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Views of Chinese Military and Civilian Analysts on the Strategic Defense Initiative



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An Intelligence Assessment

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*EA 86-10002
January 1986*

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared for China Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, China Division, OEA, [Redacted]

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Views of Chinese Military and Civilian Analysts on the Strategic Defense Initiative

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Preface

Senior Chinese leaders have not yet decided how best to deal with the challenges of the US SDI program. To date, official Chinese pronouncements have been generally confined to deliberately vague statements opposing the extension of the arms race to outer space. Chinese leaders apparently believe they have time to work out a policy because both the United States and the Soviet Union are in the initial stages of research. The SDI issue, including its implications for Sino-Soviet relations and the Western Alliance, is under active study in Chinese military and civilian think tanks.

This paper is a summary of a much longer study prepared for the China Division of the Office of East Asian Analysis. It is based on conversations in fall 1985 with Chinese military and civilian strategic thinkers and analysts. The views of these officials may not coincide with those of China's top decisionmakers in every instance. We believe, however, that they accurately reflect both the range of thinking on SDI in China and the advice reaching top leaders on this issue.

This paper presents only the views and analysis of Chinese nationals.

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The majority view of Chinese analysts is presented throughout. As in any country—and China is no exception—there are differences on this and any other issue. We have attempted to include these alternative viewpoints where we believe them to be most important.

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**Views of Chinese Military
and Civilian Analysts on the
Strategic Defense Initiative**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 10 December 1985
was used in this report.*

Chinese strategic thinkers are concerned that SDI will significantly alter the global strategic situation in the 1990s and thereby damage China's security interests. They believe the rough parity that now exists between the United States and the Soviet Union is the best guarantee of the stable international environment China needs to complete its economic and military modernization programs. The Chinese believe this parity also affords Beijing maximum leverage in the Sino-Soviet-US triangle.

Government ministries and research institutes are interested in SDI, but the statements of Chinese officials on SDI indicate that they have limited knowledge of the strategic thinking behind it. Chinese analysts tend to view SDI primarily in political terms—that is, in terms of its impact on US-Soviet political relations. They question US sincerity about seeking a way to eliminate nuclear weapons and believe that Washington really wants to increase its military leverage over Moscow to achieve political goals.

Chinese military and civilian analysts are well aware that the Soviet Union is working on its own SDI program, and they stress that Moscow's goal in opposing SDI is not to prevent the deployment of space-based weapons, but to delay the US effort until the Soviet Union is in a better position to compete. Some Chinese analysts worry that Moscow may calculate that it has more to lose by allowing the United States to deploy a system, and may elect to use force against the United States or a US system before it is deployed. China's military and Soviet experts are more inclined to hold this view; its US experts tend to play down the possibility.

A number of Chinese analysts believe SDI will exacerbate tensions within NATO. They believe the decision to participate in SDI research will be a politically difficult one, with European governments facing a Hobbesian choice of an angry electorate if they elect to participate or the risk of falling further behind US technology if they elect not to. They are also concerned that SDI will reduce the US defense commitment to Europe.

Chinese analysts believe SDI has had a positive effect on the arms control talks by forcing the Soviets back to the table. They see little chance of an accord in the near term but do not rule out a limited agreement in the future. Analysts are concerned, however, that the US refusal to put SDI on the table gives the Soviet Union a propaganda advantage. They believe Washington has a twofold task at Geneva: to convince Moscow that the

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United States is determined to deploy SDI so that Moscow will be forced to make some compromises, and to put forth a realistic counterproposal to blunt Moscow's propaganda edge. Analysts generally believe an arms accord would benefit China by reducing international tensions, but many harbor suspicions that Washington and Moscow might agree on terms harmful to China's security interests.

Of greater concern is the fear that the Soviets will deploy an SDI system that will neutralize China's small nuclear deterrent. Chinese analysts do not believe this will happen soon, however, and expect they have 20 to 30 years to develop countermeasures. A more immediate concern is the fear that China will be left out of the technological bonanza they see flowing from SDI research, and some analysts have hinted at possible participation in the EUREKA (European Research Coordinating Agency) project.

Chinese analysts believe Soviet preoccupation with stopping SDI provides the Soviets additional incentives to improve ties to Beijing. Unstated by the analysts is what we presume to be a Chinese belief that heightened concern in Washington about Sino-Soviet relations increases China's room for maneuver in the triangle. Chinese analysts are concerned about appearing to side too closely with Moscow on SDI, but they stress that Beijing will not hesitate to criticize the United States if China concludes that the Soviet Union is seriously seeking an agreement and that US "intransigence" on SDI is the principal obstacle.



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Chinese Organizations Working on SDI Issues

This paper is based on both writings and interviews of individuals associated with the following government organizations and think tanks:

- *Disarmament Division, International Organizations Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*
- *American and Oceanic Affairs Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*
- *Disarmament Division, Ministry of National Defense*
- *General Staff Department, People's Liberation Army (PLA)*
- *Academy of Military Sciences*
- *Institute of Strategic Studies, PLA Military Academy*
- *Central Party School*
- *Beijing Institute of International Strategic Studies*
- *Institute of Contemporary Foreign Relations*
- *Institute of International Studies*
- *Institute of Soviet and East European Studies*
- *Institute of US Studies*
- *Institute of World Economy and Politics*
- *Center for International Studies*
- *Shanghai Institute of International Studies*
- *Beijing University*
- *Fudan University.*

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Views of Chinese Military and Civilian Analysts on the Strategic Defense Initiative

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Chinese Views on the Strategic Situation and SDI

China's key goals for the rest of the century—economic and military modernization—require a stable, however tense, international environment. Although concerned about the conflicts in Cambodia and Afghanistan, the massive Soviet military presence in Mongolia and the Soviet Far East, and the arms race, China sees the present international strategic environment as generally conducive to its goals. In viewing the international scene, Chinese civilian and military leaders—according to their own statements—take comfort in the belief that:

- A Soviet attack on China is very unlikely, although the Soviet Union will continue to pose the primary threat to Chinese security. China's independent foreign policy as well as the US military buildup will counterbalance Soviet power and prove a strong incentive for Moscow to refrain from hostile behavior toward Beijing and to seek improvement in Sino-Soviet relations.
- The rough parity in the US-Soviet military balance will be maintained over the next five years and beyond, if there is no deployment of advanced strategic defense systems. The United States, however, will retain an edge over the Soviet Union in the global balance of power because the US lead in technology will increase slightly.
- US-Soviet relations will remain tense but not confrontational, and China will continue to enjoy better relations with both than either enjoys with the other. The Soviet Union will continue to be tactical—on the defensive—preoccupied with problems of economic and technological development and with the US military challenge.
- It is unlikely that there will be a war in Korea or that any other major conflict will erupt in Asia. The conflicts in Cambodia and Afghanistan will remain stalemated and will not escalate.

- The world economic situation will favor China's achievement of its national development goals despite continuing protectionist sentiments in the United States and elsewhere.

Chinese military and civilian analysts are concerned, however, that SDI will drastically alter this favorable strategic situation and adversely affect China's interests into the next century by disrupting the rough parity between the United States and the Soviet Union. The disruption of parity, the Chinese maintain, would lead to strategic instability and create an incentive for one side to launch a nuclear attack against the other. Deployment of strategic defense systems or other ballistic missile defenses (BMD)¹ could give one side what it is incapable of achieving otherwise—a first-strike capability.

Chinese Views on US Motivations and Goals in Pursuing SDI

Nearly all Chinese analysts doubt that the United States is genuinely seeking a means of eliminating nuclear weapons and question the sincerity of the President's stated desire to share strategic defense technology with the Soviet Union. Rather, they view the SDI program as part of a political, economic, and military strategy aimed at enhancing the US position vis-a-vis the Soviet Union in the global balance of power. The Chinese also believe the SDI program is intended to revitalize the US and other Western economies by stimulating rapid development of US military industry and by accelerating the pace of technological and industrial development. A faster

¹ In this paper, the term "space-based BMD systems" is used to refer to strategic defense systems with the general characteristics that have been envisioned in the SDI program. This system is multitiered: it includes ground-based interceptors to destroy warheads during the midcourse and reentry phases, as well as space-based lasers, particle beams, or kinetic energy weapons for attacking missiles and warheads in their boost, postboost, and midcourse phases.

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rate of economic growth, they claim, will widen the US scientific, technological, and economic lead over the Soviets; advance military programs at home; and increase US prestige abroad.

Some Chinese analysts maintain that the US motives are primarily "offensive"—a desire to achieve global hegemony—but others see US actions as primarily "defensive." Proponents of this latter view point to the Soviet military buildup in the 1970s and the increasing vulnerability of US ICBMs. They imply that the United States has no recourse other than to develop a strategic defense system, because, if the Soviet Union deploys a space-based BMD first, it will provide Moscow with a first-strike capability and an incentive to start a war.

None of the Chinese who see Washington as seeking superiority, however, suggest that the United States would use a first-strike capability to attack the Soviet Union. Rather, they maintain that the United States wants increased military leverage over Moscow for political goals, such as gaining concessions in the arms control talks and obtaining restraints on Soviet military actions. Some analysts also claim that the United States is attempting to exploit Soviet economic difficulties and ultimately to "exhaust" the Soviet Union. They maintain that Washington wants to compel Moscow to match US SDI efforts in the belief that Moscow will be so pressed economically that modernization of its offensive forces will be disrupted and its land-based ICBMs will be rendered obsolete.

A few other knowledgeable Chinese analysts who have spent considerable time in the United States maintain that development of strategic defense systems by the Soviet Union and the United States is simply the natural evolution of nuclear strategy and military technology. In current US nuclear strategy, they say, deterrence is based not only on mutual assured destruction but also on planning to fight a nuclear war, including a limited nuclear conflict, if deterrence fails. Such a limited war strategy requires defense as well as offense, they assert. Only by making full preparations for fighting a nuclear war can the United States have a reliable deterrent, "stand firm" against the Soviet Union, and defend its territory and that of its allies in case of nuclear war.

Chinese Views on Soviet Objectives in Opposing SDI

Chinese experts on the Soviet Union believe Moscow's anti-SDI campaign has four broad objectives:

- Ban the US program while continuing to conduct its own research in strategic defense technologies.
- Buy time to reinvigorate the Soviet economy and catch up with the United States technologically.
- Prevent the United States from obtaining a first-strike capability and, at a minimum, maintain parity with the United States in strategic offensive forces.
- Gain a propaganda advantage over the United States and drive a wedge between the United States and its allies and friends in Western Europe and Asia, including China.

The Chinese stress that the Soviets' long-term objective is not to prevent the deployment of weapons in outer space. Rather, they maintain that Moscow seeks only to postpone the competition with the United States in space-based weapons until the Soviet Union has achieved a stronger position economically. According to most Chinese analysts, the Soviets fear that, if the competition in strategic defense is not postponed, the United States will deploy a space-based defense system first and seriously jeopardize Moscow's nuclear deterrent.

Chinese analysts expect that the Soviets will attempt to meet the SDI challenge by proliferating the number of warheads on their land-based missiles and by developing and deploying new offensive weapons. Chinese analysts also expect the Soviets to attempt to defeat the system by the use of penetration aids, adjustments in their boosters, and deploying space mines and antisatellite weapons. While a minority of analysts maintain that Moscow will confine its efforts to defeat and destroy the US system, the dominant view among Chinese civilian and military analysts is that the Soviets will also build their own space-based BMD system. Most say Moscow also will use the US refusal to put SDI on the table to justify further increases in Soviet offensive forces.

Both civilian and military analysts seem genuinely concerned that the Soviets will use force either

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against the US space-based defense system to prevent its deployment or against the United States before the system is deployed. The Soviets are genuinely afraid that the United States is seeking a first-strike capability in SDI, according to Chinese experts, including those who maintain that Washington has no offensive intentions. Most Chinese analysts assert that the Soviet Union will not allow its offensive forces to be neutralized by US deployment of a space-based BMD system.

Some analysts downplay such risks, contending that a Soviet attack on the US defense system would risk a US attack on Soviet space assets and even retaliation against Soviet territory that could escalate to global nuclear war. But others clearly worry that the Soviets might calculate that they have more to lose by allowing the United States to deploy an SDI system than by taking the risk of launching a first strike. China's military analysts and Soviet experts seem most inclined to hold this view. An expert on the United States from the Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, disagrees, arguing that Moscow is more likely to seek a political than a military solution to the SDI threat.

Chinese Views on SDI and the Western Alliance

A number of Chinese analysts believe SDI will exacerbate political and economic tensions within the NATO Alliance and could lead to increased West European dependence on the United States—developments they see as equally negative. In addition, they view SDI as potentially weakening the credibility of the US deterrent for Europe and thus increasing the possibility of instability and conventional war. Chinese analysts argue that a US space-based BMD system will not be able to protect Western Europe from Soviet attack because of the short flight times for Soviet missiles, while a similar Soviet BMD system will neutralize US strategic forces. Western Europe, according to this view, would be faced with superior Soviet conventional forces and a dubious US security guarantee. This new strategic situation would lead to serious strains in the NATO Alliance, increased instability in East-West relations, and greater likelihood of conventional war in Europe.

Chinese analysts point out that the decision to participate in SDI research is also likely to strain the

Alliance. The Europeans must face the consequences of what is likely to be an unpopular decision with their electorates if they choose to participate, or run the risk of falling even further behind the United States and Japan if they elect not to.

Not all Chinese analysts agree with these pessimistic views, however. One influential thinker who has written knowledgeably about SDI argues that SDI might actually strengthen the defense of West European countries. Another analyst associated with a think tank with ties to the State Council and Central Committee predicted that, rather than leading to a major rift between the United States and Western Europe, SDI could encourage West European unity and "create a strong coalition that will promote the revitalization of West European economies and technological development." Although there is a possibility that SDI could lead to "fiercer competition between Western Europe and the United States," he said, "this may be beneficial to both sides."

Chinese Views on Arms Control and SDI

Although Beijing opposes the deployment of weapons in space as envisioned in the SDI program, analysts see the announcement of stepped-up efforts by the United States in strategic defense research as having had some positive consequences. It has heightened the Soviet Union's concern about its future position in the military balance, they say, compelling Moscow to return to the negotiating table. SDI has also played an important role in shifting global perceptions of the balance of power in favor of the United States. This has put the Soviet Union on the defensive, according to the Chinese, and forced Soviet leaders to at least publicly demonstrate a willingness to compromise on some arms control issues.

While some Chinese analysts doubt that the Reagan administration really wants an arms control agreement with the Soviet Union, all are far more suspicious of Moscow's intentions. The Chinese contend that the Soviet Union used arms control and detente with the United States in the 1970s to mask a massive buildup of military power. Many Chinese analysts maintain that, even if Washington were to agree to

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Deng Xiaoping on SDI

Deng said here today that the "Stars Wars" plan must not be carried out because it would cause qualitative changes in the arms race between the two superpowers. He pointed out that the "Star Wars" plan was different in nature from adding a few nuclear warheads or changing a few new types of missiles.


— *From a conversation with Robert Maxwell of the Pergamon Press and Mirror newspapers*
2 August 1985

We are concerned about the escalation of the nature of the arms race and are opposed to any arms race in outer space. We are against whoever goes in for development of outer space weapons.

— *Conversation with former President Nixon*
6 September 1985

China opposes any arms race in outer space. The space arms race signals the qualitative escalation of the US-Soviet arms race rather than escalation in a common sense. The danger of such qualitative escalation is that with a certain degree of development the arms race will go completely out of control, thus increasing the factors of war rather than reducing the danger of war. Therefore, China openly opposes any plan leading to a space arms race.

— *Quoted in the Chinese press*
16 September 1985



abandon the SDI program, Moscow may not be willing to make drastic cuts in its land-based missiles or to place limits on its research program in defensive technologies and weapons. One disarmament expert argued that the Soviet Union "won't let US 'paper'

weapons be used to force reduction of actual weapons." Citing Soviet negotiating tactics, Chinese experts on the Soviet Union allow a greater possibility that the Soviets might eventually compromise on arms control after a long period of negotiations with the United States.

Although most Chinese analysts say that a US-Soviet arms control accord is possible in the long run, they doubt that an agreement would significantly reduce offensive weapons or completely ban deployments of weapons in space. They assert that Moscow and Washington are likely to make only small concessions on offensive and defensive systems while maintaining roughly equal capabilities. China would gain, however, from the relaxed international environment that would follow, and any agreement to halt or postpone the extension of the arms race in space would slow the growing gap between Chinese military capabilities and those of the United States and the Soviet Union.

Chinese analysts are concerned about the implications of Washington's refusal to bargain on SDI, and they think the Soviets have scored a tactical victory by appearing to be more "peace minded" than the United States. If Washington remains unwilling to compromise on SDI, they fear that Moscow will build on the significant propaganda advantage it already has. An arms control specialist on the General Staff argued that the US task in Geneva is twofold: to convince the Soviets that the United States is determined to deploy SDI, so that Moscow will be forced to make some compromises; and to present a realistic proposal to demonstrate to Moscow, Western Europe, and the rest of the world that the United States is not seeking superiority over the Soviet Union. "The United States needs to kick the ball back into the Soviet court with a good offer, proof of Soviet [arms control treaty] violations and [evidence] of the Soviet BMD program."

According to proponents of this view, the United States should use the leverage SDI provides to push for an equitable agreement on substantial reductions in the nuclear arsenals of both sides. Chinese analysts state that, although the Soviet Union has not—and

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will not—give up its goal of achieving nuclear superiority, it needs to slow the pace of its military spending to redress its severe economic problems.

At the same time, although they claim they would welcome a US-Soviet agreement, Chinese analysts harbor suspicions that Washington and Moscow could agree on terms harmful to Beijing's security interests. This concern was voiced most explicitly by a senior Soviet expert: "The possibility exists that the United States and the Soviet Union will reduce their strategic forces and that Soviet INF will not be reduced or limited. We think that the United States and the Soviet Union should reduce both strategic and theater forces. . . . We hope that the United States and the Soviet Union will consider the interests of third countries such as China. Third countries will oppose any arms control treaties that are not in their interests."

Chinese Views on the Implications of SDI for China's Deterrent

The potential threat to China's nuclear deterrent posed by a Soviet BMD as well as possible Chinese countermeasures are subjects of extensive discussion and analysis by military and civilian thinkers. The Chinese fear in the worst case that their small nuclear deterrent will be neutralized and that, as a result, Beijing's geopolitical and strategic position, as well as its immediate security, will be affected. China's military experts are examining some of the countermeasures that have been evaluated in the West, but civilian and military analysts agree that countering a Soviet BMD would be costly and China would be better served if it could avoid increasing its military spending—although it will if necessary to preserve its deterrent.

Most military analysts say they are confident that China's deterrent will be effective during the long period before Soviet deployment of a space-based BMD system. One analyst maintained that "no rational defense system can be deployed by the Soviet Union for at least 20 to 30 years, and Chinese forces will remain effective during this time."

Chinese analysts are just as concerned about major advances in technology resulting from SDI research. Most analysts agree that China must not be "left

behind," and, to prevent the technology gap from widening, they say, China will have to find some means of benefiting from the technological advances in the West. A few Chinese institute analysts [redacted]

[redacted] suggested that China might participate in EUREKA, although it is too early to make a decision because EUREKA is not yet a concrete plan. EUREKA seems to appeal to China more for political than technological reasons, however. Chinese analysts say that EUREKA will enhance West European independence and unity and that this is the basis of Beijing's support for the program. The Chinese expect the West Europeans to lag far behind in the technologies being developed for SDI.

Chinese analysts do not discuss the issue directly, but they are concerned about the impact that mutual space-based BMD systems would have on maintaining Moscow's uncertainty about a US response to a Soviet attack on China—a key element in Beijing's deterrent. This concern is reflected in their treatment of "flexible response" and West European security. Some military analysts are concerned that mutual deployment of space-based BMD systems by the United States and the Soviet Union will weaken the US global deterrence posture while strengthening Washington's ability to defend US territory. They see SDI as potentially undermining the US strategy of "flexible response." On the one hand, the United States and the Soviet Union might be more likely to fight a war in Europe since they would not risk nuclear attack on their homelands; and, on the other hand, the United States might be less likely to keep its commitments to defend its West European allies if they were attacked by the Soviet Union, especially since Moscow has superiority in conventional arms in Europe. Chinese analysts point to West European doubts that a US BMD system would provide them with protection since Soviet missiles have very short flight times to West European territory, and an expert associated with the Military Academy noted that China shared the same geography.

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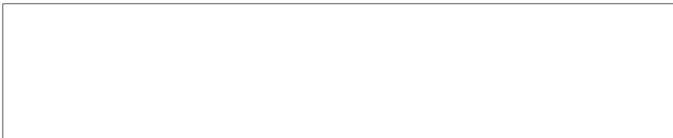
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Relations With the Soviet Union

Chinese analysts see Soviet preoccupation with SDI as serving China's interests by keeping Moscow on the defensive globally and providing the Soviets with further incentives to improve ties to Beijing. They expect Moscow to seek opportunities to expand its dialogue with Beijing, stressing the common ground it shares with China in opposing "the arms race in space."

Unstated is what we presume to be the belief of Chinese analysts that this heightened concern in Washington about a possible Sino-Soviet rapprochement will increase Beijing's room to maneuver in the triangle. At the same time, Chinese thinkers are aware that Moscow will seek to exploit China's criticism of SDI for its own purposes. They are concerned about appearing to side too closely with Moscow, but stress that Beijing will not hesitate to blame the United States for a lack of progress, if China concludes that the Soviet Union is seriously seeking an agreement and US "intransigence" on SDI is the principal obstacle.



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