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By CHARLES ALDINGER  
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With superpower arms talks set to resume on May 30, President Reagan is being pressed to offer concessions to Moscow on his "Star Wars" missile defense plan in order to spur cuts in offensive nuclear arsenals.

In congressional hearings, public meetings and interviews with Reuters, former senior U.S. officials have called on Reagan to seek a breakthrough in the Geneva talks, possibly a ban on "Star Wars" tests outside the laboratory and a U.S. pledge in writing not to deploy a defense system unilaterally.

The president also is being advised by former officials and current members of Congress to keep a cap on the arms race by adhering to current limits on nuclear weapons set by the 1979 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II).

Washington and Moscow blame each other for the lack of progress in the opening round of talks this spring, and the White House has denied Soviet charges that U.S. negotiators headed by Max Kampelman would not even discuss Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), commonly called "Star Wars."

The Pentagon is pouring billions of dollars into research on space-based lasers and other weapons to shoot down attacking nuclear warheads. But Soviet leaders have given top priority to banning defensive systems before they will agree to offensive arms cuts.

Suggesting the administration should accept such a deal for reductions in nuclear arms, former Central Intelligence Agency director Stansfield Turner asked a symposium on the military strength of the superpowers this month: "Why not go back there (Geneva) and get something for nothing?"

"We should keep an SDI research program going but we're a long, long way from any SDI defense," he said. "The Soviet Union will not cut missiles while the prospect exists that we can suddenly make their missiles less effective."

Former chief U.S. strategic arms negotiators Paul Warnke and Gerard Smith told Reuters that the Soviet Union would not reduce its nuclear force unless it got more than statements from the Reagan administration that the Soviet offensive nuclear deterrence would not suddenly be neutralized.

"The possibilities of a deal are there," said Warnke, the chief U.S. negotiator on SALT II. "We would have to give them something on Star Wars first. I think it should be a ban on anti-satellite testing (ASAT)."

Warnke said such a deal would help alleviate Soviet fears about SDI because "no matter how you cut it, when you test weapons that destroy satellites, you are at the same time improving the technology for SDI."

"SDI is not going to take warheads out of the Soviet inventory. If they think we can deploy SDI, they will simply scrap the SALT treaty and put 30 warheads each on their 308 SS-18 missiles." The SS-18s now carry 10 warheads each.

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But Warnke said an offer for an ASAT ban might get the Kremlin to dismantle all of the SS-18s, its largest missile.

"I think that as long as we are going full throttle to render Soviet missiles impotent and obsolete, they will not agree to reduce their numbers to make our task easier," said Smith, who was chief negotiator of the 1972 SALT I agreement.

Smith told Reuters the United States should make a written promise never to deploy a Star Wars system unless the Soviet Union did so first.

Reagan has said the United States will not drop its "Star Wars" research, charging that the Soviet Union has a major research effort under way on a nuclear missile defense.

Warnke said he believed the top U.S. military officers on the Joint Chiefs of Staff would press Reagan not to break SALT I missile limits when the nuclear submarine Alaska with 24 multiple-warhead missiles undergoes sea trials this year.

Reagan must decide then whether to retire an older missile submarine or some Minuteman land-based missiles or violate the 1,200-missile limit in SALT II, which both sides have pledged not to undercut even though Washington refused to ratify it.

"It is pretty obvious that if we break out of SALT, the Soviet Union, which has 80 per cent of its missile force on land, can mount a lot more warheads," Warnke said.

Four U.S. senators wrote Reagan on May 13 that violating SALT II would end superpower restraint on nuclear deployments, "cast a pall over the arms talks in Geneva (and) seriously damage important U.S. foreign policy interests."

Republicans John Chafee of Rhode Island and John Heinz of Pennsylvania and Democrats Dale Bumpers of Arkansas and Patrick Leahy of Vermont were responding to Reagan's charge on May 10 that there was considerable evidence the Soviet Union had violated SALT II.

If that was the case, Reagan said, "there is no need for us to continue to honor it."

The Washington Post reported this week that the administration might put an older Poseidon nuclear missile submarine in drydock rather than dismantling it when the new Trident submarine is launched late this year.

It quoted arms experts that this would be a "gray area" effort to avoid direct violation of SALT II.