Ordering the Strategic House

Carnes Lord

The incoming Bush administration will have its hands full in the early months fending off a variety of policy alligators, but it would do well to deal swiftly and firmly with an especially nasty one--the looming complex of issues relating to strategic nuclear forces, strategic defense, and arms control.

In 1981, an overly cavalier Reagan administration thought that such issues could be held off for a year or more while order was brought to the nation's economic house. The result was a series of fateful acts of commission or omission whose subsequent impact on the security of the United States has been damaging if not near-disastrous. The administration's Strategic Modernization Program (announced in October 1981) included some commendable initiatives, especially in the perennially neglected area of command, control and communications. But in spite of much campaign talk about closing the strategic "window of vulnerability" and putting arms control in its proper place, not only were neither of these things done, but the underlying problems were actually aggravated. In what must be reckoned one of its most irresponsible early decisions, the White House, under pressure from conservative senators and governors of certain western states, cancelled the planned basing scheme for the MX intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and reduced the prospective MX buy from 200 to 100 missiles.

It thereby shattered the existing congressional consensus on ICBM modernization and squandered important bargaining leverage for arms control.

At the same time, though it showed little genuine interest in any form of arms control, the administration allowed itself to be maneuvered by the State Department into informal observance of the SALT agreements that candidate Reagan had been roundly denouncing. At the same time, it chose to up the ante by committing itself to a new approach to strategic arms control, aptly symbolized by the new acronym START (for Strategic Arms Reduction Talks); the hallmark of this approach was to be deep reductions in existing levels of strategic weaponry and on-site inspection to verify Soviet compliance. Far from dampening enthusiasm for arms control, this step set the stage for the infiltration of anti-nuclear utopianism into US security policy and launched the president onto the path to the Reykjavik summit and beyond.

Finally, the administration made no move to revitalize the nation's strategic defense programs. No serious effort was undertaken, in spite of ample evidence of Soviet misbehavior in this area and promising developments in relevant technologies, to rethink US adherence to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty when it came up for review in 1982. This tacit blessing of the ABM Treaty regime would come back to haunt the administration after the president launched his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in the spring of 1983.

The aggregate impact of these developments is only too clearly visible today. The signing of the treaty on intermediate range nuclear forces (INF) at the Washington summit in December 1987 gave

concrete form and apparently irresistible momentum to the administration's arms control approach. Although influential voices in both political parties have sounded warnings about the political and military implications of a START agreement and the dangers of haste in concluding one, few have been willing to go into conspicuous opposition to the most conservative president and administration of this century on these issues, and no alternative design for strategic arms control has yet surfaced. At the same time, uncertainties persist concerning ICBM modernization and the SDI, both of which have lost political momentum as a result of administration indecision and increasing scepticism in the Congress.

In 1983, the President's Commission on Strategic Forces (the so-called Scowcroft Commission) attempted to develop a consensus view of strategic forces and arms control that would shore up congressional support for ICBM modernization. At about the same time, the President announced his commitment to a program of research on strategic defensive technologies intended to render ballistic missiles "impotent and obsolete." In large part because of the administration's failure to develop an overall strategy integrating these elements, support in Congress for the Scowcroft Commission's recommendations gradually dissipated, while the SDI failed to find a stable constituency there.

Powerful institutional factors within the national security bureaucracy help to account for this state of affairs. Resistance to SDI is strong throughout the military services, which have tended to see strategic defense as a secondary mission that competes for scarce resources with offensive systems. Indeed, they have helped bring

about a reinterpretation of the basic intent of SDI, from the president's original vision--defending the territory and population of the United States--to enhancing the deterrent value of American strategic forces. Largely as a result, political support for the SDI has eroded, and the program has become increasingly vulnerable to budget pressures and/or compromise in the arms control arena.

Particularly in view of the uncertainties surrounding SDI and offensive force modernization, the prospect of a START agreement in the near future is troubling. The reductions tentatively agreed under START could produce dangerous instabilities and require a thorough rethinking of current US nuclear strategy and targeting doctrine. The US is also in the process of altering its entire approach to arms control verification. Serious questions remain about the practicality and desirability of extensive reliance on on-site inspection and other intrusive verification measures. The costs of such a verification regime are or should be a major concern. Certain kinds of limits (for example, on mobile ICBMs, non-deployed missiles, and sea-launched cruise missiles) seem inherently resistant to verification of any kind. Finally, the US has yet to come up with effective compliance policies that will deprive the Soviets of the benefits of treaty violations and ensure against sudden "breakout" from treaty limits.

Some fundamental choices now face the incoming administration. A basic framework for START is currently in place, but difficult questions remain, and the administration would be ill advised to resume negotiations without undertaking a thorough, zero-based review of the bidding. This is all the more necessary in view of the rapid approach of the deadline Congress has given the

administration to decide on a more survivable basing mode for its future ICBM force, as well as the incompatibility of the START framework with current US force planning. The Defense Department has recently refused to commit itself to a force modernization plan in the absence of a completed START agreement, but Congress is likely to demand such a plan as the basis for assessing the merits of any prospective agreement. Severe budgetary pressures are also complicating the picture, pushing the new administration to seek major economies in its strategic offensive programs and placing added pressure on the SDI.

Early signs emanating from the Bush campaign and transition headquarters have been something less than reassuring concerning the future direction of the administration in this area. At the urging of Secretary of State George Shultz, the president-elect agreed to propose reconvening the START negotiations as early as February 1989--reportedly, much to the surprise of the Soviets themselves. In so doing, he declined an opportunity to establish a firm link between progress in START and reductions in the Soviet conventional military threat to Europe, as had been urged by vice president-elect Quayle among others. Transition spokesmen indicated that while the START draft treaty would be reviewed at high levels, the review would not necessarily be an extended one. At the same time, little urgency has been evident in statements by transition personnel and by the president-elect himself concerning the fate of the ICBM program or SDI, and no sign that these policy areas are being examined in relation to one another.

The most fundamental issue at this juncture concerns the priority to be given near-term SDI deployment relative to strategic force modernization and arms control. By most accounts, the technologies are available now to support a first phase SDI system that would give limited but significant protection to critical US military assets as well as the American population. Such a system would not provide the impenetrable shield of popular caricature, but it would serve a variety of very important military functions--protection from accidental missile launches or threatened attacks by nuclear-armed terrorist states, insurance against a decapitating Soviet strike against our political and military leadership, complication of any Soviet attack on US strategic forces, and limited defense of heavily populated areas against the collateral effects of such an attack. It would also serve as a testbed for emerging technologies and a valuable source of operational experience that would aid in the development of more extensive and effective defenses in the next century.

Is it worth spending some real money on such a system, at the risk of diverting funds from needed offensive programs and jeopardizing progress in START (which the Soviets have linked to stringent limits on strategic defenses)? In the current debate, this question is generally couched in technical terms, but it is really a fundamental strategic and even moral issue. Those who believe that the obligation of the government of the United States to "provide for the common defense" means just that--and not that the nation's physical survival should be entrusted to a theory of deterrence that is unproven and intellectually questionable at best--will be inclined to regard serious strategic defenses as a non-negotiable feature of

America's national security posture. They will also tend to prefer even a less than technically perfect system of strategic defenses if it is forced to compete with offensive weapons that, for all their technical virtuosity, do not provide increments of national power proportionate to their cost.

What should the new administration do to bring order to its strategic house? The one thing most needful is for the president to make a major statement of doctrinal and programmatic commitment to strategic defense of the United States. Such a statement should reaffirm the original SDI "vision," while placing it in the broader context of a defense of defense more generally--that is to say, a critique of the theory of nuclear deterrence and a defense of the need for a reorientation of American strategy away from reliance on offensive forces alone. The emphasis should be on a balanced and prudent strategic posture, one which recognizes an essential role for offensive nuclear forces in and through a period of transition to greater reliance on defense. This commitment should be given concrete form through announcement of a decision to proceed with a serious ballistic missile defense system--which is to say, the full Phase I SDI program currently under development (now projected to cost some $70 billion).

Unfortunately, there are few indications that the administration is likely to embrace this course. If any near-term decision is forthcoming in favor of SDI, it will probably be to authorize the treaty-compliant Limited Protection System which has attracted some interest in Congress. While almost certainly better than nothing, the danger in such a decision is that it will be have the effect of

inoculating the body politic against the temptation of a larger-scale SDI, and of locking the new administration into continuing obeisance to a treaty which denies the very legitimacy of the principle of strategic defense.

It is an axiom for many people that a commitment to SDI will ruin arms control by fueling the arms race and driving the Soviets away from the bargaining table in START. A cooler calculation suggests that the Soviets, once faced with a clear American determination to proceed with SDI, will make their adjustments and remain in the arms control game. Given current economic constraints as well as the political equities created by the Gorbachev peace offensive, it is virtually unthinkable that they would respond to such a decision with massive new deployments of nuclear weapons. More likely, the wasting value of the Soviets' ballistic missile assets under such circumstances would provide an important incentive for them to cut a deal in START.

At all events, it is not difficult to make the case that it would be reckless for the United States to sign on to START as it now stands without a commitment to serious strategic defense. Under a START regime, US strategic forces will be concentrated in many fewer aim points than is now the case; particularly in the absence of a new highly survivable ICBM, they will be proportionately more vulnerable to Soviet attack. Perhaps more importantly, verification problems will inevitably lead to great uncertainty concerning non-deployed Soviet missiles or warheads, and the Soviets will retain many options for sudden treaty "breakout." Strategic defenses even of a modest sort would provide critical insurance against such possibilities.

They should also alleviate the problem of ICBM vulnerability--and thereby open up possibilities for economizing on strategic force modernization. Cost estimates for currently programmed ICBMs come to around $40 billion ($31 billion for 500 road-mobile Midgetman ICBMs, $9 billion for 50 rail-garrison MX). With credible even if not leak-proof defenses, the argument for one or more new mobile ICBMs becomes much less compelling. Some combination of silo superhardening, deceptive basing, and preferential active defense of MX or Midgetman could provide a highly survivable land-based deterrent force for a fraction of the sum just mentioned. Renewed attention is now being given to the "carry-hard" basing system, under which MX or Midgetman missiles in hardened cannisters would be regularly shifted among a number of shelters that could be cheaply constructed and thus easily proliferated to meet an expanded threat. It should also be noted that foregoing a pure mobile option would allow the US to persist in its current START position banning mobile ICBMs. Eventual US acquiescence in Soviet mobile ICBM deployments (which now seems to be widely taken for granted) will create insuperable difficulties for verification--and not only of START, but also of the INF treaty (given the similarity of the SS-25 ICBM to the banned SS-20 intermediate-range missile).

Attractive as such a scenario may be, its fatal weakness for many will no doubt be its life-threatening implications for the ABM treaty regime. This is a highly charged political issue, and the temptation will be great to follow the path of least resistance and extend US adherence to the treaty. The temptation should be resisted. The ABM treaty needs to be recognized for what it is: an agreement that

rests on a questionable strategic foundation, is now technologically outmoded, and in any case has not effectively constrained the Soviets. But this is by no means to argue that the only course is simply to jettison it. The administration could announce its intention to negotiate a new understanding with the Soviets on the nature and timing of new strategic defensive deployments by the end of the administration (which will coincide with the next formal treaty review in 1992), while pledging in the interim to observe the treaty's basic terms. At the same time, it should take the position that it neither insists on nor accepts a restrictive interpretation of them, and no longer considers itself bound by the treaty's spirit or intent. Under such an approach, the US would in effect declare the ABM treaty obsolescent. It would no longer require a strict standard of compliance from the Soviets (in particular dropping its long-standing demand for dismantlement of the illegal Krasnoyarsk radar), but would also recognize no restrictions on research, development and testing of its own strategic defensive systems.

Should the US move to distance itself from the ABM treaty, there is always a risk that the Soviets will seize the opportunity to renounce the treaty totally and proceed with defensive deployments of their own. Both the likelihood and the dangers of such a step have, however, been much exaggerated. As is clear in the wake of Gorbachev's recent dramatic announcement of Soviet conventional force reductions, the Soviets are desperate to cut defense expenditures, and will hardly welcome the prospect of enormous new funding requirements for strategic defense--particularly to deploy systems based on the relatively primitive technologies now available.

Even should they do so, however, the United States should welcome a diversion of the focus of strategic competition from offensive to defensive weaponry. In any event, the United States now enjoys enormous leverage in its strategic relationship with the Soviet Union; the trick will be to appreciate that we have it and to use it boldly and with foresight. And the time is now.