

GLOBAL STRATEGIC PULSE



CISSS Journal of Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Studies

January - June 2025 | Volume I, Issue II

Cyberwarfare in the Maritime Domain and Strategic Stability in South Asia

Maryyum Masood, Amna Saqib, Anum A. Khan

Ripeness in the Middle East: Unpacking Iran-Saudi Arabia Rapprochement and China's New-found Role

Tayyaba Khurshid, Hassaan Malik

Understanding the Role of People's Primary Healthcare Initiative (PPHI) in Sindh

Sobia Abid

Managing the Crisis of Overpopulation in Pakistan: Need for Effective Population Management

Ajwa Hijazi

Understanding Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the World

Safia Malik



CISSS
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES SINDH

Weapons in Space: Technology, Politics and the Rise and Fall of the Strategic Defense Initiative

Aaron Bateman,
(The MIT Press, 2024, 337)

Reviewed by: Jawad Ali Shah¹

“Space is just another place where wars will be fought.” —Senator Barry Goldwater, 1984

Wars in space will have far-reaching and catastrophic consequences that will not only affect national security, but also global communications, economics and the environment. Today, the primary international agreement that limits military activities in space is the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. The treaty mainly forbids the deployment of nuclear weapons in space, however, it does not prohibit the deployment of non-nuclear space weaponry. This led the United States to prioritize ‘freedom of action in space’ given its pursuit of the development of space-based missile defence through the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in the early 1980s.

The book *Weapons in Space: Technology, Politics and the Rise and Fall of the Strategic Defense Initiative* outlines the strategies employed by the US to develop space-based weapon systems in the early 1980s through SDI. The book is a historical account of the US military endeavours in space. The author, Aaron Bateman, is an Assistant Professor of History and International Affairs at George Washington University and a member of the Space Policy Institute, Washington, DC. He is one of the eminent international experts on intelligence, transatlantic relations and the military use of space during the Cold War and beyond. Prior to joining academia, he served as the US Air Force intelligence officer.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter One explores how in 1970s key US officials adopted a militarily competitive view of space, due to the emergence of space-based technologies and an escalating space arms race. On 26 May 1972, President Richard Nixon and Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Interim Agreement, both were the products of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). However, the author argues that within the next five years, Moscow intensified ASAT testing which prompted Stansfield Turner, Director

¹ Jawad Ali Shah is a Research Officer at the Center for International Strategic Studies Sindh (CISSS)

of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to warn the public that “the Russians can kill us in space.”

Chapter Two situates SDI within the broader aim of military application of space technologies to enhance American leadership on the world stage. It explores the tension which emerged between President Reagan’s characterization of SDI as a tool of peace and his pursuit of military superiority in space. In the first two years of his presidency, the White House was already signalling that outer space was going to play a prominent role in American grand strategy in terms of both military and economic interests. The author points out that President Reagan’s abhorrence of mutually assured destruction (MAD) was a very significant factor in the establishment of SDI.

Chapter Three analyses the strategy of the White House for promoting the SDI on the world stage while also addressing both domestic and international criticism and concerns. The author examines the inherent challenges of creating a public diplomacy campaign around space-oriented technologies which were part of a highly classified area of the US national security. In 1986, former Head of the Catholic Church Pope John Paul II called upon world governments to create “joint agreements and commitments” that would ensure “the peaceful uses of space resources.” The author underscores that “the involvement of the Pope in the SDI debate was yet another sign of how the military use of space had become a central issue in the international arena of high-stakes diplomacy.” The critics of SDI argued that the “sanctity” of space should be preserved through arms control, while many opponents believed that the “weaponization of space” was unstoppable and in the national interest of the US.

Chapter Four details how the SDI made military space policy a source of contention in the transatlantic alliance. It evaluates the military and economic motivations behind European attempts to shape the trajectory of US strategic defence research and development. The SDI intensified pre-existing European anxieties about space becoming yet another domain of potential superpower military confrontation. As the only Western European nuclear states, France and Britain had great interest in the impact of space-based missile defence on the future of nuclear deterrence. In 1985, President Reagan invited allies to become involved in SDI to secure their support for his ‘weapons in space’ program. However, for Western European politicians, deciding whether to participate in SDI, quickly became entangled in the politics of European integration and in policy debates concerning European autonomy in space.

On the other hand, by the mid-1960s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sponsored a satellite communications program, built around US satellite technologies to ensure that the alliance had a secure means for command and control of combined forces in the European theatre. Separately, Britain cooperated with the US in the development of its own communications satellite program called “Skynet” to be able to maintain sovereign command and control of British forces deployed far from home.

Chapter Five explains how specific technological choices concerning SDI affected the US arms control strategy, and convinced President Reagan to eschew any limits on the military application of space-based technologies. The author has pointed out that President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev both wanted a nuclear-free world, but disagreement over SDI was a critical obstacle in their way. According to former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, restriction of SDI to the laboratory “became, in Reagan’s mind, nothing more than a backdoor way to destroy his dream.” But President Reagan’s intransigence concerning SDI during arms control negotiations was driven by his pursuit of an elusive dream of developing specific technologies of strategic defence. In particular, Reagan wanted to keep open the option to deploy a strategic defence system in the near term by using less-exotic technologies such as kinetic interceptors on land and in space. He also idealised that the laser weapons could be added if the relevant technologies matured.

Chapter Six follows SDI through the transition into a post-Cold War World and investigates how the politics of this period shaped the evolution of space-based missile defence and the American space power. It reveals how space arms control negotiations continued to be unsuccessful, even when Washington and Moscow agreed to unprecedented reductions in nuclear weapons. The chapter provides some key concluding ideas including how the diplomatic issues were left unresolved in the space arms control dialogue during the 1980s, while the entanglement of missile defence and ASAT technologies continued to shape space security dynamics.

The book provides details of the American pursuit of space-based weapon systems during the Cold War through SDI. Even though the SDI directly affected superpower relations, it brought together defence experts, space enthusiasts, intelligence community, diplomats, scientists and clergy into a transnational debate on weapons in space. Above all, scientific expertise, military strategy, high-stakes diplomacy and astro-culture all converged to shape the discourse on weapons in space. The book is an insightful reading on the militarization of space which began in the early 1970s and a valuable guide for researchers, scholars, historians and policymakers.