from Phyllis Schlaf1y

September 26, 1991

The Soviet Breakup Proves We Need SDI

If there ever were a time to move quickly to build and deploy our Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), that time is now. The breakup of the Soviet Union proves the need.

During the three days of the coup last month, we didn't know who controlled the awesome Soviet nuclear arsenal, or what their intentions might be. We have to assume that control of Soviet ICBMs was in the hands of a nervous, unstable bunch of putsch thugs, some of whom were drunk or suicidal at critical times.

Just suppose one of the drunks in panic, or in "fun," or by mistake -- had launched one SS-L8. Millions of Americans could be dead today.

Just one ICBM streaking toward America would have put George Bush in the hot seat with only two options: order a nuclear attack on Russia, or do nothing. Neither option could save American lives.

Nothing in U.S. strategic planning prepared us for this surprise circumstance. Our experts had always assumed that Gorbachev had control over his country's nuclear missiles through possession of the computer launch codes.

But who controlled them when the coup plotters put Gorbachev under house arrest? The military and the KGB were split between the pro- coup forces and the anti-coup forces.

For the past 20 years, U.S. strategic doctrine has prohibited our building any means of shooting down enemy missiles and has required us to keep our 250 million people totally exposed to nuclear attack. The rationale for this peculiar policy was the assumption that the Soviet nuclear arsenal was controlled by men who could be negotiated with, bargained with, and "treatied" with, and that they would be rational enough to be deterred by the threat of massive retaliation from U.S. weapons.

This doctrine is known as Mutual Assured Destruction. Some of us have always thought it was a MAD strategy, and it is downright ridiculous today.

In the Peter Jennings forum on television, Gorbachev and Yeltsin told us not to worry about nukes, but they said they are not going to tell us who has his finger on the Russian nuclear trigger. Even if they do tell us, they can't possibly assure us who it will be tomorrow because another surprise coup might be just around the corner.

The breakup of the Soviet Union makes it clear that relying on treaties is absurd. Today's treaty-signer may be dead, disgraced, or dumped to Siberia tomorrow. We can't predict the motives, stability, or sanity of whoever will be in charge next month or next year.

The Soviet Union has ll,000 strategic nuclear warheads mounted on intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine launched ballistic missiles, or strategic bombers. All these tremendously destructive weapons have the capability of hitting American targets.

In addition, the Soviets have another 17,000 tactical nuclear weapons that cannot reach the United States. These include cruise and ballistic missiles, bombs on aircraft, and artillery shells.

We should keep our guard up as long as the Russians continue to have tantrums when we talk about building SDI. As Dr. Edward Teller said, "I will consider the Soviet Union as an enemy as long as they refuse to cooperate on SDI."

The now-discredited MAD doctrine is based on the assumption that we can afford to ignore military capabilities and rely instead on our President dealing with the enemy and his intentions. But it's impossible to deal with intentions when we don't know whose intentions we are talking about.

The Soviet coup should teach us that the only rational U.S. strategy is to protect our people against the capabilities of foreign nations instead of against their presumed intentions. Furthermore, within the next nine years, six Third World nations are expected to have ICBMs able to deliver nuclear, chemical and biological warheads; and another 15 nations are expected to have missiles with shorter ranges.

We also need missile defenses as an insurance policy against an accidental launch of a missile by anyone, any time, from anywhere. And accidents can happen.

In 1986 a Soviet nuclear-armed submarine prowling off our East Coast caught fire and sank. Fortunately, none of its missiles was accidentally launched.

In the early 1980s, a Soviet submarine accidentally launched a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile. Fortunately, it happened in Soviet waters and traveled only a few hundred yards.

Former Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger summed up our challenge: “As long as the world is capable of producing such surprises, we urgently need to develop and deploy an effective space- based strategic defense against the thousands of Soviet nuclear intercontinental missiles, the control of which was dangerously uncertain for at least 72 hours.”