The most significant achievement of the 1960s and 1970s in the realm of arms control was the ABM Treaty. The treaty itself, of unlimited duration, held ballistic missile defences - the heart of any meaningful strategic defence - to an insignificant, tightly constrained minimum. No less important, after internal debates both within the United States and (less publicly but not less significantly) in the Soviet Union, an underlying accord was reached on the stabilising value of neutralising the potential of strategic defences in order to curb the arms race. The arms race in offensive arms was not, as soon became all too clear, fueled only by a perceived need to counter strategic defences, but at least that cause of pressures contributing to offensive build-ups could be contained.

Today, in the 1980s, all of these areas of strategic understanding and arms-control restraint are under heavy challenge. While advances in technology have contributed to the renaissance in interest in strategic defence, they are not the principal cause. Failure in SALT I and II to reach agreement on effective offensive arms limitations comparable to those on strategic defence embodied in the ABM treaty has been another contributory factor. But the main reason has been a political change: the ascent to power in Washington of an administration and a president seeking to escape the confines of mutual deterrence and mutual dependence for survival. President Ronald Reagan, wary of any dealings with the communist leaders of the Soviet Union and restless over any need for mutual security, has become captive of a vision of strategic defences able to liberate the United States from the need to rely upon mutual political accommodation, negotiated arms control, and reciprocal military restraint. This is, of course, only a vision and not a realistic prospect in any sense: technologically, strategically, or politically. Moreover, the clearly predictable consequences of pursuing this will-o'the-wisp are not only negative but
dangerous. Yet, because it is in essence an ideological vision rather than a technological promise or a strategic design it is impervious to correction through better acquaintance with realities of technology and strategy. Not all who follow and support President Reagan in this quixotic quest share the illusions of his vision; indeed, few even in his own administration do. But there are many who support it for a wide variety of reasons: misplaced loyalty, cultivation of influence and power, political discipline, support for any military programme, distrust or dislike for arms control and for any improvement in American relations with the Soviet Union, scientific challenge, lucrative economic gain, and others. Of course, there is also a popular interest in real defence among those who are unaware of its unattainability and of the pernicious consequences of its pursuit.

The question for the 1990s and beyond will be whether President Reagan, and the course of events during his term of office, will implant the President's fervent dedication to pursuit of his vision firmly into the American political consensus, and whether by the time his successors have the opportunity to replace it with a more realistic aim they will in practical political terms be able to do so.

While this resurrection of a goal of strategic defence has occurred owing to a unique political and even psychological conjunction in the United States, once posed it affects international politics and above all US-Soviet relations. It does so in varied ways: short- and long-run political effects, short- and long-run impact on arms control, and short- and long-run military and strategic consequences. Moreover, these are all interrelated and interacting.

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It may be useful to begin by revisiting briefly the deliberations and decisions of the late 1960s. Both in the United States and in the Soviet Union, the burden rested on those who believed that ballistic-missile defence was unattainable and/or undesirable. In both countries, work on ballistic-missile defence had begun in the early 1950s along with development of ballistic missiles, and the principal objections raised during most of the 1960s were directed at the question of whether particular systems under study were technically feasible and cost-effective. The objective of strategic defence was not seriously questioned until late in the decade.

The Soviet Union eagerly, even prematurely, moved first to deploy ABM systems. After an earlier abortive start at Leningrad, an ABM system began to be deployed around Moscow