

The arms race and ‘Star Wars’

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_arms_race_and_star_wars-en-f5a25645-7f98-4dff-b153-e1d024f61foe.html

Last updated: 07/07/2016



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In the United States, the Watergate scandal led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon on 8 August 1974. This affair discredited the institution of the Presidency in a country that was already traumatised by defeat in the Vietnam War and a loss of international influence. Five years later, on 4 November 1979, in an Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian students occupied the US Embassy in Tehran and held more than 50 people hostage. The United States seemed incapable of settling the matter, and in April 1980 the US military operation to save the hostages ended in fiasco, discrediting President Carter further still. On top of this came the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, which had a major impact on US public opinion.

In 1980, after all these failures and humiliations, the Americans voted in a man who was determined to restore the image of the United States in the world. New President Ronald Reagan used the term ‘evil empire’ to describe the USSR and relaunched the arms race. Reagan’s Presidency was particularly marked by a rise in military spending and a significant increase in the budget for the armed forces. The arms race reached such a scale that the term ‘balance of terror’ was coined to describe the global situation. Détente was forgotten and the number of direct and indirect interventions increased: the United States supported the United Kingdom in the Falklands War (1982), offered its support to counter-revolutionaries in Latin America (for example the Contras in Nicaragua) and overthrew the pro-Soviet regime in Grenada (1983).

The late 1970s saw the start of the Euromissile crisis. The focus of this tense diplomatic battle was the installation by the United States of Pershing II cruise missiles and rockets in Europe as a counterbalance to the threat posed by the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles. On 28 October 1977, the West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt gave an address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London in which he deplored the threat hanging over Western Europe as a result of the deployment of Soviet SS-20s, which put all the NATO countries and Western bases at risk. The USSR was seeking to establish its regional superiority over Europe. Moreover, the military consolidation of the Warsaw Pact and its superiority over NATO in terms of equipment and manpower raised doubts as to the Atlantic Alliance’s ability to implement a strong traditional defence. Helmut Schmidt’s address therefore called for a reassessment of US nuclear involvement in Europe. Once again, the Old Continent became the focus of the struggle between the two blocs. The Soviet SS-20s increased the potential of the Warsaw Pact’s nuclear forces and was one element that led to NATO’s decision on 12 December 1979 to install 572 US missiles (108 Pershing II and 464 cruise missiles) in Europe.

The actual deployment of US missiles in some countries in Western Europe from 1983 onwards (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and the FRG) led to the failure of the disarmament negotiations in Geneva, which had been under way since June 1982, following a decision from Moscow. The Euromissile crisis gave rise to large-scale campaigns by European pacifists demonstrating against the deployment of nuclear weapons.

This period of tension between East and West fuelled the arms race, the focus of which was the ‘Star Wars’ programme devised by US President Reagan.

On 23 March 1983, Ronald Reagan announced the launch of a vast technological programme known as the ‘Strategic Defense Initiative’ (SDI), or ‘Star Wars’: the United States would be protected from enemy nuclear weapons by a space-based shield that would detect and destroy

enemy ballistic missiles as soon as they were launched.

The US project (which would never come to fruition) drew the USSR into a frenzied arms race which led the country to the brink of financial and economic collapse. It was only in 1985, with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev in power in the USSR and his domestic reforms to democratise the Soviet regime, that Moscow decided to put an end to this reckless arms race that was ruining the country. Gorbachev openly displayed his wish to develop closer relations with the West and to resume talks with the United States. On 8 December 1987, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which provided for the destruction of all nuclear and conventional ground-launched missiles with ranges between 500 and 5 500 km, including the famous SS-20s and Pershing IIs, within three years. This treaty is seen as the first real nuclear disarmament agreement and marked the end of the arms race between the two superpowers.