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NOTE ON THE CLUB OF ROME FUTURE WORK

by

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Science, technology and related policies have always been among the main concerns of the Club of Rome.

What I am proposing does not, therefore, represent an entirely new direction in our activities.

It is clear that we are living in a time of rapid change, brought about by the outcome and diffusion of a cluster of emerging technologies, with microelectronics and information technologies in the forefront, but with others, such as materials technology, biotechnology and advanced process technologies (i.e. the laser) coming into the picture.

As it has been noted by many, a new situation is arising, whereby long established concepts, such as the distinction between mature and emerging industries, and the related international division of labour, need a thorough revision.

Very recently, the revamping by President Reagan of the "Star War" proposal under the more benign name of "Strategic Defense Initiative" (SDI) has focused the

attention of governments and public opinion at large on problems related to the proposed unprecedented thrust in frontier technologies.

The present debate is quite complex, and the risk of confusing between different issues is high.

The Club of Rome could sponsor a study, which would need high caliber people to undertake it, with the purpose of clarifying some precise issues, such as:

- Will the gigantic efforts in R&D on selected basic technologies such as: optronics, materials, rapid microelectronics, artificial intelligence, lasers, supercomputers and the like, determine a new technology-driven change in the economy and society of industrial countries, and shall this be in the most desirable direction?
- Is the proposed SDI programme (and those which Europe and Japan may also bring about in order to retain a competitive position in this new technological race) so resource-demanding as to produce a slowing down of other scientific and technological research not so relevant to the defense and advanced industrial purposes of said programmes?

- Is this new trend going to further deepen the already intolerable gap between the North and the South, and if so, what could be done in order to call for an effort of research aiming at an accelerated development of the Third World? Misery, hunger, unemployment, social and political unrest could be aggravated in entire continents if an effort to orient R&D and to inject massive resources in development-related subjects is not promptly undertaken.

The reader will remark that this proposal has avoided to look into problems which are more specifically defense-related, such as the achievability of a near-perfect shelter with SDI-like programmes, or the consequences, both in the medium and long term, of the project in the context of East-West relationships.

Also, the proposal does not explore the consequences on the Soviet economy of having to become heavily committed in such an expensive defense-related programme which would capture a still higher fraction of their GNP for activities not directed to improve the standard of living of their population.