

Missile Defense

By Michelle Ciarrocca | May 2003

With public attention focused on Iraq, the Bush administration's prized missile defense system has been far from the limelight. But make no mistake, it's still chugging along. Many things have changed since the September 11th attacks, but the current administration's stubborn determination to deploy some kind of missile defense system—whether it works or not—has not wavered. During President Bush's State of the Union address in January 2003, he said, "This year, for the first time, we are beginning to field a defense to protect this nation against ballistic missiles." However, the truth is, this won't be the first time.

Under President Nixon, the Safeguard system was developed and eventually deployed. That system, using nuclear-tipped interceptors, became fully operational on October 1, 1975. It was actually

Key Points

- President Bush has decided to deploy a partial missile defense system by October 1, 2004.
- Despite the huge investment in missile defense over the past four decades, the Pentagon has been unable to field a workable system, and major hurdles remain.
- The Bush administration's proposal to deploy a missile defense system, coupled with its aggressive nuclear policy, could halt progress toward nuclear arms reductions.

Donald Rumsfeld who pulled the plug on the system four months later during his first stint as defense secretary. Rumsfeld announced that the Safeguard system was being shut down, because it was too costly while offering only meager capability. Today, Rumsfeld is of a different mindset. Acknowledging that the system will only be able to deal with a relatively small number of incoming ballistic missiles, he now calls it "better than nothing."

In March 1983, President Reagan introduced his Strategic Defense Initiative—Star Wars—as a way to render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Since that time the U.S. has spent more than \$90 billion (over \$143 billion since the early 1960s) attempting to develop various approaches to missile defense. Though the current administration has scaled back Reagan's vision of a multitiered defensive shield fending off thousands of Soviet missiles, its broad description of the program's goals is just as ambitious. President Bush has pledged to install a system capable of defending "our friends and allies and deployed forces overseas" from ballistic missile attack.

According to a press release from the Pentagon, this time around, the initial missile defense capability will build on the Ft. Greeley, Alaska, test-bed site and include up to 10 land-based

interceptors in Alaska and California by 2004. Another 10 interceptors could be added in 2005. The Pentagon says it will be employing an "evolutionary approach to the development and deployment of missile defenses over time," and it envisions a layered system comprising ground-based and sea-based interceptors alongside upgraded versions of the short-range Patriot system.

Bush's decision to start with a modest missile defense shield may have been prompted by the string of test failures that preceded it. As the *New York Times* reported, the \$100 million test conducted on December 11, 2002, failed when the interceptor "missed its intended target by hundreds of miles and burned up in the atmosphere, while the mock enemy warhead it was meant to destroy zoomed by unscathed."

As with previous failures, officials were quick to dismissively deny that the malfunction had anything to do with advanced missile technology. Air Force Lt. Col. Rick Lehner of the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) said that the U.S. has been successfully separating boosters from their payloads for 50 years. However, the same problem had occurred during an intercept test in July 2000.

The 2004 budget requests \$9.1 billion for missile defense programs, a hefty increase over the amount in the last Clinton administration budget (\$5.4 billion) and \$1.5 billion more than this year. The Pentagon is projecting yearly missile defense funding to reach \$11.5 billion by 2007. Though substantially surpassing the Clinton administration's spending on missile defense, these sums represent only the down payment on the actual cost of deploying the system.

The Bush administration has been increasing its support for missile defense while dismantling the international arms control regime both by withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and by putting forth a new nuclear war fighting doctrine. Whereas Ronald Reagan left office saying that a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought, two decades later, the word coming from the Bush administration is that nuclear weapons are here to stay. Bush's "new idea" is that the U.S. should develop flexible nuclear weapons that can be employed in a variety of circumstances from busting Saddam Hussein's underground bunkers to bailing out U.S. forces in a conventional conflict. Following the recommendations from the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the declared role of U.S. nuclear weapons could change from a tool of deterrence and a weapon of last resort to a central, usable component of the U.S. antiterror arsenal.



Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Since 9/11/01, President Bush has been painting a picture of “unprecedented threats” to the U.S., highlighting the threat of a hostile state or terrorist group armed with weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. However, Joseph Cirincione of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has pointed out that “there are fewer nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in the world and fewer nations pursuing these weapons than there were ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago.” Even the December 2001 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) disagrees with Bush’s claims. The NIE noted that “U.S. territory is more likely to be attacked” with weapons of mass destruction by countries or terrorist groups using “ships, trucks, airplanes, or other means” than by anyone using a long-range ballistic missile. Such delivery systems are less expensive than those needed for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and, unlike missiles, nonmissile systems can be covertly developed and employed in an attempt to evade retaliation. They can also be deployed in ways that will evade ballistic missile defenses, rendering the costly investments in these systems irrelevant.

Beyond the issue of whether or not the threat warrants an elaborate, though partial missile defense system is the fact that the proposed system has yet to show that it can effectively defend the U.S. against a ballistic missile attack. As former Pentagon testing official Philip Coyle has repeatedly pointed out, “There is nothing that the DOD has done that is as difficult.”

In eight highly scripted tests, the ground-based system, which is most developed and the backbone of the Bush administration’s scheme, has failed three times. Compare that to Nixon’s Safeguard system, which underwent 111 tests, including 58 successful target intercepts in 70 attempts. And the few successful intercept tests of the Bush system are marred by how simple and predictable the variables were compared to the uncertainties of a real ballistic missile attack. Furthermore, all the tests to date—successful and unsuccessful—used a beacon inside the mock warhead, which helps guide the intercept missile to the target. Lt. Gen. Ronald Kadish, director of the Missile Defense Agency, was adamant in saying that the data from the beacon does not assist the interceptor in the final targeting of the kill vehicle. But it certainly makes the job a lot easier.

A report from the Union of Concerned Scientists shows that although the target and interceptor start out 5,000 miles away from each other, a transponder guides the interceptor to within 400 meters of the warhead. Pentagon officials claim that the transponder has to be used, because existing Pacific radars are located in less-than-ideal places for testing. Maybe this is part of any weapons testing program—you’ve got to walk before you can run—but the Bush administration wants to deploy them before they’ve even taken a step. Defense contractor Raytheon won a \$350 million contract to develop the X-band radar; however, it won’t be ready for testing until 2005, after the Bush administration has deployed the system.

The Pentagon’s own director of test and evaluation, Thomas Christie, noted in his annual report that “due to the stage of devel-

opment and the following testing limitations, the GMD [ground-based mid-course missile defense] element has yet to demonstrate significant operational capability.” Elaborating to the Senate Armed Services Committee in April, Christie continued, “This conclusion is based on the fact that many essential components of the GMD element have yet to be built.” Similar concerns exist for the sea-based systems.

One obvious “solution” to test failures is to cancel the tests, and that’s exactly what the Bush administration has sought to do. The Pentagon has cancelled three of five intercept tests of the ground-based system that were scheduled before the 2004 deployment date. The president’s 2004 budget included language that would have formally waived the system from testing requirements; fortunately, the language was removed. As Senator Carl Levin (D-MI) said, “That law exists to prevent the production and fielding of a weapons system that doesn’t work right.”

Following the president’s deployment announcement, Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) got to the heart of the matter: “The president’s decision to deploy an untested national missile defense system has more to do with politics than effective military strategy.” What else would explain the rush to deploy and get something in the ground by October 2004, conveniently right before the elections?

More than any administration in history, the Bush team has relied on the expertise of former weapons contractors to outline U.S. defense needs. Thirty-two Bush appointees are former executives, consultants, or major shareholders of top weapons contractors, including appointees with ties to major missile defense contractors Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman. At a time when corporate scandals are making headlines, the Bush administration’s reliance on individuals with ties to the arms industry to fill major posts in the national security bureaucracy deserves far greater scrutiny than it has received to date.

In addition to the dozens of former weapons executives in the Bush administration, personnel from conservative, corporate-backed think tanks, such as the Center for Security Policy, the Project for a New American Century, and the American Enterprise Institute, are now ensconced in key policymaking posts. Their fingerprints can be seen on virtually every major element of the Bush national security strategy, from the doctrines of preemptive strikes and regime change in Iraq, to the administration’s aggressive nuclear posture and commitment to deploying a Star Wars-style missile defense system.

Key Problems

- The threats that a missile defense system is meant to address have been greatly exaggerated.
 - The Bush administration is rushing to deploy a missile defense system before it has been sufficiently tested.
 - The resurgence of Star Wars has been politically driven, spurred on by the missile defense lobby, which is thoroughly entrenched in the Bush administration.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

It is true that President Bush has pledged to reduce deployed U.S. nuclear weapons. Last May, President Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, which should reduce each nation's nuclear arsenal to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads, although the cuts do not have to take effect until the expiration date of the treaty: December 31, 2012. Moreover, there are minimal accounting and verification measures within the treaty. Besides granting 10 years to make the reductions, the treaty allows both sides to keep thousands of their withdrawn warheads in reserve rather than destroying

Key Recommendations

- Instead of focusing primarily on military and technical means to deal with the threat of weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration should expand and increase funding for nonproliferation programs.
- The U.S. should redouble its diplomatic efforts to bargain away nascent nuclear weapons programs in North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and India.
- The ultimate goal of U.S. nuclear strategy should be the abolition of nuclear weapons.

today is the danger that weapons of mass destruction or weapons-usable material in Russia could be stolen and sold to terrorists or hostile nation-states and used against American troops abroad or citizens at home.” The task force recommended the development of a \$3-billion-per-year, long-term plan to safeguard, destroy, or neutralize Russian nuclear materials. Total current funding for all nonproliferation programs is about \$1.8 billion.

Even at current funding levels, major U.S. government nonproliferation programs have accomplished a tremendous amount, from financing the destruction of more than 4,400 Russian strategic nuclear warheads to orchestrating the airlift of nearly 600 kilograms of poorly guarded, highly enriched uranium from Kazakhstan in 1994. But much more can and should be done.

The potential benefits of U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions are overshadowed by the risks posed from the administration's nuclear plans, which include dramatically expanding the scenarios in which U.S. nuclear weapons might be used, producing a new generation of more usable nuclear weapons systems, and resuming nuclear weapons testing. How likely are countries like Iran, North Korea, Syria, Libya, Russia, and China—all of which have been targeted in Bush's nuclear plan—to heed the administration's calls to reduce or renounce their own nuclear arsenals in the face of this new threat from the United States? Given Washington's multibil-

lion-dollar Star Wars plan and knowing that they may be targeted by a new generation of U.S. nukes, aren't such countries more likely to beef up their nuclear stockpiles? Unfortunately, U.S. arms trade and military assistance policy also deters them from undertaking any serious nuclear disarmament. For example, rather than pressing new nuclear nations like India, Pakistan, and Israel to give up their nuclear weapons, Washington has been rewarding these states with arms sales and military assistance.

The continued pursuit of a costly missile defense system will have far-reaching consequences for the future of arms control and the goal of nuclear abolition. It will also take precious time, money, and energy from nonproliferation and diplomatic efforts, which have proven to be far more productive in reducing the threat posed by nuclear weapons.

A modest missile defense program of research, in the range of a few hundred million dollars per year and focused on improving the performance of a medium-range defensive shield to replace the current Patriot system, is justified as a way to limit the potential damage posed by the use (or threat of use) of ballistic missiles. Pentagon test director Thomas Christie rightly noted: “I recognize and agree, in principle, with the desire to field new capabilities as soon as possible, but that desire should be tempered with the responsibility to ensure that the weapons will not put Americans at risk.”

Ultimately the U.S. and other nuclear powers should strive for a nuclear-weapons-free world by living up to their commitments, signed 30 years ago under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, “to reduce and eventually eliminate their vast arsenals of nuclear weaponry.” The abolition of nuclear weapons is the only reasonable safeguard against the threat of annihilation. The U.S. must lead the way toward this goal.

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Sources for More Information

Organizations:

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Websites:

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<http://www.armscontrol.org/>

Missile Defense Agency

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

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Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. In Focus internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments. ISSN 1524-1939

Recommended citation:

Michelle Ciarrocca, "Missile Defense," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, May 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/briefs/vol8/v8n01missile.html>

Production Information:

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