

Missile Defense All Over Again

By Michelle Ciarrocca, October 2004

Under President Clinton, it became U.S. policy to deploy a National Missile Defense (NMD) system “as soon as technologically feasible.” However, Clinton’s commitment to missile defense was tempered by his pledge to base a deployment decision on four criteria: the overall cost of the program, its technical feasibility, an assessment of the ballistic missile threat facing the United States, and the impact that NMD might have on arms control and arms reduction efforts. In contrast, President Bush has set no criteria to constrain deployment.

Citing a critical test failure in July 2000 and a growing chorus of criticisms, Clinton felt safe in delaying deployment of the proposed missile defense system. In September 2000 he said, “I simply cannot conclude with the information I have today that we have enough confidence in the technology, and the operational effectiveness of the entire NMD system, to move forward to deployment.” Clinton

Key Points

- President Bush has directed the Pentagon to begin fielding an initial set of missile defense capabilities by the end of 2004.
- Despite Bush’s more than 100% increase in funding for missile defense, the resulting multilayered system is no more workable than previous systems.
- The current administration’s push to deploy a missile defense system, coupled with its aggressive nuclear policy, could halt progress toward nuclear arms reductions.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld by his side, on May 1, 2001, Bush delivered a speech at the National Defense University reiterating his campaign pledge calling for a missile defense system capable of protecting the entire United States, as well as “our friends and allies and deployed forces overseas” from ballistic missile attack.

According to the Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency, the initial missile defense system will have “limited capability” and will build on the facility at Ft. Greely, Alaska, which was previously designated as a site for testing purposes. Five interceptors have already been installed, and exercises have begun in order to make the system capable of going on alert by the end of 2004. Another 10 interceptors could be added in 2005. The Pentagon says it will be employing an “evolutionary approach to the development of mis-

sile defenses over time,” and it envisions a layered system comprising ground-based and sea-based interceptors alongside upgraded versions of the short-range Patriot missile. However, necessary radar and satellite networks are not complete, and the actual interceptors have not been tested with the overall system.

In the eight highly scripted intercept tests of the ground-based system, it has failed three times. The most recent test by the Missile Defense Agency in December 2002 was one of those failures. In a recent report, *Technical Realities*, the Union of Concerned Scientists argues that the system to be deployed in late 2004 “will have no demonstrated defensive capability and will be ineffective against a real attack by long-range ballistic missiles.” The report goes on to note that the Bush administration’s “claims that the system will be reliable and highly effective are irresponsible exaggerations.”

Even before the added spending proposed by the Bush administration is taken into account, missile defense is already one of the most expensive military programs in history. The Pentagon has spent close to \$100 billion on missile defense projects since President Reagan’s 1983 “Star Wars” speech. The last budget submitted by the Clinton administration allocated \$4.8 billion for missile defense, and President Bush has requested \$10.2 billion for the project in his 2005 fiscal year budget. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) says that the Pentagon estimates it will need \$53 billion between fiscal years 2004 and 2009 to continue development and testing of ballistic missile defenses. Yet, despite the huge investment in missile defense over the past two decades, the Pentagon has been unable to field a workable system.

Acknowledging that the system will only be able to deal with an “unsophisticated threat”—one or two incoming ballistic missiles without effective decoys or countermeasures—from a foe like North Korea, Rumsfeld maintains that it’s “better than nothing.” But is it? The administration’s increasing support for missile defense, while dismantling the international arms control regime by withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and advancing a new nuclear war fighting doctrine, could create a more dangerous global security environment.

Mohamed El-Baradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, recently pointed out one of the most difficult challenges in tackling nuclear proliferation: the ongoing hypocrisy in global nuclear policy by which “it is morally reprehensible for some countries to pursue nuclear weapons but morally acceptable for others to rely on them.” If recommendations from the Bush administration’s Nuclear Posture Review are adopted, nuclear weapons could morph from a tool of deterrence and a weapon of last resort into a central, usable component of the U.S. antiterror arsenal.

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Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Before September 11, 2001, missile defense consumed the Bush administration. In his speech at the National Defense University four months before the Sept. 11 attacks, Bush said, “today’s most urgent threat stems not from thousands of ballistic missiles in the Soviet hands but from a small number of missiles in the hands of these states, states for whom terror and blackmail are a way of life.” Deploying a missile defense system was the Bush administration’s No. 1 priority.

In addition to doubling funding for missile defense, the president sent several high-ranking officials across the globe, not to discuss terrorism, but to seek international support and backing for his missile defense scheme. As Joe Cirincione of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently observed, missile defense “had an almost religious power” for administration neo-conservatives, “evoking the Reagan legacy and this belief that creating an effective defense against ballistic missiles was largely the function of political will.” Cirincione concludes that one of the major reasons that the United States was so unprepared for terrorist attacks is because the threat assessment favored by conservatives pointed policymakers in the wrong direction.

A 1998 report of a congressionally mandated panel chaired by Donald Rumsfeld dramatically altered the debate on missile defense and the ballistic missile threat facing the United States. The Rumsfeld Commission’s key finding was the assertion that “rogue states” like North Korea or Iraq could acquire ballistic missiles within “five years of a decision to do so,” not the 10-15 years suggested by previous U.S. intelligence estimates.

The report painted a worst-case scenario by ignoring obstacles that poor countries face in trying to obtain a long-range ballistic capability while playing up factors that might increase their chances of getting usable ballistic missiles in a shorter time frame. According to commission members, the five-year estimate was based in part on briefings from missile engineers at major U.S. defense contractors, including Lockheed Martin and Boeing—hardly unbiased sources, given the billions in profits that their firms stood to gain from building a missile defense system. Many commission members also had connections to the defense industry or to missile defense advocacy organizations such as the Center for Security Policy.

With Rumsfeld heading the Pentagon, it’s no surprise that missile defense is high on the agenda. However, even the December 2001 National Intelligence Estimate notes 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 a long-range ballistic missile. Those delivery systems are “less expensive than developing and producing ICBMs,” and, unlike missiles, nonmissile systems “can be overtly developed and employed” with the source being “masked in an attempt to

evade retaliation.” They can also be deployed in ways that will evade missile defenses, rendering these systems irrelevant.

Beyond the issue of whether or not the rogue state threat warrants an elaborate and costly missile defense shield, the proposed system has yet to show that it can effectively defend the United States against a ballistic missile attack. Despite a handful of “hits” in highly scripted tests of the ground-based and sea-based elements of a prospective missile defense program, serious technical challenges remain.

Tests of the ground-based interceptor continue to use a transponder to guide the kill vehicle to within 400 yards of the mock warhead, an unrealistic “prop” that would obviously not be available in the event of an actual ballistic missile attack. Major components of the final system, ranging from the booster rocket to the proposed X-band radar, are either behind schedule or have yet to be developed. The Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency has demonstrated no capability to distinguish realistic decoys from warheads in the weightless environment of space, an essential requirement for the success of the ground- and sea-based elements of the system. A GAO report released in April 2004 notes, “testing in 2003 did little to demonstrate the predicted effectiveness of the system’s capability to defeat ballistic missiles as an integrated system.” The report continues, “none of the components of the defensive capability have yet to be flight tested in their fielded configuration.”

The Bush administration’s exaggerated assessment of the ballistic missile threat and its unjustified optimism about the capabilities of its proposed missile defense system might be explained by an undue reliance on former corporate officials and conservative missile defense boosters in the formation of White House strategic policy. In fact, a domestic “axis of influence”—a small circle of conservative think-tanks, corporate officials, and hard-line veterans of the Pentagon and the uniformed military that have been pushing missile defense for years—is playing an unprecedented role in crafting U.S. security policy in the Bush administration. Thirty-two key appointees of the administration are former executives, consultants, or major shareholders of top defense contractors. In addition, 22 former advisory board members or close associates of the Center for Security Policy, an energetic missile defense advocacy group funded in part by missile defense contractors, have been appointed to key policymaking posts in the Bush administration.

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

The missile defense program promises little in terms of increasing real security due to technical problems in the program and because the primary security threats facing the United States stem from sources other than ballistic missiles. Support for a vigorous and verifiable arms control and disarmament regime would contribute much more to improving the security of U.S. citizens.

It is true that President Bush has pledged to reduce deployed U.S. nuclear weapons. President Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, which would reduce each nation's operationally deployed nuclear weapons to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads. However, 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 meas-

Key Recommendations

- Instead of focusing primarily on military and technical means to deal with weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration should increase funding for nonproliferation programs.
- Not only should Washington redouble its diplomatic efforts to bargain away nascent nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, it should do so in Pakistan, India, and Israel, too.
- The ultimate goal of U.S. nuclear strategy should be the abolition of nuclear weapons, and the United States must lead by example.

Shortly before Bush's inauguration, a bipartisan task force chaired by former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker and former White House Counsel Lloyd Cutler reported that "the most urgent national security threat to the U.S. 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—international and national—is less than \$2 billion.

Despite White House overtures "to expand our efforts to keep weapons from the Cold War and other dangerous materials out of the wrong hands" through the Nunn-Lugar program, Bush's 2005 nonproliferation budget request is actually \$41.8 million less than last year's spending. The Natural Resources Defense Council's report *Weaponers of Waste* finds that under President Bush, the United States is spending twelve times more on nuclear weapons research and production than on nonproliferation efforts that would retrieve, secure, and dispose of nuclear weapons materials worldwide.

In preparation for the 2005 review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), United Nations members met

this past spring to discuss the progress made and the challenges ahead in their commitment "to pursue negotiations in good faith" toward a nuclear weapons-free world. Unfortunately, a nuclear weapons-free world doesn't appear to be on the U.S. agenda.

In his statement presented to the UN, John Bolton, U.S. under-secretary for Arms Control and International Security, claimed, "the central bargain of the NPT is that if non-nuclear weapons states renounce the pursuit of nuclear weapons, they may gain assistance in developing civilian nuclear power." Bolton was quick to point out that Iran, Iraq, and Libya have all been in violation of their treaty obligations and that North Korea has pulled out of the treaty altogether, calling it "a crisis of NPT noncompliance." However, the greater "bargain" within the treaty is the understanding that the non-nuclear weapons states give up their quest for nuclear weapons on the condition that nuclear weapons states work toward nuclear disarmament.

Although Bolton condemns particular treaty members for not complying with the nonproliferation objectives, he gives no mention of the failings of the Bush administration to follow through with its treaty obligations. Nor does he point to the nuclear nations that are entirely outside of the treaty: Israel, India, and Pakistan. Instead of demanding inspections, threatening sanctions, or warning of an all-out attack, Washington rewards those nations with arms sales and military assistance, perpetuating the nuclear double standard.

Iraq has no nuclear weapons, as everyone now admits. Libya has been trying to shed its rogue nation image and join the international community. It voluntarily dismantled its nuclear weapons program and has allowed UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) weapons inspectors inside the country. Iran has permitted more inspections of its facilities and is preparing to give the IAEA a full declaration of its nuclear program. And six-party talks with North Korea are ongoing. Clearly, more needs to happen with each of these nations to ensure that they are serious about relinquishing their nuclear pursuits, but progress is being made one step at a time.

Despite this progress and the fact that the Iraq War has revealed the accuracy of the IAEA's inspections regime, the Bush administration remains committed to pursuing missile defense at the expense of multilateral arms control and disarmament. President Bush recently said that those opposing missile defense "don't understand the threats of the 21st century." "They're living in the past. We're living in the future," he told a crowd of Boeing employees in Pennsylvania. However, deploying a missile defense system dreamt up more than two decades ago simply shows that Washington has not learned from the past. This is the challenge facing architects of a security policy adequate to the needs of the 21st century. Increasing funding for nonproliferation programs, getting U.S. nuclear weapons reductions back on track, and focusing on diplomatic disarmament efforts will provide real, lasting security.

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Sources for More Information

Organizations

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Websites

Arms Control Association

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

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Non-Proliferation Project

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

GlobalSecurity.org

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Missile Defense Agency

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