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NATIONAL MISSILE DEFENSE: OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?

CDR P. GARDNER HOWE, USN

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SEMINAR K

PROFESSOR

COL DANIEL L. BURGHART, USA

ADVISOR

CAPT RENATA P. LOUIE, USN

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NATIONAL MISSILE DEFENSE: OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?

Prior to the election of 2000, presidential candidate George W. Bush campaigned with promises to bolster United States national security and strengthen the military. An essential element of his strategy for enhanced security was a National Missile Defense (NMD) system to protect the American “homeland” from a ballistic missile attack. Bush felt that a combination of international and domestic factors had come together to give the country a unique opportunity to build and deploy such a system. Once in office, his administration moved aggressively to make this opportunity a reality. Critics of the NMD proposal, however, have been equally aggressive in their opposition and argue that the current initiative should be considered more of a “threat” to national security than an “opportunity.” The purpose of this paper is to first analyze the Bush administration’s NMD proposal, then determine if it will serve as an effective component of the United States National Security Strategy. After a brief review of the NMD proposal, the paper will evaluate the initiative’s strengths and weaknesses, and then conclude with recommendations on the future of NMD.

Background

The idea of a ballistic missile defense system is not new. United States research into anti-ballistic missile systems was already underway when the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in October 1957.¹ As both countries developed and deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in the 1960s, the concept of “mutually assured destruction,” or MAD, evolved

¹ Lawrence Freedman, “The First Two Generations of Nuclear Strategists,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 756.

as the primary organizing principle for the defense against nuclear weapons. This concept proposed that both the United States and the Soviet Union were secure from the threat of a nuclear attack because each faced an unacceptable level of damage by a the other's "assured" response.

As early as 1964, strategists recognized a potential threat to the stability of the MAD principle. Writing in *Scientific American*, ex-government officials and scientists Herbert York and Jerome Wiesner argued that the deployment of a viable ABM system would destabilize the security provided by acceptance of the MAD doctrine.² By offering an aggressor the potential ability to survive a retaliatory strike, a reliable ABM system shakes the very foundation of the "assured destruction" concept.

Despite such warnings, the United States and Soviet Union continued research into ABM systems throughout the 1960s. Eventually, however, both countries recognized the potential threat to nuclear stability, and negotiated strict limitations on the deployment of ABM systems during the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT). Signed in May 1972, the ABM Treaty was the first significant agreement of the SALT process and signaled commitment to the inherent security of the MAD concept.³

A decade later and presumably unsatisfied with the level of security provided by the concept of MAD, President Ronald Reagan resumed the United States' effort to develop a national missile defense system with his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Reagan envisioned a layered network of space-based sensors and weapons that would protect the United States from

² Herbert York and Jerome Wiesner, "National Security and the Nuclear Test Ban," *Scientific American*, October 1964.

³ Richard Smoke, "Strategic Arms Limitation Talks," in *The Oxford Companion to World Politics*, ed. Joel Krieger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 883.

any nuclear attack. Controversial from the start, the system was criticized as impractical, too expensive, and a threat to the deterrent stability of MAD. Like many major defense programs, SDI lost significance and funding after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the Clinton administration eventually transformed the initiative into a low-priority, less-costly research program focusing on a ground-based ABM system.⁴

The Bush Administration's NMD Initiative

On 1 May 2001, President George W. Bush addressed the faculty and student body of the National Defense University. In this speech, the President delineated his plan to turn his campaign promise of bolstering national security into reality. Citing the significant changes in the international environment over the last 30 years, President Bush asserted that a security posture based on Cold War deterrence and the concept of MAD is not only outdated but dangerous. The changed world, he said, had “an important opportunity” to re-think security strategies and “to find new ways to keep the peace.”⁵

The President made clear his vision of the key national security threat faced by the United States today:

. . . this is still a dangerous world, a less certain, a less predictable one. More nations have nuclear weapons and still more have nuclear aspirations. Many have chemical and biological weapons. Some already have developed the ballistic missile technology that would allow them to deliver weapons of mass destruction at long distances and at incredible speeds. And a number of these countries are spreading these technologies around the world.

Most troubling of all, the list of these countries includes some of the world's least-responsible states. Unlike the Cold War, 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

⁴ “Strategic Defense Initiative,” *Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2001*; available from <http://www.encyarta.msn.com>; Internet; accessed 15 Sep 2001.

⁵ “Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University,” available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/05/print/20010501-10.html>; Internet; accessed 15 Sep 2001.

these states, states for whom terror and blackmail are a way of life. They seek weapons of mass destruction to intimidate their neighbors, and to keep the United States and other responsible nations from helping allies and friends in strategic parts of the world.⁶

The President then proposed that the United States needs a “new framework” for national security that utilizes “missile defenses to counter the different threats of today’s world” and encourages “still further cuts in nuclear weapons.”⁷ Without detailing specific technologies, the President outlined a broad concept for his NMD proposal; building on existing capabilities, he proposed an integrated system of land and sea-based weapons and sensors designed to detect, track, intercept and destroy ballistic missiles throughout their flight profile. He completed this speech by acknowledging the importance of both consulting with friendly nations and allies, and developing the new strategic framework as a multilateral effort.

Since first proposed in May, the Bush administration’s NMD initiative has been the subject of intense debate. The next section of the paper will look at the key arguments of supporters and critics of the current NMD initiative.

NMD Initiative Strengths

The primary argument in support of the Bush administrations’ NMD initiative is simple: the United States’ national security requires the capability to counter the emerging threat of ballistic missile attack against the American “homeland.” The threat, articulated by President Bush in his address to the National Defense University, echoed growing concerns of previous administration and Congress. In 1998, the congressionally-mandated Rumsfeld Commission

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

reported to Congress after making an independent assessment of the ballistic missile threat to the United States. The Commission found that,

Concerted efforts by a number of overtly or potentially hostile nations to acquire ballistic missiles with biological or nuclear payloads pose a growing threat to the United States, its deployed forces and its friends and allies. These newer, developing threats in North Korea, Iran and Iraq are in addition to those still posed by the existing ballistic missile arsenals of Russia and China, nations with which we are not now in conflict but which remain in uncertain transitions. The newer ballistic missile-equipped nations' capabilities will not match those of U.S. systems for accuracy or reliability. However, they would be able to inflict major destruction on the U.S. within about five years of a decision to acquire such a capability (10 years in the case of Iraq). During several of those years, the U.S. might not be aware that such a decision had been made. The threat to the U.S. posed by these emerging capabilities is broader, more mature and evolving more rapidly than has been reported in estimates and reports by the Intelligence Community.⁸

Even Russian security planners acknowledge the potential ballistic missile threat from “rogue” nations. When visiting Moscow in August to discuss the current NMD proposal, Undersecretary of State John Bolton stated that “Russian experts no longer reject outright the American rationale that the world is at risk from rogue states brandishing nuclear- or chemical-tipped missiles.”⁹

In addition to an intentional attack from a “rogue” state, the threat of an accidental or unauthorized launch of a weapon from the existing nuclear powers is cited as justification for a national ballistic missile defense system. Although unlikely, the threat is very real. A 1999 Cato Institute Policy Brief on National Missile Defense recounts two incidents in which routine United States rocket launches were incorrectly assessed by the Soviet Union (1983 incident) and Russian (1995 incident) strategic command and control system and almost resulted in the launch of nuclear weapons against the United States.¹⁰

⁸ Rumsfeld Commission, *Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1998), p.5.

⁹ Michael Wines, “U.S. Envoy Says Russia Has Time in Missile Talks,” *New York Times*, 23 Aug 2001.

¹⁰ Charles V. Peña and Barbara Conry, “National Missile Defense: Examining the Options,” *Policy Analysis Number 337*, (The Cato Institute, 1999), pp. 6-7.

A final and subtle argument for the current NMD initiative is its potential to help the United States capitalize on Russian desires to make bilateral cuts in nuclear arsenals. While both countries would like to trim defense expenditures by cutting back on the expensive nuclear forces each has deployed, Russia is especially eager for the potential savings. In offering a strategic security framework based not only on deterrence but also defense (i.e., NMD), President Bush has the opportunity to negotiate significant cuts in both country's nuclear missile inventory without a perceived decline in their national security.

NMD Initiative Weaknesses

The arguments against the Bush administration's NMD initiative are centered on three main themes: priority of the threat, technological limitations, and the potential impact on the international environment.

Few NMD critics question the danger posed ballistic missiles. Indeed, most agree with the basic elements of the threat articulated by President Bush. Where they differ from the administration, however, is in the assessment of the threat's likelihood, and the priority in the nation's defense program. Led by Senators Joseph Biden and Tom Daschle, these critics see other significant threats to United States national security as much more likely, and just as devastating as ballistic missiles. In a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Senator Biden called the NMD initiative "myopic" and asserted that the threat of a biological attack on the United States "dwarfs" the threat of ballistic missiles.¹¹ Senator Daschle argued that the \$8.3 billion requested by the Bush administration for NMD wasn't the best possible use of defense dollars. He called the NMD initiative "the most expensive possible response to the

¹¹ Tom Carter, "Germ Attack 'Dwarfs' Missiles as Threat," *The Washington Times*, 6 Sep 2001, p. 6.

least likely threat we face” and proposed a spending plan that addresses funding increases for chemical/biological response training, counter-terrorism and non-proliferation efforts.¹²

A second major theme among critics of NMD is that technological limitations make the development of the proposed system unachievable. According to Senator Biden, “the administration has no idea whether the science and technology was available to build the system as envisaged.”¹³ To date, the United States has completed four tests of the intercept system and successfully destroyed the target missiles only twice.¹⁴ Additionally, experts contend that “real” missiles from a rogue state would have only the most basic warheads and be subject to unpredictable gyrations and tumbling during flight, making them much more difficult targets than the current “test” missiles.¹⁵ In these critics’ view, the current NMD proposal is simply too expensive an investment for unproven and doubtful technology.

The destabilizing impact of an ABM system deployment on the international environment and relations between existing nuclear powers is a third cause of major concern for critics of the NMD initiative. As previously mentioned, the concept of MAD has deterred the employment of nuclear weapons since the 1960s. This concept, however, relies on each party believing they have no chance of surviving a retaliatory nuclear strike (i.e., assured destruction). As originally cited in 1964, NMD critics maintain that an effective ABM system will destabilize global security by leading one country to believe they could survive a counter-strike strike, and

¹² Alison Mitchell, “Senate Leader to Challenge Bush on Missile Defense,” *The New York Times*, 9 Aug 2001.

¹³ “Biden Gives A Tough Critique of Missile Shield,” *The New York Times*, 11 Sep 2001.

¹⁴ William Broad, “Achilles’ Heel in Missile Plan: Crude Weapons,” *The New York Times*, 27 Aug 2001, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

therefore, possibly “win” a nuclear exchange.¹⁶ In addition, these critics believe that other states could be drawn into a new nuclear arms race; these states might balance against the deployment of an ABM system by expanding their nuclear arsenals to provide the capability to overwhelm the defenses. The final destabilizing impact on the international environment is that the current NMD proposal will require the United States to modify or abandon the 1972 ABM Treaty with Russia. Russia is against any significant modifications to the treaty and the Bush administration’s response has been to threaten unilateral withdrawal. Critics argue that such an action will upset the international order and have a negative impact on future U.S foreign relations. As Senator Biden recently commented,

Are we willing to end four decades of arms control agreements to go it alone, a kind of bully nation . . . and the hell with our treaties, our commitments in the world? I don't believe our national interests can be furthered, let alone achieved, in splendid indifference to the rest of the world's views of our policies.¹⁷

Conclusions and Recommendations

Prior to the events of 11 September 2001, the debate over the Bush NMD proposal was a central issue in Washington D.C. and the focus of intense debate concerning the proper allocation of defense dollars in the upcoming federal budget. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, however, it is clear that the continued threat of international terrorism is the most pressing national security issue and demands the country’s full resources. For the time being, it is likely that current NMD proposal will be scaled back to fund America’s new war on terrorism.

¹⁶ Wines.

¹⁷ Steven Mufson, “Sen. Biden Attacks Missile Defense Plans as Costly, Risky,” *The Washington Post*, 11 Sep 2001, p. 4.

In the long term, however, the key question remains: Are the basic elements of the Bush administration's NMD proposal an "opportunity" to enhance America's national security, or a "threat" which will weaken it? The answer is both.

The ballistic missile threat is real. Although not the most immediate threat to United States security, the ballistic missile capability of "rogue" states exists and can be expected to grow over the next decade. Because the concept of MAD is not likely to prevent a limited ballistic missile attack from such states, an alternative to the strategy of deterrence is required. The strategy of defense offered by the NMD proposal can be effective against this threat and should be integrated as a key element of United States's National Security Strategy in the years ahead.

The Bush administration's approach to the development and deployment of an ABM system, however, is a "threat" to national security. The costs associated with the proposal, both planned expenditures and opportunity costs, are simply too great. Recent terrorist events notwithstanding, there are more pressing national security issues that demand attention before spending \$8.3 billion of unprogrammed funds for NMD. Modernization of the armed forces, force structure, operations and maintenance funding, and improved chemical/biological defense programs are all key areas of concern that require immediate attention, and would be subject to cuts if the current NMD initiative went forward as proposed. Additional "costs" include the potential negative impacts on the international environment previously discussed. The bottom line is that the United States simply cannot afford the level of security offered by NMD at this time.

So what is to be done? A scaled-back NMD proposal, emphasizing a more deliberate and less expensive pace of research, would be the most efficient and effective approach to this dilemma. Such an approach will be more affordable in the short run and mitigate the most

significant opportunity costs; key national security programs will remain funded while research into the emergent ABM technology continues. In addition, a more deliberate approach to the development of an NMD system provides time for effective statecraft to address the concerns of Russia and other nuclear powers. In order to preserve nuclear stability through the concept of MAD, prevent a new arms race, and negotiate a bilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, the United States must convince existing and potential nuclear powers that the NMD system is purely defensive and capable of defending against only limited strikes. Finally, a key element of this modified NMD proposal should be a focused intelligence effort to track the status of the ballistic missile capability of existing and emergent “rogue” states while the ABM development program continues. Any future indications of a significantly improved capability will likely warrant a re-prioritization and more aggressive development/deployment of the NMD system.

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