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US MISSILE DEFENCE

Strategically sound, politically questionable

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1. Introduction

During the Reagan era, political leaders and analysts rarely mentioned the Strategic Defense Initiative (otherwise known as "Star Wars") without a reference to Hollywood movies. For example, in her history of the Star Wars controversy, Frances Fitzgerald traces the origins of Reagan's project back to Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* (1966). In that film, the US agent played by Paul Newman claims that "we will produce a defensive weapon that will make all nuclear weapons obsolete, and thereby abolish the terror of nuclear warfare".[1] Thus, it is not unreasonable for Europeans to regard strategic defences as typifying a dream-like US vision – that of the ultimate technological fix, one to restore the sense of American invulnerability that was lost with the advent of Soviet long-range missiles.[2]

After Reagan left office, the political salience of strategic defences declined. But the idea of a national missile defence system remained on the US agenda. Since the Clinton administration announced its intention to finance a National Missile Defense (NMD) in January 1999, a new and active international debate has begun.

Clinton proposed a defensive system of 100 to 200 interceptors, based on American soil, to protect the US against limited ballistic threats. In September 2000, he deferred a deployment decision to his successor, partly because of the programme's technical and operational difficulties. However, the combination of George W. Bush's arrival in the White House, plus the Republican majority in Congress, suggests that missile defence will remain high on the US agenda.

In Europe, both governments and the broad spread of public opinion have been largely sceptical about, or opposed to, missile defence. Arguments between the Europeans and the Bush administration over missile defence – combined with tensions over the European Security and Defence Policy, and American participation in Balkan peacekeeping operations – may well lead to strained transatlantic relations in the security field in the coming years.

This paper focuses on the strategic and political consequences, in particular for Europe, of American plans to deploy a territorial missile defence system – whether it comes in the form of the NMD envisioned by the Clinton administration or a different one. It will argue that the coming deployment of strategic defences by the US matters more for political reasons than for strategic ones; that while strategically sound, US plans may be politically damaging; and that the consequences for Europe will be profound but as yet unpredictable.

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[1] Frances Fitzgerald, "Way Out There In The Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and The End of The Cold War", New-York, 2000

[2] Throughout this paper, the word "strategic" carries several meanings. "Strategic defences" are understood as systems designed to protect the US homeland against missiles "Strategic nuclear weapons" are the long-range ones covered by the SALT and START treaties. The word "strategic" in general refers to a political-military issue of prime importance, and more specifically to nuclear, ballistic, and missile defence issues

2. Debating the pros and cons

In case you missed the beginning…

The current debate on missile defence gives an impression of *déjà vu* to many veterans of the Cold War. In fact, the NMD debate is the fourth one on the issue, after the Sentinel/Safeguard controversy in the 1960s, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in the 1980s, and the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS)/Global Protection System (GPS) proposals of the early 1990s. Given this continuity it is worth reviewing these earlier debates.

Both the launch of the *Sputnik* in 1957 and the first Soviet Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) tests exposed the vulnerability of US territory. In the first debate on missile defence, US policy makers saw China, which was at that time a Soviet ally opposed to US policies in Asia, in the same way that US administrations were to view North Korea, Iran and Iraq in the 1990s, that is as a "rogue state". In 1967, Robert MacNamara, the Defense Secretary, publicly sold the Sentinel programme on a Chinese rationale. But critics stressed the ineffectiveness of the system, which they said would be likely to face countermeasures. Others warned about the risk of new arms races. Under the Nixon administration, the main rationale of the system, now renamed Safeguard, became the protection of ICBM bases from the risk of a Soviet strike. (Eventually the plan fell victim to the arms control process, and Congressional dissatisfaction with the Pentagon.)

The 1985 initiative, commonly known as Star Wars, was the next chapter in the strategic defences story. In fairness, it has sometimes been misrepresented. President Reagan mandated nothing more than a major, long-term research programme in his 1983 televised speech. And when the bureaucracy was asked to flesh it out, it naturally came back to the traditional designs of missile defence, those which aimed primarily to protect US nuclear forces from a Soviet strike.

At the end of the 1980s, fears of a disintegration of the Soviet Union raised a new threat: the possibility of an accidental or unauthorised launch. The GPALS concept, inherited from SDI, was an answer to this fear (it was often called the Red October scenario, in reference to another Hollywood blockbuster). GPALS was also seen as an insurance policy against regional powers becoming armed with ballistic missiles. In response to these American plans, Moscow suggested a US-Russian venture, termed the Global Protection System (GPS). George Bush and Boris Yeltsin held serious discussions on these proposals.

In 1993, however, the Clinton administration killed this project and transferred most of America's technological and financial efforts into "theatre" missile defence, namely defences designed to protect US forces or allies. But the US also maintained the goal of eventually establishing a strategic defence system. The administration developed this plan in 1995 under the heading "Two plus Two", meaning that there would be two years of studies and research, preparing the way for a decision to deploy, and then – in the event of such a decision – another two years for the deployment of 20 interceptors. The plan became "Three plus Three" under Defense Secretary William Perry in April 1996, and then evolved to become the more ambitious "Clinton Plan" in January 1999.

Thus, there is a remarkable continuity and consistency in the US approach to strategic defence. Still, Episode IV of this story is in some ways different from the three preceding episodes. First, the perceived threat is different: the goal would not be to stop a massive volley of Soviet missiles. Second, the technology has matured. Non-nuclear interception – whether by hit-to-kill or other means – has progressed to the point that it can credibly constitute the basis of an Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system. Third, the financial means exist: the US can afford a defence budget increase. And finally, missile defence is no longer an American bilateral affair with the Soviet Union or Russia. It is clear that in the coming decade theatre and strategic missile defences will appear on several (hot) spots of the planet. In fact, we are on the cusp of entering the era of missile defence: the first non-nuclear interceptors designed specifically for such a purpose are entering service in Israel. These will be followed by others such as the US Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3).

Therefore, the deployment of *some* form of US strategic defences in the second part of the coming decade is almost certain. Missile defence can no longer be considered just a cyclical and unrealistic proposal: now the prospect of deployment is real.

The arguments to support or criticise US strategic defences are often put in an oversimplified form. To stimulate an informed debate, it is worth examining them one by one.

Is the ballistic missile threat for real?

Bill Clinton's September 2000 "postponement" speech mentioned three justifications for an NMD system:

- the risk of disintegration of a hostile state with "missiles falling into unstable hands";
- a deliberate launch by the leadership of such a state; and
- an aggression by terrorists having gained access to a country's nuclear missiles.

When debating missile defence, critics have raised a number of questions. Firstly, is there a ballistic missile threat to the US territory? Many non-Americans consider the official US threat assessment as too pessimistic, particularly when it comes to how soon countries will be able to develop long-range missiles. Critics also argue that US assessments focus only on a small group of countries, formerly known as "rogue states" (North Korea, Iran and Iraq), for no legitimate reason. Some analysts say that other regional actors should also be taken into account. For example, how about India and its nuclear ambitions? Finally, non-Americans believe that US thinking concentrates too much on capabilities and too little on intentions.

Secondly, apart from such regional threats, is there a risk of an accidental or unauthorised launch? During 1999-2000, the controversy over so-called "states of concern" almost masked this second requirement. But because of the positive developments on the Korean peninsula during the second half of 2000, the accidental or unauthorised launch rationale has made a comeback in public statements. It is worth emphasising that the Missile Defence Act of 1999, voted by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton, mentioned this risk as one of the rationales for a missile defence.

Thirdly, can one really imagine the circumstances in which a regional power would be willing to take the risk of threatening a missile strike on the territory of the strongest military power in the world? US policy-makers do not necessarily consider the leaders of such a state irrational. Indeed, they generally assume these leaders would know very well that they would face overwhelming retaliation, perhaps of a nuclear nature, if they ever made such a move.

Despite the doubts and questions, the hypothesis supporting the case for limited defences is plausible:

- States have many reasons to develop long-range ballistic missiles: security considerations, domestic politics, international attention, access to outer space, and commercial benefits (Ballistic missiles are great export products – the longer the range the better, as far as most customers are concerned). In the final analysis, few Western proliferation experts entirely dismiss the hypothesis that, by about 2010, some states of concern will be technically able to strike part of the American continent with ballistic missiles.

- The problem of missile proliferation is as much about the threat of a deliberate strike as an actual launch. In essence, missile defence is about how the US can counter the emerging missile threat and maintain its freedom of action. Such a threat is most likely to come in the middle of a crisis that might involve US military action in Asia. Few people, if any, believe that Kim Jong Il, the North Korean leader, is going to wake up one morning and think "Oh, how about launching an ICBM on the US today?". However, given the depth of American security commitments to Japan and South Korea, it is reasonable for the US to want protection against a ballistic threat, so that it can avoid blackmail or pressure during a crisis. The new US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, has pointed out that missiles "work without being fired", since they "alter behaviour".[3]

[3] Confirmation Hearings, Senate Armed Services Committee, 11 January 2001

- A regional power (for example, North Korea) would be more likely than a major power to actually fire its ballistic missiles. As two US experts point out, "rogue states with small arsenals would be far more vulnerable to a disarming US pre-emptive strike, giving them a more sensitive trigger finger than Russia or China".[4] Regional powers are much more vulnerable to the classic "use them or lose them" dilemma. Also, a country that faces the risk of being totally destroyed – a real possibility if it became embroiled in a major war with the US – might have nothing to lose by launching one or several missiles on US territory. Therefore, the risk of such a country deciding to fire its missiles, once conflict has erupted, is real.

- Even if one assumes that deterrence *can* and *should* work, there could still be a "deterrence malfunction". This is because of the uncertain political dynamics which may surround a major crisis involving the survival of an authoritarian regime. The crisis could lead to dangerous circumstances in which channels of communications break down, or in which the authority or power to authorise a launch falls in different hands.

In short, the hypotheses of US policy-makers cannot be easily dismissed. To be sure, the fluidity of the political situation on the Korean peninsula is, in the eyes of outsiders, a flaw in the US justification for NMD. After all, what is the probability that the Pyongyang regime will even exist in 2010? But to Americans, things are less clear. Many find it prudent to deploy a system that is able to manage *any* regional threat of ballistic missiles, whether known or unknown at this time. As one US official puts it: "Would you be ready to bet that no Taleban-type regime with access to ballistic missiles will emerge in the region ranging from North Africa to East Asia in the next 10 years?".

Critics of missile defence often argue that potential enemies have other means to attack the US – such as terrorism, which arguably presents a much higher risk than an ICBM strike. Indeed, terrorists have in the past attacked the US or US interests. But this argument misses the point. Not all forms of military action are interchangeable, meaning that they do not all have the same political value. Nor are they all subject to the same constraints. It is in many respects a safer – although technically difficult – option to deliver a chemical or biological warhead via a ballistic missile than it is to rely on a group of terrorists, no matter how well-organised and dedicated they may be.

And these options – terrorism versus ballistic missiles – are even less interchangeable in times of crisis: one simply cannot improvise a terrorist action. Also, the sheer existence of ballistic missiles obliges the other party to factor them into the management of the crisis. Terrorism does not have any political impact when there is no threat of a terrorist action. By contrast, ballistic missiles have a political impact by their mere existence. They allow for "existential coercion" (just like nuclear weapons can provide deterrence by their mere existence). True, terrorism is much less visible or traceable than an ICBM launch. But in many instances, a state defying the US would *want* the world to notice, rather than to hide from international attention.

The threat of terrorism is real, and the possibility of non-state actors using weapons of mass destruction is real. But the argument that Washington should concentrate on fighting the "real" threat of terrorism rather than developing missile defences is not convincing. Nobody ever said that a missile defence shield would shelter the US from *all* possible forms of aggression.

Finally, the US spends *much more* on the prevention of, and the protection against, terrorism than on missile defence. On average, the breakdown of US federal spending on "homeland defence" is as follows: 13% on National Missile Defence, 13% on Theater Missile Defence, 3% on the BMDO (Ballistic Missile Defense Organization), 10% on "Counter-Weapons of Mass Destruction terrorism", 13% on "Critical Infrastructure Protection", and 48% on "Other Combat Terrorism".[5] Thus, the score card is: yes, states have other means to attack the US – but so what?

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[4] David C. Gompert and Jeffrey A. Isaacson, "Planning a Ballistic Missile Defense System of Systems: An Adaptive Strategy", Issue Paper 181, National Defense Research Institute, RAND, 1991

How would strategic defences affect China?

Is China the real "target" of US strategic defences? It is hard to assess whether there is a broader purpose behind missile defence than the one that US officials use in public. The possibility that there is indeed a hidden agenda is something that few of those Westerners who know the open nature of US society will readily accept. Nevertheless some Chinese (and Russians, for that matter) believe this notion. And it is true that the technical characteristics of most strategic defence schemes, being designed to cope with the threat of a strike from North Korea, would be able to intercept a missile from China, because of their geographical proximity. Therefore, some analysts were right to raise questions about the avowed goal of Clinton's NMD plans, since the number of warheads it was capable of intercepting sounded suspiciously close to the current number of Chinese ICBM warheads (about two dozen).

And these questions could become more relevant in the future. The Clinton administration did not seem opposed to the notion of a bilateral nuclear deterrence relationship with China. But on the Republican side, many wonder why China would "deserve" to be placed on a par with the US. Consequently, there is no consensus in America today on whether or not there should be a stable deterrence relationship between Washington and Beijing. It is unlikely that the Bush administration will accept that China should be able to strike the US in the same way that America is able to strike China. In those circumstances it would be difficult to argue against those Chinese experts who point out that "what really matters is the technical ability of the NMD system".[6]

Another question relates to China's policy of "no-first-use" of nuclear weapons. If one believes Beijing's commitment to no-first-use, can one conceive of circumstances in which the Chinese nuclear force would be vulnerable to a US strike that would degrade it to the point of being unable to execute a counterstrike on a protected US? The answer is probably yes. But this would not necessarily "upset the existing strategic balance" because it is likely that the US already has a *de facto* disarming first strike capability vis-à-vis China. In any case, Beijing is seeking, regardless of US defences, a secure second-strike capability.

How would strategic defences affect the US-Russian strategic balance?

As is well known, nation-wide strategic defences are not permitted under the 1972 ABM treaty. It has become something of a mantra to hail the ABM treaty as a "cornerstone of strategic stability". Everybody keeps on repeating it – Americans, Russians, Chinese, Europeans and others – without explaining or acknowledging its meaning or relevance. In fact, the ABM treaty was the defensive side of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT-1) package. It did constrain the prospects of an offence/defence race between the US and the Soviet Union, and throughout the Cold War it ensured that the temptation of a disarming first strike remained limited. But it has in no way whatsoever slowed down the build-up of offensive weapons. In fact, a good case can be made that the ABM Treaty may have channelled the arms race towards the offensive side.

What would be the consequences for strategic stability of a modification, or even abrogation, of the ABM treaty, to allow for the deployment of thin territorial defences? Probably none, since the possibility for both sides of making a massive strike on the adversary's territory would be preserved, while the risk of a disarming US first strike on Russia would still be almost non-existent.

In terms of legal analysis, the argument of some Republicans, that the treaty ceased to exist with the extinction of the Soviet Union, is unconvincing. It is much more credible to argue that the "intention of the negotiators", which was to preserve a stable deterrence relationship between the two countries, could still be realised without the treaty, or with an amended version that allows for limited nation-wide strategic defences.
Some simple calculations show that even a Russian arsenal of 1,000 ballistic warheads (which is probably more than Moscow will be able to sustain in 2010) would still allow for a massive strike on the US if Russia faced a system akin to Phase Three of the NMD envisioned by Clinton. But could such a system evolve further and be enlarged to a point that it would threaten the Russian deterrent? In 1999-2000, US officials briefed their Russian counterparts on the intrinsic limits of the system they were proposing.

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[5] Anthony H. Cordesman, "Where the Money Goes in Homeland Defense: A Graphic and Tabular Analysis", Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, December 12, 2000

[6] Dingli Shen, "What missile defense says to China", The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, July-August 2000

They said these limits were a direct consequence of the limited power of the system's proposed detection capabilities. A Clinton-type NMD would surely have some built-in evolutionary potential. But it would not be a credible basis for another Star Wars-type programme.

Nevertheless, two hypotheses need to be explored:

First, a self-fulfilling prophecy would be created if Moscow, in response to US missile defence, placed more nuclear forces on high alert. This would heighten the risks of an accidental or unauthorised launch. As Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution has argued: "Whatever threat countries like North Korea may pose to the United States in the coming years, the danger of loose Russian nukes is orders of magnitude greater. It would be folly to address the first concern in a way that exacerbated the second."[7] Note, however, that if the Russian government were to react in this way, it would still seriously believe that the US could consider a first strike against it. Thus the missile defence controversy would be hiding a much deeper misunderstanding between the two countries, of which it would only be a symptom.

Second, if the new US administration engaged in a large-scale programme, going much beyond the Clinton plans, and if simultaneously Russia cut its strategic arsenal to a few hundred operational weapons, then Moscow's ability to deliver a massive ballistic strike on US territory might be severely questioned. In this respect, Russians may be right to be worried about those Republicans who declare the principle of "mutually assured destruction" to be obsolete.

Do strategic defences weaken the concept of deterrence?

Will the deployment of strategic defences affect the credibility of the very concept of deterrence in general and of the US nuclear deterrent in particular? The answer is: it depends, because the relationship between deterrence and defences is complex. Five decades of controversy over US strategic defences have revealed three conceptions:

- First, strategic defences can be a *substitute* for deterrence, in cases where deterrence cannot work. This would be the case if deterrence "malfunctioned" in a time of crisis, for example if the capability to launch a missile fell into the wrong hands. Or missile defences can be a substitute for deterrence in the event of an accidental launch.

- Second, they can be a *complement* to deterrence. This would be the case if the threat is too modest to require a nuclear response. Nuclear deterrence may not be plausible if the threat is only a few conventional warheads. The third and final phase of the Clinton administration's NMD plans probably would not have been able to intercept more than about 50 warheads by 2012: it is hard to believe that an attack of *more* than 50 detonations on the US, even if they were conventional, would not warrant a nuclear response.

- Third, strategic defences can be considered as an *element* of deterrence. A potential aggressor could be deterred by the rational calculation that its strike would not reach the US territory: it is deterred by the promise of "denial" instead of the threat of "punishment". Thus it can be argued that the existence of an ABM system around Moscow contributes to the deterrence of an attack on the Russian capital region.

Therefore a willingness to deploy strategic defences does not necessarily reveal a lack of faith in nuclear deterrence, or a cultural shift based on the idea that nuclear weapons are "immoral". Such defences should not be seen as an alternative to deterrence, but rather as an additional insurance policy or a "second line of defence". If deterrence is the safety belt, interception is the airbag.

But will they work?

The doubts over the ability of strategic defences to work are generally not about whether it is technically possible "to strike a bullet with a bullet". It is. Therefore, those sceptics who confidently predict that missile defence will never work should be careful. For instance, if one takes the US space programme in

[7] Michael O'Hanlon, "Star Wars Strikes Back", Foreign Affairs, 78, 6, November/December 1999

the late 1950s and early 1960s as an example, it could well be that the multiple failures of earlier NMD tests will be followed by a series of stunning successes.

Also, the efficacy of the system is not a black and white issue. Rather, the doubts are over whether strategic defences will satisfy the requirements of the US government's programme. And the Bush administration still has to define these requirements.

Admittedly, the logic of the project suggests that the system should have a high probability of intercepting all incoming objects. Thus the real question is whether the probability of destroying all attacking warheads is closer to 90% than to, say, 70%. The latter would not be considered satisfactory. But the former could, if one sees missile defence as much as a deterrent as an operational programme. Even taking into account the need to demonstrate to that the technology is mature, the programme's success is not critically dependent on its efficacy in real terms. The political impact of strategic defences, namely to show to America's citizens, allies and adversaries that the US is protected, is more important than its marginal success rate vis-à-vis the "last" incoming object.

But surely strategic defences would face countermeasures? Many studies coming out of the US scientific community suggest that Clinton's NMD would not be effective, because adversaries would simply develop countermeasures such as chaff or decoys. This argument has merit. But any new weapon system is likely to provoke countermeasures. In any case, the technical nature of the NMD debate means that it is hard to make definitive assertions in this area. Countermeasures that are efficient and reliable are not easy to devise. They place additional burdens on missile design. And they would also need to be tested, which would be a visible process. Those industrialised countries which have mastered the technologies of ballistic missiles by definition know a lot about countermeasures. As a result, they are well placed to negate them. It is true that an unsavoury regime might seek to buy countermeasure technologies in the marketplace. But would any major power such as China or Russia find it in its own long-term interest to transfer such sensitive knowledge? The answer is probably no.

And how about undesirable side effects?

Three possible harmful side effects have been mentioned: a breakdown in the arms control and disarmament process; new arms races; and further proliferation.

The first possible side effect is the argument that strategic defences would undermine the arms control and disarmament process. This seems wrong on two counts. Firstly, the US-Russian nuclear arms control process is indeed stalled, but that has been the case since 1993, when missile defence was not on most people's radar screens. Secondly, even if Russia and the US abandoned the negotiated arms reduction process, there are now strong pressures on them to push ahead unilaterally with reductions.

In a speech delivered in May 2000, George Bush proposed the deployment of a robust missile defence at the same time as unilateral cuts in the US arsenal. This suggests that missile defence could be an accelerator of American nuclear disarmament, even if it comes in a very different form from the process of negotiated reductions that began in in the mid-1980s. Russia has recently shown some interest in this idea, and President Putin's speech of November 2000 echoed Bush's approach. For the first time, Russia signalled its readiness to consider "parallel" disarmament moves as a substitute for the traditional US-Russian strategic arms control negotiations. Thus the fear of George Bunn, a US analyst, that NMD ould tand for "No More Disarmament" may be misplaced.[8]

A thin defensive layer against ballistic attack would not threaten the Russian deterrent. Therefore the Russians' declarations that they will not stand by START-2 unless the ABM treaty continues looks more like a short-term tactical move than a strategically motivated policy. Moscow knows that it has a lot to lose by abandoning the negotiated reduction of nuclear weapons. And it could use the fact that the US cannot modify the ABM treaty without its consent to get a favourable deal from the US on a future START-3. (The Russians seem to have decided on a gradual reduction of their strategic arsenal to 1,500 eapons in August 2000.)[9]

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[8] George Bunn, "Does NMD Stand For No More Disarmament As Well As National Missile Defence?" Disarmament Diplomacy, 42, December 1999

The second possible side effect is a different version of the first one. The idea is that the deployment of strategic defences could both reverse the disarmament process and launch new arms races with Russia or China.

Could Russia react to the unilateral deployment of a US ballistic defence system, which would amount to an abrogation of the ABM treaty, by launching a new arms race? The range of credible Russian "responses" appears limited. Moscow could theoretically expand its own existing strategic defences: but that would not pose any serious problems for the Western nuclear powers. Moscow could also withdraw from the START-2 Treaty and place multiple warheads on its new ICBMs; but that would be a political move, since there is no strategic ground for Moscow to do so. It would also be a cost-saving option. Russia would save money by placing more warheads on individual launchers, thus cutting down the number of launchers while keeping the same number of warheads. But Russia has neither the means, nor the will, nor any reason to expand its overall nuclear arsenal.

In this context it is also useful to remember that the only strategic defences currently in place are in Russia. Granted, these cover a limited portion of Russian territory – the capital region. But if territorial defences were so bad for strategic stability, and less missile defence meant more nuclear disarmament, why wouldn't Russia propose to dismantle its ABM network as part of a deal with the US?

The vast majority of Western experts on China believe that Beijing decided to expand its intercontinental arsenal a long time ago. But China will see US missile defence as an additional reason to increase and modernise its strategic arsenal – if only because it would then face *two* protected potential adversaries, and would be the only major power to do so. Note to historians of 2020: the comparison between the actual increase in the number of Chinese intercontinental warheads and the maximum intercept capability of the US system is a good indication of how much that system was a factor in Beijing's modernisation plans – and vice versa.

The third possible side effect is that the deployment of missile defences could foster further proliferation. If so, this would make the remedy worse than the disease. To start with, it should be remembered that missile defence is a consequence of ballistic proliferation. But in some instances, it does seem that the deployment of defences could increase, or accelerate, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It could encourage the increase of regional arsenals, as well as the development of alternative means of threatening the US. It could also contribute to regional arms races: if Beijing develops its forces because of US defences, then India might wish to strengthen its own nuclear arsenal in a context already marked by an "Asian nuclear reaction chain."[10]

On the other hand, the development of strategic defences could have a *positive* impact on some aspects of missile proliferation. The new US administration seems to share this approach. Secretary Rumsfeld has suggested that "a decisive change in policy [that is, the deployment of missile defence systems] should be aimed at devaluing investment in weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems by potential adversaries."[11] Indeed, might not the opening of negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang in the autumn of 2000, which touched upon ways of compensating North Korean for curbing its ballistic missile programme, have been encouraged by US determination to go ahead with its plans? Of course, this proposition is difficult to prove. But at least it shows that missile defence has not yet had the dire consequences that many predicted. It is also worth noting that, for all the talk about NMD, US policies did not prevent a successful outcome of the Enhanced Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in the spring of 2000.

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[9] Nikolai Sokov, "The Fate of Russian Nuclear Weapons: An Anticlimax on August 11", Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute for International Affairs, 14 August 2000

[10] Brahma Chellaney, "New Delhi's Dilemma", The Washington Quarterly, 23, 3, Summer 2000. He claims that the environment created by an NMD deployment would legitimise an Indian ICBM programme

[11] Confirmation Hearings, Senate Armed Services Committee, 11 January 2001

3. "It's the politics, stupid"

On the basis of the above analysis, none of the strategic arguments that are generally presented against US deployment of thin nation-wide defences is compelling enough to stir major anxieties about the future of strategic stability. One should also note that the arguments against NMD are not cumulative: it is difficult to argue simultaneously that there is no threat *and* that states will find ways to counter or bypass such a system.

But it is equally true that the mere *hypothesis* of a future deployment has generated political dynamics that can hardly be considered a positive development for the future of international security. In this respect, Lawrence Freedman judges that "the problem with NMD is that in failing to solve one type of strategic problem…it is likely to aggravate other problems, in particular the already tense relations with Russia and China."[12]

The problem is that the Gulf war, the enlargement of NATO, and most certainly the Kosovo operations have created in many parts of the world the perception of an aggressive and "expansionist" US strategy. At the same time, the US appears increasingly tempted to free itself from the disciplines of international law. US policy towards the United Nations and the establishment of an International Criminal Court, and most importantly the Senate vote on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), have bolstered this image. To many, the deployment of strategic defences is all the more worrying because it comes on the top of the Senate's rejection of a treaty that many consider a key element in the global fight against proliferation. Therefore in a different international context – one unmarked by NATO enlargement or Kosovo – Russia's reaction might have been more positive. The precedent of the Global Protection System of 1992 suggests exactly that.

That context might help to explain why America's January 1999 announcement of a budget increase for NMD triggered such a heated debate, even if missile defence had been in the pipeline for a long time. Those worried about the extent of America's global power cannot help but notice that an NMD-endowed US would have a triple superiority: conventional, nuclear, and missile defences. As French expert François Heisbourg has noted:

> "What Washington is telling the world through NMD is that the United States, which already commands 35% of the world's military expenditures, considers itself secure only if it now gets a missile shield in addition to the world's most powerful conventional and nuclear forces."[13]

Small wonder that US plans are troubling in Russian, Chinese or Indian eyes, and that missile defence is viewed as a tool to enhance US military superiority and global leadership. Take the following colourful quote from ambassador Sha Zukang, China's number one arms control official:

> "What the United States has in mind is to grab the strategic high ground by taking advantage of its peerless economic and scientific power, so as to break the existing global strategic balance and establish itself as the unrivalled hegemon of the world… After the United States has acquired its NMD system, it will definitely not sit idly in the presumably impregnable "Bastion America", to enjoy the serene piece of sky above its head, or to wait passively to hit and kill the missiles or whatever UFOs come tumbling from the sky. Its omnipresent "national" interests and its God-given sense of "mission", with which it is born, will drive this "lonely superpower" to sort out and demolish all kinds of "rogue states" and "evil empires" in Asia, Europe, in the Middle East or in any corner of the world, with higher enthusiasm and with smarter bombs. By then, the United States will not be content with being the "world leader". Nothing less than the "world ruler", and substituting the existing collective security system with the Pax Americana will satisfy its real ambitions."[14]

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[12] Lawrence Freedman, "Does Deterrence Have a Future?", Arms Control Today, October 2000

[13] François Heisbourg, "Brussels's Burden", The Washington Quarterly, 23, 3, Summer 2000

[14] Sha Zukang, "The Impact of the US Missile Defense Programme on the Global Security Structure" Chinese People's Association for Peace and Disarmament/Oxford Research Group, Joint Seminar on Missile Defense and the ABM Treaty, Beijing, 13-15 March 2000

This blunt and crude statement is representative of the image that the US has in many parts of the world. While this perception puzzles many US observers, it is nevertheless an important factor when assessing the consequences of strategic defences. In this respect, missile defence is likely to aggravate existing anti-American sentiments across the world, however skillfully Americans try to justify it.

Going further, one might argue this: even though there are few strategic reasons to believe that defences will promote proliferation, they might provide a political motive or justification for states to apply unilateral policies, disregard international treaties and thus legitimise weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes in general. Missile defence might, for instance, "strengthen the hand of those who want to give Iran a credible weapons of mass destruction profile at any price."[15] Likewise, the scrapping of the ABM treaty, even if it did not have any major strategic consequences, would have important political ones. For if the US withdrew from the ABM treaty, would it not give arguments to countries which might be tempted to leave, for example, the Non-Proliferation Treaty? They might claim that "conditions have changed," to cite the expression used by US officials to justify modifying the ABM treaty.

Thus, even if the deployment of missile defence did not have the dire strategic consequences on international security that some predict, it might very well have a major negative political impact. It would reinforce anti-US and, more generally, anti-Western political forces throughout the world. It is clear that the Clinton administration had not anticipated the magnitude of this political dynamic.

A parallel can be made with the June 1995 French decision to embark on a final round of nuclear testing: few analysts expected the scope and vigour of the international reactions. But it is important to acknowledge that France paid a significant price by accompanying the decision to test with nuclear disarmament measures (France scrapped its land-based missiles after the tests). Moreover, in 1995 France could count on the dust to settle after the tests, whereas the NMD system and its consequences would be here to stay.

[15] Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Tehran's Tocsin", The Washington Quarterly, 23, 3, Summer 2000

4. What now?

Strategic defences under the Bush administration

Whatever one thought of the Clinton plan for NMD, it revealed a willingness to remain as close to the letter of the ABM treaty as possible. It was arguably one of the least "ABM-unfriendly" plans conceivable, in terms of its basic architecture (two sites of 100-200 fixed, land-based, hit-to-kill interceptors). Perhaps as a result, the Clinton NMD plan ran into flak from both from opponents and proponents of strategic defences. The Clinton administration's problem was that it tried to have the best of both worlds: maintain the ABM treaty (hailed as a cornerstone of stability) *and* protect the US against a limited ballistic threat (and thus be prepared to leave that same treaty). However, anyone devising the architecture of strategic defences faces a fundamental dilemma, which could be termed "legality versus efficacy": the most efficient systems are those which require so many revisions of the ABM treaty that the very concept of revision becomes meaningless.

Where next? The Bush team's commitment to missile defence is strong. And the nomination of Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense could not have sent a clearer message of administration's determination to defend America against the perceived threat of long-range ballistic missiles.

Two broad alternatives stand out. The US may try to remain as much as possible within the parameters of the letter of the ABM treaty. This "legality-driven" approach would argue in favour of a scaled-down version of a Clinton-type NMD, such as the one suggested by Ivo Daalder, James Goldgeier and James Lindsay (a total of 100 interceptors at two sites).[16] But the Bush administration seems unlikely to be torn by the legality versus efficacy dilemma. It seems likely to seek an "efficacy-driven" solution, that is one which puts a premium on the probability of successful intercept, regardless of the legal constraints. However, the Bush team will face another dilemma, which might be termed "efficacy versus timing": those systems that are most efficient are also the ones for which the prospects of deployment are the most distant.

The Bush administration is unlikely to return to a Star Wars-type programme. To be sure, some of the Bush team, in contrast to the people around Clinton, seem driven by an ideological yearning for missile defences. Nevertheless most Bush advisers have been generally cautious and realistic about missile defence (especially in the absence of a massive threat such as the Soviet one). Many Republicans are also keen to emphasise that they would consult the Europeans much more than the Democrat administration did, and that they would seek enhanced co-operation with them.

Consultation and co-operation are not just good ideas in themselves. As some Republican experts have pointed out, "getting the Europeans on board" has many potential advantages for the US. It would reduce Russia's political leverage; prevent European military participation in regional crisis management operations being hindered by the risk of blackmail; help to create an integrated transatlantic architecture of sensors and interceptors; and protect US populations located in Europe.

The Bush presidency's commitment to missile defence does not mean that the US is embarking on a collision course with Russia. Indeed, Moscow may be ready to trade the assurance of US nuclear reductions in return for the deployment of limited strategic defences. It is worth remembering that it was during the 1988-1992 Bush administration that the US and Russia reached a tentative agreement on missile defence, around the concept of a Global Protection System.

It is less easy to be optimistic about the impact of missile defence on America' relations with China. It is possible that President Bush will avoid presenting defences as an insurance against China. But many other Republicans will doubtless see them as having a potential role in preventing Beijing appyling nuclear blackmail to the US. For example, some Republicans fear that if China invaded Taiwan, it might try to prevent the US intervening by threatening to destroy an American city.

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[16] Ivo H. Daalder, James M. Goldgeier and James M. Lindsay, "Deploying NMD: Not Whether, but How", Survival, 42, 1, Spring 2000

Boost-Phase Interception: the magic wand?

Many enthusiasts for missile defence hope for a scheme based on Boost-Phase Interception (BPI). This is about destroying the missile when it is "big, hot and slow", soon after launch. In contrast, the Clinton plan would involve "mid-course interception", when the incoming objects are "small, cold and fast", after the missile's boost-phase and the separation of the warhead from the body of the missile. With BPI, the missiles could be destroyed by kinetic interceptors or lasers, delivered from the land, ships, aircraft or space. (Borrowing from the Chinese tradition, one might suggest that BPI applies when the object is "yang", i.e. hard, skyward and hot, as opposed to mid-course interception which applies at a time when the object is "yin", that that is soft, groundward and cold).

Suddenly, around the spring of 2000, boost-phase interception appeared to be a magic wand. For boost-phase systems have many advantages. They are not dedicated to the interception of a single type of threat, but can deal with medium-range as well as long-range missiles. They would not be able to intercept missiles launched from the heartland of China and Russia. They blur the distinction between Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) and National Missile Defence, because interception is made "at the source", rather than above the territory of the defending party. Because they give equal protection to all potential targets, and can be based outside national territories, boost-phase systems are much better suited to international co-operation with allies and partners (this is a paradox of sorts, since they are mostly promoted by Republicans, who tend to be more unilateralist in these matters than Democrats). And they do not demand the use of radar sites based on allied territories such as the UK and Denmark.

During the presidential campaign, George Bush referred several times to BPI as being "the most effective system".[17] Indeed, a majority of experts favours the boost-phase concept. Richard Garwin suggests a multiple fixed- and mobile-site BPI system, an approach also favoured by Senator Joseph Biden.[18] Others, especially in the Republican camp, seek an incremental approach that would lead to the gradual deployment of a "multi-layered" system – that is a system which allows the defender to shoot at the missile during the boost-phase and later on in its flight – as the technologies evolve and mature. Steve Hadley, before joining President Bush's National Security Council, favoured an interim BPI system based on *Aegis* cruisers, as an "emergency deployment option", to be later complemented by a multiple mid-course intercept fixed-site system.[19] Steve Cambone, now an adviser to Secretary Rumsfeld, suggested combining BPI (in air or in space) with mid-course interception using several fixed sites.[20] David Gompert and Jeffrey Isaacson propose a "system of systems", based on a similar combination while also suggesting a link between theatre defences and national defences.[21] A few, such as James Woolsey, openly favour space-based BPI.[22]

But alas, boost-phase interception is no magic wand. Promising though it may be, the technology is a long way from being usable. BPI requires the stationing of interceptors very close to the launching point. Thus a possible Iranian launch could not be intercepted without access to foreign territories. BPI also involves the risk that chemical, biological or nuclear warheads would fall on friendly territories. Nor can BPI distinguish a *real* satellite launch from a faked one, because the rocket's flight profile would not be established by the time the interception had to take place (North Korea claimed that its 1998 test was a satellite launch).

It is true that, from a legal point of view, BPI would perhaps not require as many amendments to the ABM treaty as the Clinton plan. But BPI would nevertheless breach the letter of the treaty and thus could create political problems; since it would protect a whole territory against long-range missiles.

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[17] See for instance interview with ABC News, 29 July 2000

[18] Richard L Garwin, "A Defense that Will Not Defend", The Washington Quarterly, 23, 3, Summer 2000, suggests sites in Russia or in the Sea of Japan, in the Gulf, and in Southern Turkey

[19] Stephen J. Hadley, "A Call to Deploy", The Washington Quarterly, 23, 3, Summer 2000, suggests at least four sites: Alaska, Maine, Europe, and Asia

[20] Stephen A. Cambone, Statement for the Record, Hearing before the Armed Services Committee, House of Representatives, 106th Congress, June 28, 2000

[21] Gompert and Isaacson, op. cit.

[22] R. James Woolsey, "The Way to Missile Defense: Dealing with Russia and ourselves", National Review, June 19, 2000

Nor would BPI help anyone trying to intercept an accidental or unauthorised launch from the central parts of China or Russia. Thus BPI does not answer all the questions that are posed by the concept of mid-course intercept.

It is clear that the US will deploy a system based on one of these options, or a combination thereof, before 2010. Given the constraints, the Bush administration is likely to settle for a mix of different techniques and launch systems. It will probably adopt an evolving and incremental approach, starting with a Clinton-type system (the only viable option in the near-term, in the eyes of many), and then proceed with sea-based, boost-phase systems. It will also leave open the option of deploying space-based interceptors in the future.

5. What's in it for Europe?

The nature of European uneasiness: the four Ds

Outside the British Conservative Party, most European political leaders and analysts have reacted to NMD by being mildly sceptical at best, and completely opposed at worst. Nicole Gnesotto, Director of the WEU (Western European Union) Institute for Security Studies, summarised in early 2000 the four main European worries about US strategic defences as the "Four Ds": *délégitimation* (possible delegitimisation of nuclear deterrence), *découplage* (possible transatlantic decoupling), *déstabilisation* (potential destabilisation of the strategic balance), and *détournement* (possible siphoning of European budgetary resources towards missile defences).[23]

Most Europeans do not deny that a potential threat exists. The proliferation of ballistic missiles is also viewed in Europe as a serious danger. But most analysts believe that the US threat assessment is too pessimistic, and excessively focused on capabilities (as opposed to intentions). As far as the response is concerned, a "cultural gap" exists between the two sides of the Atlantic.[24] Europeans tend to be more confident about nuclear deterrence as an effective means of countering ballistic and WMD threats; and many in Europe do not share the US preference for technological fixes to solve strategic problems. In addition, most Europeans are not particularly concerned with the North Korean ballistic missile problem.

In any case, even if nobody in Europe seriously claims that territorial vulnerability is desirable, the history and geography of Europe do make the issue of vulnerability less salient. Most European analysts also make different assumptions about the knock-on effects of the deployment of strategic defences. And they believe that US officials downplay the potential negative consequences of deployment on the US-Russia strategic balance, on non-proliferation and on disarmament.

The most important arguments that Europeans advance may be the political ones. Just as in Russia or China, it is not so much missile defence as such that causes concern, but rather missile defence in the context of a more general perception of US "belligerence". In Europe, the US domestic political context is the biggest worry. As an excellent report on European views of missile defence put it: "the decline in European confidence in the consistency and reliability of US policy…has had important effects on the way in which the US National Missile Defense was initially received, and is still viewed, by many Europeans."[25]

To sum up: for many in Russia, missile defence is mostly a problem because it comes on the top of Kosovo; and for many in Europe it is mostly a problem because it comes on the top of the CTBT vote. Both groups agree that strategic missile defence is bad because it symbolises US unilateralism. Once again it is clear that missile defence matters mostly for political reasons.

Most of the European arguments against NMD are the same as those used during the Star Wars controversy – except for two important differences. First, whereas Europeans feared that the Soviet Union would launch its own SDI, there is now no comparable fear that Russia might expand its strategic defences into a nation-wide shield. Few Europeans believe that Russia has the means to develop its defences to such levels that they would negate the French or UK nuclear forces. Second, there have been few European voices calling for an NMD-type system to protect Europe. (It is interesting that US allies in the Asia/Pacific region have been more cautious than the Europeans in voicing their concerns over NMD. This is probably due to a mix of strategic factors, such as the North Korean problem, and the Asians' own interest in missile defence; and political factors, such as their greater dependence on the US for their vital security interests.)

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[23] Introductory remarks to the seminar on "Missile Defence and The Future of Nuclear Policy", Paris, WEU Institute for Security Studies, 9 June 2000

[24] For more on the transatlantic 'cultural gap' see Steven Everts, "Unilateral America, Lightweight Europe", CER, February 2001

[25] Stephen Cambone, Ivo Daalder, Stephen J. Hadley, Christopher J. Makins, "European Views of National Missile Defense", The Atlantic Council of the United States, Washington DC, September 2000

The impact of strategic defences on the transatlantic relationship

The argument that missile defence could lead to a "transatlantic decoupling" of the sort that was feared during the Cold War can be discarded. There has long been a differentiation of security conditions (creating "unequal security zones") between the two sides of the Atlantic: Europe was always vulnerable to Soviet theatre missiles, whereas the US was not. And it is hard to argue that US vulnerability is indispensable for transatlantic coupling: it is precisely the vulnerability of the US territory that led Europe, during the Cold war, to question the reliability of the US protection, and thus worry about "decoupling".

But the "decoupling" argument may have disappeared from the debate a little too quickly. When examined more closely, this question turns into an interesting one, because the effect of missile defence on transatlantic coupling depends on various sorts of scenarios:

- If there was a ballistic threat to the US but not to Europe (such as the North Korean one), Europe would not feel directly concerned. However, might not an adversary who sought to blackmail the US, but who was unable to do so because of its defences, seek to threaten its allies instead? If so, the net effect of defences might be a quasi-zero-sum game, with the ballistic risk possibly being "transferred" to another region such as Europe.

- In case of a "common ballistic threat" of ICBMs from a Middle East regional power, Europe would be closer to the strategic situation of the Cold war. In these circumstances, one could argue that the US might be more ready to protect Europe with strategic defences than it would be without.

- If there was a threat to Europe but not to the US territory (for instance by a Middle East country having only short- and medium-range ballistic mssiles), then NMD would not have any impact on the US guarantee. (The parallel with Soviet medium-range missiles would not be relevant, because the Soviet Union also had ICBMs that could reach the US).

But these latter two scenarios also raise an interesting question: why would the US rely on the threat of retaliation to help protect Europe, but not for the protection of its own territory? There are two possible answers to this question: either US policy-makers continue to believe in traditional deterrence (and the missile defences programme is thus *just* a political issue). Or there is a sincere US belief that deterrence might not work (which is the official view). In that case, the Europeans would need to stop counting on the US nuclear guarantee. It would then be logical for the Europeans to consider jumping on the missile defence train (notwithstanding the existence of French and UK nuclear forces). It is interesting to note that these thorny questions would not be raised if the US deployed a BPI system which would, by definition, protect all potential targets.

Going further, missile defence could have a "hyper-coupling" effect, meaning that it could *strengthen* transatlantic strategic coupling. When the US makes a concrete decisions on deployment, it is conceivable that it could set off a shift in European strategic culture and a mimicking process. The Europeans might then start to stress the importance of proliferation as the most important security threat to Europe, and missile defence as the most appropriate response. Such a shift could be reinforced by fear of the "threat displacement" effect mentioned above, and by unease stemming from the emergence of a new "capabilities gap" in military technology.

Increasingly, US analysts are suggesting that only a system which also protected allies would be coherent. And as indicated earlier, involving the Europeans would have many advantages for the US too.

The coming debate on "Allied Missile Defence" is likely to have parallels with the old transatlantic discussions on "sharing of risks and responsibilities" in the NATO nuclear debates of the 1960s. For the use of radars in Europe would give Europeans a say in the protection of the US territory. Moreover, the stationing of interceptors on the European side of the Atlantic would integrate the ballistic defence of Europe to

that of the US. It would also give the deployment countries more weight in the North Atlantic Council, rather like the stationing of US nuclear forces in Europe during the Cold War enhanced the influence of "hosting" countries.

We are likely to see proposals for schemes that would be similar to the 1960s concept of a "Multi-Lateral Force" (MLF), in which ships manned by multinational crews would have carried nuclear missiles. A contemporary version of the MLF concept would replace missiles with anti-ballistic interceptors. But it is no less likely that it will eventually be concluded, as happened in the MLF debate, that there should be "only one finger on the button". Given the short timeflights of ballistic missiles, the interception decision would have to be granted to one single central authority.

And yet, American plans for missile defence could also decouple America from Europe, in many ways. These plans have already solidified European perceptions of growing US unilateralism. It was remarkable that when the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Javier Solana, raised his concerns about the consequences of the Clinton plan, he was able to take a position on such a sensitive defence issue without being contradicted by EU member-states. Likewise, in June 2000 Gerhard Schröder felt strongly enough about NMD to voice publicly the same kind of concerns in the presence of the US president, something which German chancellors do not often do.

A unilateral deployment of strategic defences by the US could also, indirectly, bolster European political autonomy, through the development of a separate European strategic culture. One might remember the fear (notably in the UK) that the 1986 US-Soviet Reykjavik Summit created. At that time, nothing less than the abolition of nuclear weapons was floated. This fear led European governments to reaffirm their attachment to nuclear deterrence. Indeed, a Reykjavik-type deal between Putin and Bush, whereby both countries would agree to the deployment of strategic defences and de-emphasise nuclear weapons with massive reductions, is one that should worry those Europeans who believe that nuclear deterrence is still the cornerstone of their security and that defences have an inherently destabilising potential.
So perhaps Europe's problem is not so much the physical vulnerability of its territory to ballistic missiles as its intellectual vulnerability to American influence on its strategic thinking. In any case, the debate between Europe and the US on missile defence is only just starting. One of the difficulties in reaching a transatlantic consensus is that the US desire to deploy missile defence for its territory is not justified by a common threat. The real transatlantic debate will begin when (and if) a long-range ballistic threat emerges in the Middle-East. Only such a threat would be a common threat in the traditional sense.

These differences are arguably more of a quantitative than of a qualitative nature, leaving some room for reconciliation. This compromise might come in the form of an agreement along the lines of the so-called "Thatcher Guidelines" of 1984. In December of that year, UK Prime Minister Thatcher and US President Reagan issued a joint communiqué – at British insistence – that, in effect, expressed UK support for SDI with the understanding that:

- the goal of the West was to achieve balance, not superiority;
- in light of treaty obligations, SDI-related deployments had to be a matter of negotiations with Moscow;
- the aim of SDI was to enhance, not undercut, deterrence; and
- negotiations to reduce levels of offensive weapons on both sides should continue.

The principles that German foreign minister Joschka Fischer laid down before the Bundestag could be another useful starting point. In June 2000, Fischer suggested that Germany expected three things from the US: that NMD deployment should not be decided without consultations with US allies, because of their direct interest in the issue; that the arms control and non-proliferation regime should be reinforced, not dismantled; and that NMD should not trigger new arms races, between the US and Russia or between the US and China.

The deterrence versus defence debate in Europe

As the US moves ahead with the deployment of strategic defences, pressures will grow for Europe to have its own missile defence system. Many Europeans will wonder why the US can be protected and not Europe. Thus a missile debate will be imposed on Europe. Not that it is unhealthy to have a new strategic debate in Europe about such issues. Indeed, the January 1999 announcement on NMD served as a useful wake-up call for Europeans on the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation. But most Europeans would prefer to have such a debate on their own terms. Also, such a debate will be much more complex and volatile than the American one, both for political and geographical reasons.

Vulnerability is not homogenous on the European continent. An intercontinental missile from Asia could threaten all European countries equally; but a medium-range missile from the Middle East would not. In addition, just as during the Cold War the distinction between strategic and theatre nuclear weapons was in many respects pointless, the distinction between Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) systems in Europe and a European NMD-type system would be largely irrelevant. For simple geographical reasons, there can be no clear threshold between the protection of forces and the protection of territories. Thus the debate on the former is likely to open a debate on the latter.

Such a debate on the European need for ballistic missile protection would have far-reaching ramifications. Assuming that EU countries devote a fixed level of resources to their defence policies, a demand for territorial missile defence might threaten the existing efforts to improve conventional power projection capabilities. Such a demand could also lead to pressure on the nuclear budgets of France and the UK.

Because of these reasons, and the absence of an immediate threat, Europe could usefully delay its debate on missile defence until just after 2003, when the EU is supposed to have reached its "headline goal" targets. And that is the time when the NATO-mandated studies on a possible TMD architecture are due to be finished.

If Europe did decide that it needed partial protection of its territory, several technical options – with very different political, financial and strategic consequences – would be feasible. Europe could embark on designing and developing ABM systems from scratch, or rather from existing theatre air defence programmes such as the French-Italian Aster missile. The cost of an independent and limited ballistic shield, based on a development of the Aster, has been estimated by a recent French parliamentary report to be 11.7 billion euros. This assumed that 20 European locations had to be protected against No-Dong type missiles (which might be exported by North Korea).[26] But Europe could also buy US theatre defence systems. Or it could negotiate to be "plugged in" to the US national system: either by participating in a multinational BPI network, or by having one or two fixed interceptor sites on European territory. The latter option might require a specific amendment to the ABM treaty, which does not allow the transfer of ABM technologies to defend against a missile with a range of greater than 3,500 kilometres.

The debate on defences will inevitably lead to a broader one on the issue of deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons. Thus the nuclear issue in Europe, at present pretty much a sleeping dog, could be reawakened, for better or for worse. Anti-nuclear protests might resurface, notably in countries which had fierce nuclear debates in the 1980s such as Germany or the UK.

The impact on EU-Russia relations

Missile defence is bound to have consequences for relations between the EU and Russia, although it is too early to tell exactly what they will be. Much will depend on the way Moscow manages the US decision to deploy. If Russia and the US reach an agreement, vocal opposition to US defences is likely to disappear. But if the US withdraws from the ABM treaty, Europe might suffer from the consequences of a crisis between Moscow and Washington. The fall-out would be political and perhaps military, if Moscow responded by withdrawing from other arms control agreements and boosting its nuclear forces. However, an assertive US unilateral stance, involving deployment and the scrapping of the ABM treaty, combined with a moderate Russian response, could also lead to some form of political *rapprochement* between Europe and Russia.

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[26] Pierre Lellouche, Guy-Michel Chauveau et Aloyse Warhouver, "La France et les bombes. Les défis de la prolifération des armes de destruction massive", Documents d'information de l'Assemblée nationale, n° 2788, Paris, 2000

So far, Russia's "sticks and carrots" approach vis-à-vis European countries has been an unhealthy blend of strategic and political considerations. Moscow suggested building a pan-European "non-strategic" ballistic shield in 2000, and again in a more precise form this year. That proposal looks like an attempt to split the NATO allies. It may also be a sincere proposal, in line with Yeltsin's 1992 GPS suggestion. But it would have been much more appealing if Moscow had refrained from implicitly threatening Europe to suffer the consequences of a US withdrawal from the ABM treaty. In any case, the implementation of the Russian concept would only be feasible in the framework of a package deal that included a START-3 favourable to Russia and a revised ABM treaty that allowed for the kind of strategic defences that the US deems necessary for its security.

US missile defence and European defence policy: a misleading parallel

Analysts sometimes make a parallel between the simultaneous emergence of America's plans for missile defence and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), noting that they are two of the major challenges to transatlantic relations in the years to come. There are indeed some interesting symmetries between the two. Both the US and Europe are seeking to respond to what they perceive to be a key challenge to their freedom of action. For the US, it is to avoid being vulnerable to a limited long-range ballistic threat; for the Europeans, it is to ensure that the Union has the ability to manage crises on its own.

For both, this implies the development of specific capabilities. Both sides want to avoid a situation in which military action might be paralysed for political reasons. The US wants to ensure that a country seeking to prevent US military intervention could not blackmail it. The EU does not want European military action to be exceedingly dependent on a NATO decision to act. In both cases, there have been strong reactions to the other side's comments and warnings, of the "mind-your-own-business" sort. Finally, there is also a historical parallel. These two projects have not appeared out of the blue: both are the product of a long history, dating back to the 1950s. They are both coming of age today because conditions are ripe for their implementation.

But the parallels between missile defence and ESDP stop here. Budgetary constraints are not the same on the two sides of the Atlantic. The US is perfectly able to boost its spending on arms procurement. Europe's budgetary situation is not as healthy. Financially, it is easier for the US to build a missile defence system than it is for the Europeans to increase their military capabilities. From a strategic point of view, too, the comparison between NMD and ESDP does not carry very far. The plan for strategic defences has been, so far, a US-only enterprise, with no built-in direct benefits for other countries. In contrast, the European effort will increase both EU and NATO capabilities.

However, one could very well have an impact on the other. America's unilateralism could, indirectly, boost European efforts to develop ESDP. Also, the possible use of radars on the territory of Denmark and the UK could create a split between those European countries that are directly involved in missile defence and the rest. Divisions among EU member-states on these issues could damage Europe's efforts to build a common defence policy. And European reluctance to accept the US plans could also lead to US hostility to the development of the ESDP.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The exact political and strategic consequences of an American deployment of strategic defences are still unpredictable. They will depend on the type of system that Washington chooses, and on the way that Russia handles the issue.

From a strategic point of view, limited territorial defences do make sense for the US. Under close examination, most of the justifications advanced by US analysts stand up to scrutiny. The potentially harmful strategic side effects, although real, do not warrant excessive anxiety. But those side effects would be alarming if:

- the US viewed strategic defences as a substitute for deterrence in its dealings with China; and/or
- the US embarked on an open-ended programme that involved the deployment of interceptors in space.

However, the political ramifications and consequences of US missile defence are more important than the strategic impact. The decision to deploy strategic defences would be above all an important political gesture vis-à-vis potential adversaries, as a sign of resolve; and vis-à-vis US public opinion, as a sign of responsibility. And the political consequences of deployment for Europe, Russia and China will be more important than the strategic effects.

The key factor in European reactions to missile defence will be whether or not there is a deal between the US and Russia. Such a deal is likely, provided that the US accedes to Moscow's requests, in particular concerning deep cuts in strategic nuclear arsenals.

Recommendations

- The US should think seriously about the way missile defence may affect its long-term political and security interests. An overall cost-benefit analysis is needed, factoring in the global political ramifications.
- Many countries would look more favourably on the deployment of strategic defences if the US made parallel and far-reaching efforts to reinforce non-proliferation and arms control regimes. For instance, the US could bolster and complement the Missile Technology Control Regime, and agree on measures to avoid the weaponisation of space.

- If America reached a deal with Russia, even if it had to forego some of its ambitions, this would profoundly alter perceptions of US missile defence plans. Likewise, a US-Chinese understanding on the conditions required for strategic stability between the two countries would also have a very positive impact on perceptions.

- Russia, China and Europe all have a vested interest in the maintenance of some kind of legal regime that maintains quantitative and qualitative limits on strategic defences. Together, they should try to persuade the US that it is also in its long-term interest to maintain such a regime.

- The Europeans need to develop some fresh thinking on missile defence – thinking that avoids some of the Pavlovian reactions stirred by memories of SDI. The Europeans should differentiate between the case in which the US builds a demonstrably limited ballistic shield; and the case in which America embarks on a massive, open-ended programme that leads to the deployment of defences in space.

- A serious debate on whether or not Europe needs to have its own territorial defences is needed. For example, an American offer for Europeans to participate as full partners in a revived GPS architecture (that is, a US-Russian missile system) could not easily be dismissed.

- The transatlantic dialogue on missile defence would be easier if the Europeans were more serious about making their own assessments of the ballistic risks to their security. Only then could the Alliance undertake a common ballistic threat assessement in a serious manner.

- The Europeans should remember that lecturing the US is not the best way to deal with Washington. It is often counter-productive. Rather than flatly opposing the deployment of strategic defences, the Europeans should seek to manage the issue in a dispassionate way, for instance by accepting modifications of the ABM Treaty. The Europeans would be wise to get ready for a possible US-Russia deal, and ensure that such a deal takes their interests into account.

- Conversely, the US should not try to force Europe's hand. It should not demand that the Europeans participate in a transatlantic missile defence system, or financial contributions to the development of such a scheme. Such approaches would be equally counterproductive.

- The US should listen to Europe. European views are important for the US for at least four reasons: because some of the allies may be directly concerned (for instance, if the radar sites in the UK and Denmark are used); because the deployment of a US-only strategic defence system might displace the potential threat onto unprotected European allies; because the Europeans are major players in the global disarmament and non-proliferation debates, and have their own relationship with Russia and China; and finally because, whether Washington likes it or not, its plans will impact on the broader transatlantic debate on America's role in Europe and the future of NATO.

- Four countries could play a useful role in building bridges between the US, Europe and Russia on the issue of strategic defences: France (a US ally opposed to NMD), the United Kingdom (a US ally with a potential role in NMD and a traditional role as a transatlantic bridge-builder), Canada (a US ally that could be included in a missile defence system but which is strongly committed to disarmament), and Ukraine (an ex-Soviet Republic which is a party to the ABM treaty).

- "Trading NMD for ESDP" is a debatable proposition. It is true that transatlantic debates are seldom insulated from another. And Europeans should bear in mind that their attitude towards missile defence will affect US reactions to ESDP. But it would be preferable and healthier for the future of the Alliance if all parties sought an agreement on both issues separately, rather than a tactical trade-off.