

Missile Defense: A Deadly Danger

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The new film *Thirteen Days* reminds us that the danger of nuclear annihilation does not come, mainly, from irrational adversaries and rogue states. Instead, the main threat stems from the policies and behaviors of those who are entrusted with the world's largest and most volatile nuclear arsenal – our own.

Since Ronald Reagan announced Star Wars in 1983, missile defense has come to dominate the evolution of strategic technologies and strategic thinking. For the leaders of the nuclear establishment, the propaganda value of this has been immense; it has enabled them to escape the stigma of *Dr. Strangelove* and to portray themselves as guardians of the search for security and survival.

The American debate over missile defense has accepted this self-portrayal -- so much so that Donald Rumsfeld now feels able to describe the pursuit of missile defense as a “moral imperative.” Accordingly, the American argument over whether to proceed has come to depend on technical issues. Opponents make the pragmatic argument that decisions to deploy the system should be delayed until it can be proven to work. In taking this position, they concede the principle that a working system would be a good thing.

But in fact, missile defense in all forms except possibly the most short-range are drastically destabilizing, easily defeated, and globally dangerous whether the system works or not. The new administration may be showing realism in shifting emphasis from a national ballistic missile shield to the more limited theater missile defense (TMD). But TMD has its own dangers, and a decision to move TMD now does not, unfortunately, preclude a decision to move ahead with national missile defense (NMD) later.

Put simply, national missile defense is:

1. A diplomatic disaster. Deployment of national missile defense requires abrogation of the 1972 ABM treaty. The administration claims to regard this treaty as a “Cold War relic” but it is the foundation of the entire structure of strategic arms control. Without the ABM treaty, neither Russia nor China can feel secure in their second-strike capabilities, and neither will comfortably adhere to their longstanding restraint in nuclear offensive weapons. Our allies in Europe and elsewhere recognize these dangers, and for this reason they also oppose U.S. NMD.
2. A technological dead end. As defense, national missile defense will not work, for the simple reason that it is easily defeated by decoys and by attacks on the “eyes” of the system. The fact that the technology has not matured after forty years of effort is clear evidence of this fact. It only took six years to go from the discovery of uranium fission all the way to the detonation of an atomic bomb, and only one test to show that the implosion bomb would work. National missile defense has been tested repeatedly. There is no sign that the fundamental difficulties of making it work under combat conditions can be overcome.
3. A budget sink-hole. National missile defense is impossibly expensive. Standard estimates of \$60 billion for a working system overlook two important facts. First, many scores of billions have already been spent on the system, with little to show. Second, all military development programs cost much more than is budgeted for them at the outset. Cost is particularly open-ended for high-urgency programs whose technological difficulties remain unresolved. Such programs are, of course, an invitation to misrepresentation and fraud; and important accusations of this have already been made against NMD.
4. A strategic threat. The administration claims that national missile defense is not targeted against Chinese or

Russian deterrence, but against the threat of a rogue state or an accidental missile launch. The obvious fallacy is that no “rogue state” would target the United States with a ballistic missile, when simpler, cheaper, effective, less traceable means of delivery of a small atomic terror weapon are available, against which missile defenses would be useless. The accidental launch argument, on the other hand, concedes that Russian and Chinese missiles are the real targets. But the risk of accidents could be eliminated by de-alerting Russian missiles (China’s are not on high alert now), as well as our own; de-alerting which is only possible without missile defense.

The fact that NMD cannot defend against a first strike again calls attention to the only configuration in which NMD might work: as an adjunct to an American first strike that destroys most enemy forces (and everything else) on the ground. Following a first strike, a limited missile defense might shoot down a handful of surviving retaliatory missiles. This point is clear to both Russia and China, who long ago concluded that NMD merely extends long-standing American strike-first plans. They will respond, as both have warned, by increasing the numbers of their own missiles, and by placing their forces on a higher alert.

National Missile Defense is, in short, an unlimited budget drain aimed at a deeply immoral objective: the nuclear blackmail of other states. It is a highway back to the days when thermonuclear death threatened from one minute to the next.

At first glance, Theater Missile Defense (TMD) is comparatively appealing. It can be implemented, up to a point, by upgrading existing systems. It can be based on ships, and posted to parts of the world where missile threats exist. And it cannot seriously threaten the retaliatory nuclear forces of a great power like Russia or China.

But a closer look also raises frightening questions. First, who decides when a missile is hostile? Under TMD, that decision has to rest with a forward commander — the ship’s captain, in the naval version. Do we want U.S. navy ships to have authority to shoot down test rockets and weather satellites in the boost phase? Second, who protects the ships? On permanent station, they are vulnerable to missile attack — or for that matter to attack by shore-based jets, patrol boats, submarines. Third, such attacks are actually invited: how is a state targeted by missile defense to know that the ship-board missiles are in fact interceptors, and not short-range ship to shore weapons with nuclear warheads? Fourth (and partly for this reason), the ABM treaty forbids a ship-based ballistic missile defense system; no less than NMD, TMD in this form would undermine arms control.

Fifth, there is a glaring logical contradiction in TMD plans. If the “rogue state” argument for NMD is a ruse, how can it be a valid argument for TMD? And if NMD is really aimed against accidental launch by Russia or China, how can TMD counter this threat? No ship-based or boost-phase system can hope to hit a missile launched from the interior of either country. So what is TMD really about, except once again for blackmail, or possibly to build a system for sale to Israel and Taiwan?

And so finally, there is — or will be eventually — proliferation. TMD will only come to exist if, with very large investments, we create the technology. But once created, it will be copied, around the world, by emerging nuclear states who are close to each other: India and Pakistan, China and Taiwan, and perhaps especially Israel, Iran and Iraq. In each case, countermeasures will follow. The risk is then of proliferating offense-defense arms races, with high likelihood that one or more of them will eventually lead to nuclear war.

Theater Missile Defense may be the path we choose in the years just ahead. If it turns out, in the end, to have been merely a face-saving station on the way of retreat from the delusions of NMD, perhaps no great harm will be done. But if TMD eventually develops into a partly workable system, then many parts of the world will,

sooner or later, be drawn into the vortex. And still worse if TMD turns out to be a cover for later development of NMD.

In the final analysis, therefore, no form of missile defense can ever be a substitute for building strategic stability, for resolving conflicts, for de-alerting, and ultimately for disarmament, on which the nuclear future of the world finally depends.

This is, of course, the further lesson of Thirteen Days. The great improvements in strategic stability that followed the Cuban crisis did not come from better U-2s, more accurate ICBMs, or because the Russians “blinked.” They came because Kennedy and Khrushchev opened communications channels, agreed to withdraw forward-based missiles from both Cuba and Turkey, and later banned atmospheric testing. Diplomacy worked, when, under the gun of the hydrogen bomb, nothing else could.

Missile defense repudiates diplomacy. It places confidence in men with trigger fingers, and puts hair-trigger systems back onto forward stations. It signals, and reflects, contempt for the interests, concerns and perspectives of other powers. As such, missile defense in any form threatens the fragile stability of the nuclear peace.

It is past time for the world’s great anti-nuclear communities to wake up to the danger.

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