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Let's Make National Missile Defense Truly "National"

by Ivan Eland

Executive Summary

Not all proposals for deploying a national missile defense live up to their name. Many are for "international" missile defense systems that would also defend U.S. allies and "friends," even though they are wealthy enough to build their own missile defenses. For example, some policymakers and analysts on both the left and the right advocate sea-based missile defense as a substitute for the Clinton administration's limited land-based system, which is designed to protect only the territory of the United States. Conservatives would like to build a more comprehensive, layered defense consisting of sea- and space-based weapons or land-, sea-, and space-based weapons. George W. Bush, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, is clear that he wants a comprehensive defense to defend U.S. allies and seems to favor the latter approach.

Any defense expenditure—including spending on missile defense—must be commensurate with the threat. More robust missile defenses are not justified by the limited threat. Also, sinking large amounts of funds into more comprehensive missile defenses—when even the Clinton administration's limited system might fail because of technical risk or lack of adequate testing—is questionable.

The main objective of conservatives in supporting more robust missile defense systems does not seem to be defense of the U.S. homeland. Instead, their aim seems to be to create a stronger shield behind which the United States can move against potential regional adversaries possessing weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles to deliver them. The reasoning is that, if such adversaries cannot threaten the United States or its allies with catastrophic retaliation, U.S. policymakers will feel more confident in intervening militarily. But because any missile defense system cannot guarantee that all incoming warheads will be destroyed, that reasoning is a dangerous illusion that could actually undermine U.S. security. Thus, development of a missile shield should be confined to the more limited land-based system that the Clinton administration has proposed.

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Introduction

In his 1983 "Star Wars" speech, President Ronald Reagan revived the dormant objective of building a defense against attacks using ballistic missiles. Such proposed defenses have come to be called "national missile defense" (NMD). Despite the moniker, however, few of the many proposals to defend against missile attacks have been confined to the stated purpose—defending the territory of the United States. For example, President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative—dubbed "Star Wars" by critics—was a grandiose scheme, which included the use of space-based sensors and weapons, to provide *worldwide* protection against a massive Soviet ballistic missile attack. During the Bush administration, missile defense was scaled back to provide global protection against limited strikes (GPALS). In addition to defending the landmass of the United States, both systems protected the territory of U.S. friends and allies.

After coming to office, the Clinton administration scaled back the anti-missile program even further to embrace a truly "national" missile defense program. The proposed program consists of space-based sensors, one or more new radars (and upgrades to older models), and 20 to 250 ground-based interceptors based at one or two sites. Using infrared sensors, the interceptors attempt to distinguish—outside the earth's atmosphere and in the midcourse of warheads' flight—the reentry vehicles containing the warheads from any decoys. That limited defense is designed to counter a small number of warheads launched intentionally or accidentally from a potential regional adversary (a so-called rogue state). In short, the system would act as a backup in case the most powerful offensive nuclear deterrent in the world failed to deter such an adversary from launching a nuclear attack against the United States. A more likely scenario for the use of missile defenses might be against an accidental launch from a potential adversary that had newly acquired nuclear weapons, an undefined nuclear doctrine, and only a crude command and control structure.

Some policymakers and analysts on the left and the right have advocated either replacing or supplementing limited land-based defenses with sea-based defenses. Curiously, some on the left support sea-based defenses to preserve the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—which severely limits missile defenses—while conservatives support sea-based systems because they believe that is the best way to destroy the limits of the treaty. Although most analysts on the left have traditionally opposed missile defenses, some have advocated limited sea-based NMD. They would prefer to improve sea-based theater missile defense systems—now being developed to intercept medium-range missiles targeted at U.S. forces deployed overseas—to gain some limited ability to intercept long-range missiles launched from a potential adversary such as North Korea. For example, they argue that an Aegis ship off the coast of North Korea containing marginally improved theater systems could intercept a North Korean long-range missile in its boost (initial) phase. Proponents of that course of action also argue that upgrading such theater systems would require little or no change in the ABM Treaty.[1] In response, the Clinton administration argues that such boost phase intercept technology will not mature for 10 years. In reality, the meager capability obtained by using a theater system to intercept long-range missiles is designed to delay—and possibly avoid—procuring the Clinton administration's limited land-based system.

Some conservatives would also like to upgrade theater missile defenses on Aegis ships to either replace[2] or supplement the limited land-based system. The objective of supporting a more robust sea-based system is to provide protection for allies and shatter the ABM Treaty so that the United States could eventually build a much more comprehensive defense using space-based weapons. Although George W. Bush, the presumptive Republican candidate for president, has made vague proposals on missile defense, he seems to be considering a layered defense of

land-, sea-, and even space-based weapons. He categorically states that he wants to build a more comprehensive missile system than the one proposed by the Clinton administration so that U.S. allies can be protected. Bush seems inclined toward missile defenses similar to the GPALS system advocated by his father's administration.[3] Thus, Bush and other conservatives who advocate more capable missile defenses are dredging up the "international" missile defenses of the past.

Robust "International" Missile Defenses Are Ill-Advised

Developing more comprehensive, layered missile defenses is questionable for several reasons. First, the money spent on any weapon system should correspond with the threat it is designed to counter. For example, it is foolish to use an expensive guided missile to destroy an enemy truck. Similar reasoning should hold when buying missile defenses. As noted, missile defenses are designed to guard against a small accidental launch by a nuclear power or to act as backup protection if the powerful U.S. offensive nuclear missile force failed to deter a missile attack. Both of those scenarios are unlikely; moreover, the latter scenario is less probable than a scenario in which a nuclear weapon is delivered by an adversary state or terrorists, for example, using a small plane, a ship entering a harbor, or a short-range ballistic or cruise missile launched from a freighter off the coast. Those forms of attack are less traceable to the home country than is a long-range missile launched from that country's territory—making the threat of massive conventional or nuclear retaliation by the U.S. arsenal more problematic. Missile defenses cannot counter those cheaper, more accurate, and more reliable means of attack.

Therefore, the U.S. government—when making its resource allocations to missile defense—should remember that missile defenses are a backup system to address a narrow range of unlikely, albeit potentially destructive, threats. A limited threat deserves only limited public resources to counter it. According to Geoff Forden and Raymond Hall of the Congressional Budget Office, a limited land-based system would cost between $30 billion and $60 billion (the expenses for acquiring and operating the system for 15 years).[4] Adding supplemental sea-based interceptors and spaced-based weapons would increase the price substantially.

One further problem with building robust defenses now is that the technology for missile defenses is unproven. Attempts to develop and deploy a successful U.S. missile defense system failed in the 1960s and 1970s. The Clinton administration's limited missile program is the most complex weapon system ever built. To date, the few tests conducted have shown that the system has a spotty success record in intercepting missiles. No decision to produce any weapon system—especially one as complex and uncertain as NMD—should be taken until the system undergoes thorough developmental and operational testing under real-world conditions. The politically charged environment of electoral politics in Washington makes adequate testing difficult. President Clinton plans to make a decision based on only 3 of 19 scheduled tests.[5] A decision to deploy even a limited land-based system should be delayed until the system can be adequately tested against realistic countermeasures (for example, decoys) and a final design selected—circa 2003.

A dispute in the technical community exists about whether potential regional adversaries—through development or purchase—would be able to obtain countermeasures (for example, tens of warheads hidden among hundreds of balloons) that would fool the system. Proponents of missile defenses say no; opponents say yes. That dispute is beyond the scope of this paper. The answer can be determined only by testing the limited land-based system under realistic conditions. Until the testing is complete and the system is built, the powerful U.S. offensive nuclear force should be capable of deterring any potential adversary that might

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develop a long-range missile that could reach the United States (despite the hype of the threat by conservatives). Inadequate testing before a decision is made will ultimately result in longer delays and higher costs to deploy an effective system. If testing under realistic conditions indicates that relatively cheap and simple countermeasures can fool relatively expensive defenses (what is called a poor cost-exchange ratio), efforts to deploy any missile defenses should be shelved (research and development should be continued on technologies that more effectively discriminate between warheads and countermeasures). Sinking large amounts of scarce funds into developing and building robust missile defenses before a more limited defense is proven effective is certainly questionable.

Foreign Policy Implications of "International" Defenses

Even if potential regional adversaries began to field more sophisticated countermeasures and testing showed that missile defenses can defeat all countermeasures, the need for building sea- and space-based weapons is debatable. Phases two and three of the Clinton administration's land-based system, discussed below, are designed to deal with that more sophisticated threat.

Although conservatives have run television ads emphasizing that the United States currently has no defense against a ballistic missile attack, defense of the U.S. homeland does not seem to be their main objective in building missile defenses. They seem to realize that the U.S. early warning system—which can determine the origin of a missile attack—and the powerful U.S. nuclear arsenal would, in most cases, be likely to deter a long-range missile strike. Conservatives' primary purpose for building a missile defense system—which was previously de-emphasized but is being given more public emphasis recently—is to facilitate U.S. interventions overseas.

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For example, according to Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

> Of course, the government ought to protect Americans from "rogue" warheads; it probably ought to protect them from comets and asteroids, too. But even the crazies are unlikely to fire a warhead at the United States out of the clear blue sky. The reason the United States needs a robust missile defense system has less to do with the actual launching of a strike against us than with how the mere threat of a missile attack will affect a future president's thinking during a crisis. Or even before a crisis.
>
> What matters most is deterrence. Not our ability to deter others, but their ability to deter us. For the past decade, American strategy has rested on our ability to project overwhelming conventional force into vital regions around the world.[6]

Kagan concludes, "Nothing is more likely to push the United States toward an isolationist foreign policy than our increasing vulnerability to missile attack."[7]

Conservatives who are prone to advocate foreign interventions fear that, as more potential adversaries develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (nuclear, chemical, and biological) and the long-range missiles to deliver them to the United States, U.S. policymakers will be more reluctant to move against such states directly or even in their regions.

The Heritage Foundation Missile Defense Study Team echoes Kagan's sentiments:

> The existence of longer-range ballistic missiles—particularly ones armed with nuclear weapons—would have made the situation in the Gulf intolerably unpredictable, possibly precluding the use of U.S. military force. . . . With long-range ballistic missiles Saddam Hussein could have held cities throughout Europe at risk. It probably would have been impossible to form an allied coalition with Europeans had Saddam possessed

> the capability to target European cities with ballistic missiles, especially if they had been armed with chemical, biological, or nuclear warheads. The U.S. Congress would have been hard-pressed to sanction the use of force had Iraq possessed ballistic missiles with intercontinental range.[8]

Robert Zoellick, a foreign policy adviser to presidential candidate George W. Bush, recently made the same argument.[9]

The reasoning of those analysts is sound. The leader of a state whose regime is threatened by a U.S. invasion may have nothing to lose and everything to gain by threatening the United States with a long-range missile attack with WMD. The leader's threat would probably be effective in causing U.S. leadership to think twice about invading the state or elsewhere in the region. Even if the leader did not directly threaten to launch a missile at U.S. territory, the leader's possession of WMD and long-range delivery systems would probably give the president of the United States pause. If the United States decided to invade the nation anyway, the threatened leader would have nothing to lose by launching a catastrophic strike.

George W. Bush's explicit pledge to build a defense comprehensive enough to defend U.S. allies is designed partly for electoral politics (to distinguish his more robust defense from the Clinton-Gore administration's limited land-based defense that protects only U.S. territory) but is also driven by allied objections to building a U.S. missile defense. The Clinton administration has tried unsuccessfully to convince allies that the security provided by a U.S. land-based missile shield would make the United States more willing to intervene overseas to safeguard allied interests. But the allies are afraid that their security will be "decoupled" from that of the United States. In other words, the United States will be protected from missile attacks from potential regional adversaries but the allies will not.[10] Thus, in part to silence the objections of the allies, George W. Bush has offered to protect them too.

Although a missile defense would undoubtedly make the United States more willing to intervene overseas, the allies should be skeptical that U.S. interventions would always serve their interests. If the United States—protected by a missile defense—moved against a regional adversary possessing WMD and long-range delivery systems, the adversary, having a lower probability of successfully attacking the United States, might instead threaten a missile strike against a U.S. ally. In effect, the adversary—betting that the United States would care more about the safety of its economically developed allies than about intervening in the developing world—would hold U.S. allies hostage to persuade the United States to desist from meddling in its business. U.S. allies should be wary that they might be exposed to the consequences of U.S. recklessness overseas.

The allies should conclude that without missile defense they could be left "holding the bag" for risky U.S. foreign interventions. But the United States should refuse to cover wealthy allies—nations that spend too little on their own defense and already benefit from significant U.S. security guarantees—with a missile shield. (For example, Germany spends only about 1.5 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, and Japan spends less than 1 percent.) Instead, President Clinton recently proposed a superior approach: sharing missile defense technology with the allies.[11] Using that technology, allied nations could unilaterally or collectively build their own missile defenses. In contrast, protection by a U.S.-directed missile shield would deepen and perpetuate the unhealthy dependence of allies on the United States.

The dangers of U.S. interventions overseas do not accrue only to allies. Comprehensive missile defenses may inadvertently increase the risk to those they are ostensibly intended to protect—the American people. In addition to creating a wider defense by protecting allies, adding sea- and space-based missile defenses to a limited land-based system also increases the probability that warheads will be intercepted

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before they strike U.S. soil. That increased protection (a "thicker" defense) could do more harm than good if it spurred more dangerous activism in U.S. foreign policy.

Small, poor states—for example, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Sudan, and North Korea—are a threat to U.S. security primarily because the United States has an overextended defense perimeter. The United States is the only country on the globe to perceive interests that require defending in every region of the world. That expansive attitude is left over from the Cold War policy of responding in a tit-for-tat manner to deter or react to Soviet advances anywhere in the world.

If a thicker and wider missile defense causes U.S. policymakers to feel more secure against a direct missile attack, they may be more tempted to engage in reckless overseas military adventures.

Even the "worst-case" threats by such states—an Iraqi or an Iranian threat to Persian Gulf oil supplies or a North Korean invasion of South Korea—have been overblown. Before the Gulf War, prominent economists from across the American political spectrum—Milton Friedman, William Niskanen, and James Tobin, for example—cautioned U.S. policymakers that going to war with Iraq to safeguard the flow of Persian Gulf oil was unnecessary. They agreed with David R. Henderson, formerly the senior economist for energy on President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisors, who estimated that an Iraqi conquest of Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia would result in oil price increases that would reduce U.S. GDP by at most one-half of 1 percent.[12] Furthermore, Iraq and Iran have a greater need to sell their oil than the West has a need to buy it.

Similarly, the security of South Korea does not fall into the sphere of U.S. vital interests. Even as the Cold War raged, before President Truman reversed the course of U.S. policy and made the decision to intervene after North Korea had attacked South Korea, the U.S. Department of Defense considered South Korea to be of little strategic interest. The Pentagon had supported the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea in 1949, believing that Soviet domination of the South was a probability and that there was a risk of a North Korean invasion. If an invasion occurred, the United States had planned to appeal to the United Nations rather than commit U.S. forces to defend the South.[13] South Korea had little strategic value to the United States during the Cold War and has much less now. A rival superpower—the Soviet Union—can no longer take advantage of North Korean aggression against the South.[14]

If a thicker and wider missile defense causes U.S. policymakers to feel more secure against a direct missile attack and less vulnerable by threatened attacks to its allies, they may be more tempted to engage in reckless overseas military adventures against potential regional adversaries possessing WMD and long-range missiles. Such interventions would actually reduce U.S. security. Even a thicker, wider missile defense offers only a probability of killing incoming warheads, not an airtight defense against them. So it is possible that overconfident U.S. policymakers might get into unnecessary scrapes with WMD-armed regional powers that could lead to at least one warhead getting through the shield. In other words, a catastrophic attack on U.S. soil (a failure of the first magnitude in U.S. security policy) could originate from a country that would not have threatened U.S. security if it had been left alone. An apt analogy can be found in attempts to swat a wasp at a picnic. If the wasp is left alone, it will probably not sting any of the picnickers; but the picnickers will probably be stung if they threaten the wasp by attempting to swat it.

The United States Should Purchase a "National" Missile Defense

The Clinton administration's limited land-based system is truly a "national" missile defense system. It is designed to defend only the territory of the United States, not that of U.S. allies. If wealthy U.S. allies believe that lack of their own missile defense leaves them exposed, they can afford to remedy the situation. The U.S. government might even

consider selling them some of the technology to do so.

The current—and the next—administration would be well served by continuing to develop only the land-based system. Further testing is needed to determine the exact architecture of the system (for example, the number of sites and interceptors needed) or if a missile defense system will even work. No decision to deploy such unproven technology should be made before the entire testing program is completed under realistic operating conditions. The limited threat does not warrant a "rush to failure"—that is, a hurried decision based on inadequate testing that ultimately requires the system to be redesigned after incurring test failures. A redesign or a significant modification of the system later in the acquisition process could lead ultimately to lengthy delays in fielding the system and to exorbitant cost overruns.

A limited land-based system is a cost-effective way to counter a limited threat. Depending on the final configuration of the system, a limited land-based system can be purchased for between $30 billion and $60 billion (the cost to acquire and operate the system for 15 years).[15] It is even questionable whether the Clinton administration needs to build phases two and three of the land-based system. As development and testing of that system progress, it may be confirmed that phase one (1 launch site and 100 interceptors)—at a more reasonable cost of about $30 billion[16]—would be able to effectively defend against an attack by tens of missiles with simple countermeasures. If the phase-one system lives up to that expectation, it would probably be sufficient to guard against accidental and intentional launches by regional adversaries that possess crude long-range missiles. Phases two and three are designed to defeat more sophisticated countermeasures by adding new sensors, up to 2 launch sites, and up to 250 interceptors.

A layered international missile defense that adds sea- and space-based weapons will escalate the costs of an NMD system dramatically. In addition, an international defense is not warranted by the limited threat and should not be used to defend rich allies who can afford to build their own missile defenses. The Clinton administration is following the proper course of action by pursuing a limited land-based national missile defense program that is true to its name.

Conclusion

In the missile defense debate, truly national systems should be distinguished from international military welfare systems. The Clinton administration's limited land-based system will defend only U.S. territory. In contrast, George W. Bush is supporting a more comprehensive system designed to protect both the United States and its wealthy allies. Such comprehensive systems are not justified by the threat, are expensive, and may reduce rather than enhance U.S. security.

Notes

1. John Deutch, Harold Brown, and John White, "National Missile Defense: Is There Another Way?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 118 (Summer 2000): 97–99.

2. Heritage Foundation, *Defending America: Ending America's Vulnerability to Ballistic Missiles* (Washington: Heritage Foundation, 1996), pp. 2–4.

3. George W. Bush, Speech on strategic nuclear force levels and national missile defense, National Press Club, Washington, May 23, 2000. Excerpts from a transcript of the speech and question-and-answer session were published in the *New York Times*, May 24, 2000, p. 10.

4. Geoff Forden and Raymond Hall, *Budgetary and Technical Implications of the Administration's Plan for National Missile Defense* (Washington: Congressional Budget Office, 2000), pp. 8–10.

5. Vernon Loeb, "Antimissile System Is Called 'No Defense': Scientists' Group Says Countermeasures Could Fool Proposed Shield in Attack," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2000, p. A15.

6. Robert Kagan, "A Real Case for Missile Defense," *Washington Post*, May 21, 2000, p. B7.

7. Ibid.

The Clinton administration is following the proper course of action by pursuing a limited land-based national missile defense program that is true to its name.

8. Heritage Foundation, p. 16.

9. Robert Zoellick, Statements made on PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, May 31, 2000.

10. William Drozdiak, "Worries Mount in Europe over U.S. Missile Defenses," *Washington Post*, May 19, 2000, p. A1.

11. Charles Babington, "U.S. Set to Share ABM Research: Clinton Offers Data to 'Civilized' States," *Washington Post*, June 1, 2000, p. A1.

12. David Henderson, "The Myth of Saddam's Oil Stranglehold," in *America Entangled: The Persian Gulf Crisis and Its Consequences*, ed. Ted Galen Carpenter (Washington: Cato Institute, 1991), pp. 41–45; and William Niskanen, "Oil, War, and the Economy," in ibid., pp. 53–57.

13. Doug Bandow, *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1996), pp. 10–11, 19, 20.

14. Today, even North Korea seems less of a rogue state. According to the Center for Defense Information, the North Koreans have ceased their nuclear weapons program and their testing of ballistic missiles. North Korea is also engaged in dialogue with the West. Corwin Vandermark, *Weekly Defense Monitor* 4, no. 13 (March 30, 2000): 7.

15. Forden and Hall, p. 10.

16. Ibid.

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