

51. Strategic Nuclear Forces and Missile Defense

Congress should

- endorse the truly “national” limited land-based national missile defense (NMD) system currently under development;
- eschew grandiose sea- and space-based missile defenses—which are unnecessary, expensive “international” systems designed to protect wealthy U.S. allies and friends and provide a robust shield for unneeded U.S. interventions overseas;
- pressure the new administration to slow development of land-based missile defense so that the system can be thoroughly tested under realistic conditions before a decision is made to deploy it;
- encourage the U.S. administration to offer deep cuts in offensive strategic nuclear forces—down to a maximum of 1,500 warheads (the Russian proposal)—in exchange for Russian acquiescence to a limited U.S. land-based NMD; and
- reduce the triad of U.S. nuclear forces—nuclear-capable bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs)—to a dyad.

To date, the debate surrounding national missile defense (NMD) has been dominated by political rhetoric. Supporters (usually conservatives) often paint a “doom-and gloom” picture, pointing out that the United States is vulnerable to attack by ballistic missiles. Critics (usually liberals) defend the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty as the cornerstone of nuclear deterrence and stability and argue that any defensive deployment would upset the balance between the offensive strategic forces of the United States and Russia.

Opponents of NMD, who use preserving the ABM Treaty as an argument to forestall deployment of a defense, need to acknowledge that the threat of attack by long-range ballistic missiles from “rogue” states may become real. Opponents also need to realize that the United States can build a limited NMD without disrupting the bilateral strategic nuclear balance. Supporters of NMD need to acknowledge that NMD is not a panacea for the full spectrum of threats from rogue states—that long-range ballistic missiles are only one of the options available to those states. Supporters also need to recognize the daunting technological challenge that NMD poses and not seek to rush its development.

A limited NMD, which would afford the United States protection against long-range ballistic missile threats from rogue states, seems feasible and probably can be deployed at a reasonable cost. The elements of the limited land-based system under development during the Clinton administration can provide such capability.

No matter what the threat, however, the development of an NMD system should proceed at a measured pace because an excessively rapid development program could waste taxpayer dollars on an ineffective system. NMD should remain a research and development (R&D) program until it has been thoroughly tested under realistic operational conditions. Only then should a decision be made about its deployment.

Any defense expenditures—including those on missile defense—must be commensurate with the threat. More robust missile defenses are not justified by the present limited threat. Also, sinking large amounts of money into more comprehensive missile defenses—when even the limited land-based system might fail because of technical problems or lack of adequate testing—is questionable.

A Limited NMD Is Needed for a Limited Threat

Although it is not certain that North Korea will be capable of launching a missile attack against the United States by 2005, the R&D program for NMD is being rushed to have a system deployed by that date. Even if the threat from North Korea did materialize by that date, the United States would probably be able to use its offensive nuclear force to deter a missile attack from North Korea, another “rogue” state, or any other state. Thus, NMD would be a backup system against a missile attack from a pariah state. Rushing development increases the probability that the system will ultimately be delayed, will experience escalating costs, or will simply not work.

More important, rogue states have or will have options for striking the United States other than long-range ballistic missiles. Such countries already possess short- and medium-range ballistic missiles that could be launched from ships operating in international waters off the U.S. coasts. They also may possess or could acquire cruise missiles that could be launched from ships or, possibly, aircraft. Finally, terrorist attacks using weapons of mass destruction are an option readily available to rogue states (or groups they sponsor), especially given the open nature of American society.

Such threats to the American homeland may be more inexpensive, accurate, reliable, and thus more probable than that posed by ICBMs launched from rogue states. Even the most hostile pariah state is likely to hesitate to launch from its territory an ICBM against the United States. U.S. satellites can detect the origin of such long-range missile launches, and the world's most powerful nuclear force would almost certainly retaliate against the attacking nation. In contrast, the origin of terrorist attacks or missile launches from ships or aircraft may be harder to determine, which makes U.S. retaliation—and therefore deterrence—more difficult. The existence of the other threats does not, of course, refute the argument that long-range ballistic missiles also pose a threat and that the U.S. government should combat the threats that can be defeated. But we must understand that long-range ballistic missiles will be just one of several possible threats.

None of the proposed NMD systems will have a defensive capability against either short-range ballistic missiles or cruise missiles—delivery systems for which rogue states and others may already possess. The best reason to have a limited missile defense may be the possibility of accidental—rather than intentional—launches from such states and limited accidental launches from established nuclear powers. Pariah states with newly acquired long-range missiles and nuclear warheads may have poor early warning systems, only rudimentary command and control over such forces, nonexistent nuclear doctrine, and insufficient safeguards against an accidental launch. In addition, in the past, Russia's decrepit early warning systems have almost led to accidental launches.

Nevertheless, the primary threat from accidental or intentional launches from rogue states is likely to be relatively modest (a few ICBMs) and unsophisticated (their missiles are unlikely to have multiple warheads or sophisticated decoys), requiring an equally modest response. A limited ground-based NMD system of 100 or so interceptors could provide sufficient defensive capability against such threats.

The Limited Threat Does Not Warrant “International” Defenses

Not all proposals for deploying a “national” missile defense system 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 limited land-based system, which is designed to protect only the territory of the United States. Many conservatives would like to build a more comprehensive and robust layered defense consisting of sea- and space-based weapons or land-, sea-, and space-based weapons.

Proponents of sea-based NMD argue that such a system can be deployed more quickly and will be less expensive than the limited land-based system. Some argue that the Navy Theater Wide system (a system that is currently being designed to provide midcourse intercept capability against slower, shorter-range theater ballistic missiles) can be upgraded to destroy long-range ICBMs in their boost phase (when under powered flight at the beginning of their trajectories). To intercept faster, longer-range missiles in the boost phase, a new, faster interceptor would need to be developed. That interceptor would probably not be compatible with the vertical launchers of Navy ships. Forward-deployed sea-based NMD might also experience operational difficulties, including greater vulnerability to attack, and detract from the Navy’s other missions.

Even if a sea-based missile defense could be developed faster and more inexpensively than the more mature land-based system (a dubious proposition since the sea-based system would depend on sensor, communication, and kill vehicle technology being developed for the land-based system), critical gaps in coverage would necessitate supplementing the sea-based system with expensive space-based weapons. Unlike land-based NMD, sea-based NMD is not a stand-alone system.

The main objective of observers who support more comprehensive, robust, and layered 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 intervene against potential regional adversaries possessing weapons of mass destruction and the long-range missiles to deliver them. According to that reasoning, 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 no missile defense system can guarantee that all incoming warheads will be destroyed, such an increase in U.S. military activism could actually undermine U.S. security in a catastrophic way. Thus, development of a missile shield should be confined to the more limited land-based “national” system under development during the Clinton administration.

Also, many advocates of sea- and space-based weapons want to protect U.S. friends and allies. But the United States should refuse to cover those wealthy nations—which spend too little on their own defense and already benefit from significant U.S. security guarantees—with a missile shield. 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.

A limited land-based NMD (for example, a hundred or more ground-based interceptors designed to defend against tens of warheads from rogue states) would not enable the United States to undermine nuclear stability by threatening Russia’s surviving offensive nuclear forces (even at reduced levels, numbering in the hundreds or thousands of warheads), but more robust defenses might do so. In addition, deploying robust defenses might cause an “action-reaction” cycle with China. As China modernizes and builds up its small nuclear forces (which will probably happen whether or not U.S. defenses are deployed), robust defenses are much more likely to cause a larger Chinese buildup than is a limited NMD. If Congress encouraged the new administration to pair a limited missile defense with deep cuts in the U.S. offensive nuclear arsenal, the United States could send a signal to both powers that it was not trying to achieve strategic advantage.

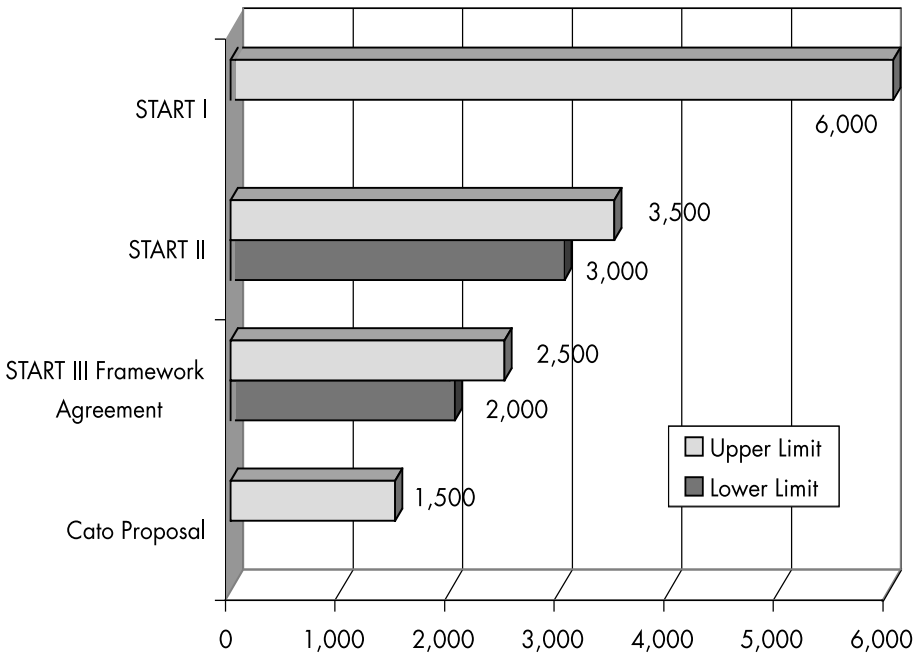
Combine Limited NMD with Deep Cuts in Offensive Strategic Weapons

The most prudent course of action is to pursue development of a limited NMD system to defend against rogue state threats and accidental launches, renegotiate the ABM Treaty with the Russians, and continue further strategic arms control negotiations under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) process. In fact, the Russians have intimated that they might be willing to accept changes to the ABM Treaty to allow a limited NMD in exchange for even deeper cuts in strategic offensive forces.

In the much milder threat environment of a post–Cold War world, if the United States changed its nuclear posture from war fighting to deterrence, deep mutual reductions in offensive forces to levels below those of the START III framework agreement (perhaps a ceiling as low as 1,500 warheads) would still allow the United States to deter Russia and smaller or emerging nuclear powers (Figure 51.1). Also, with much lower numbers of warheads in that more benign environment, it might be more efficient and cost effective to reduce the triad of nuclear forces—nuclear-capable bombers, ICBMs, and SLBMs—to a dyad (possibly ICBMs and bombers or SLBMs and bombers). The reduced threat of nuclear war would require less redundancy among U.S. forces to complicate the attack plans of the adversary.

Lower numbers of warheads in the inventories of Russia and the United States would probably mean lower numbers of warheads on alert status, and lower numbers of warheads on alert status would substantially reduce the risk of an accidental nuclear launch. The lower inventory levels would

Figure 51.1
Proposed Limits on Warheads in Each of the U.S. and Russian Arsenals



also mean that fewer nuclear warheads would be available to be stolen or sold to rogue states (that possibility is a particular concern for the aging and insecure Russian nuclear stockpile).

The United States should pursue a limited land-based NMD system to defend against accidental launches or intentional missile attacks from rogue states and simultaneously renegotiate the ABM Treaty with the Russians. That conclusion does not imply that the ABM Treaty is sacrosanct or the cornerstone of strategic stability. Rather, it simply acknowledges that concerns about stability and deterrence vis-à-vis Russia are legitimate and cannot be ignored. To simply ignore the ABM Treaty and Russian concerns would needlessly antagonize Russia at an inopportune time (much as the United States did by expanding NATO and conducting the war in Kosovo)—potentially throwing away the gains of START II, START III, and other arms control agreements. Of course, any renegotiation would have to retain the basic aim of the ABM Treaty—restraining defenses so that neither the U.S. nor the Russian strategic arsenal would be undermined—while permitting limited land-based NMD against rogue states.

Working with the Russians to renegotiate the ABM Treaty—rather than unilaterally withdrawing from it—has advantages. In response to a unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the treaty, the Russians could sell rogue states the countermeasures (for example, decoys) to defeat any NMD system, refuse to help stem the spread of Russian weapons of mass destruction to such states, or maintain large numbers of nuclear weapons on alert.

It is possible to achieve a “balance” between strategic offensive arms control, the ABM Treaty, and NMD against the emerging threats. But that balance will not be achieved without dispensing with the overheated political rhetoric on both sides of the issue. Deep reductions in offensive nuclear forces combined with the deployment of a limited land-based NMD system would greatly enhance U.S. security.

Suggested Readings

- Eland, Ivan. “Let’s Make National Missile Defense Truly ‘National.’” Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 58, June 27, 2000.
- Krepon, Michael. “Defusing Today’s Doomsday Machines.” *New Democrat Blueprint* (Winter 2000): 20–24.
- Peña, Charles V. “Arms Control and Missile Defense: Not Mutually Exclusive.” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 376, July 26, 2000.
- . “From the Sea: National Missile Defense Is Neither Cheap Nor Easy.” Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 60, September 6, 2000.

Peña, Charles V., and Barbara Conry. “National Missile Defense: Examining the Options.” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 337, March 16, 1999.

Tanks, David. “National Missile Defense: Policy Issues and Technological Capabilities.” Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, April 2000.

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