# A Strategic Conversation about National Missile Defense

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As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, as instability rises in Pakistan, as we face off with Russian interventionism, and as China delivers the Olympics, the future of US national security strategy becomes more and more tenuous. These collective events represent just a few trends and potential threats across a very broad spectrum. As American policy makers determine the course of our grand strategy, it becomes necessary to engage in a critically important conversation. In the face of difficult economic times and dynamic geopolitics, we must be willing to ask the tough questions, and we must also demand the tougher answers. Such a conversation is underway at this very moment with regards to national missile defense (NMD) and the related strategic imperatives of America and her allies. While there are many sides to this conversation, some questions will simply need to be addressed.

First, one must consider the threat spectrum. Is there a convergence between states potentially pursuing intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities and states with intent to do us harm? Second, what degree of real progress has been made in testing and proving the current system? Third, would an NMD system be a stabilizing or destabilizing element in the current geopolitical order? By approaching and answering these questions honestly, we can determine the best course of action for the United States, both as a global superpower and as one actor on a very large stage.

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## The Myth of the Missile Threat

Proponents of national missile defense systems often first make claims of burgeoning security threats, pointing to missile tests and discussing numbers and sizes of missile arsenals. While countries such as Iran and North Korea certainly present military threats, the claims made by ardent missile defense supporters are often overblown and designed to instigate a kind of terror similar to the one borne from the missile gap of the 1960s. In fact, over the past 40 years, far more states have abandoned nuclear weapons programs than have initiated them.[1]

During his 1983 "Star Wars" speech, President Reagan repeatedly commented on the Soviet nuclear arsenal. He argued that "their missiles are much more powerful and accurate than they were several years ago, and they continue to develop more, while ours are increasingly obsolete."[2] When discussing the Soviet nuclear threat, he often referred to a "margin of superiority," a phrase likely motivated by decades-earlier Soviet claims that they were "producing missiles like sausages." These quotes, and the overall tone of Reagan's speech, indicate the specific historical context in which missile defense was considered. The logic behind developing the Strategic Defense Initiative was based on the *thought* that the Soviets possessed a critical advantage with their strategic rocket forces. Furthermore, one must look at the specific events of the early 1980s. Détente collapsed; Soviet aggression expanded into Afghanistan, Latin America, and elsewhere; and both sides were antagonized by events like Operation Ryan, Able Archer '83, and the deployment of Pershing missiles to Western Europe. Given this additional "freezing" of the Cold War, it is easy to see why American military and political leaders believed a missile defense system was necessary. Today, the geopolitical context does not indicate that an NMD system is strategically worthwhile.

First, let us look at Iran. The November 2007 *National Intelligence Estimate* (*NIE*) assessed, "with moderate-to-high confidence that Iran does not currently have a nuclear weapon" and made similar reassuring comments about Iran's intent to produce one.[3] Iran has never successfully test-fired a long-range missile nor has it ever successfully detonated a nuclear device. Iranian tests conducted in June of this year indicate that, by all accounts, even their short- and medium-range missiles are, at best, partly reliable. It is believed that Iran went to some lengths to falsify photographs of these tests. Some have further argued that Iran, or others, might pass nuclear weapons technology to terrorist groups. This argument is not applicable.

It is highly unlikely that nonstate or transnational actors would choose an intercontinental ballistic missile as their weapon of choice. The technology and infrastructure needed to launch an ICBM is hardly the kind a terrorist organization would possess. The events of September 11th, as well as attacks in London, Madrid, Mumbai, Bali, and elsewhere, should be proof enough. We are far more likely to see radiological "dirty bombs," attacks on commercial airliners, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) placed in shipping containers, the introduction of chemical or biological agents into major waterways, or conventional car and pipe bomb attacks. All of these are cheaper, easier, and just as traumatic.

Next, let us look at North Korea. The Taepodong-2 missile test-fired by North Korea in July 2006 failed 42 seconds into flight, the only missile in the North Korean arsenal with the potential to hit the United States. This was the only test of this missile and demonstrates the extreme difficulty North Korea has faced in producing a stable, capable, long-range ballistic missile platform. This test "harked" back to the September 1998 test of a Taepodong-1 missile. Meant to be the inaugural launch of a satellite for North Korea, that launch, too, ended in failure when the third stage failed to fire. Furthermore, there is no evidence that, aside from the launch platform itself, North Korea has made any great strides in producing an effective reentry vehicle (RV) and warhead system that would be needed to convert the missile into a weapon. Placing nuclear warheads on the tips of missiles is far more complicated than simply producing the missile itself. It requires specific engineering capabilities and very fine design tolerances. Finally, recent developments regarding the North's shutting down of its Yongbyon nuclear plant and the demolition of its cooling tower are positive signs and proof that hard-fought diplomacy is slowly working.

There are other regimes, too, that are hostile to US interests. While ballistic missiles will always be a threat, the more likely weapon of choice by such regimes would be land-attack cruise missiles. A 2006 study by the National Air and Space Intelligence Center states that "the cruise missile threat to US forces will increase over the next decade."[4] Cruise missiles are cheaper to produce and much more effective as precision strike tools. A broad-based NMD system would present no defense against this kind of weapon, as it would likely be used within local theaters of war. Air defense systems, as well as theater-based missile defense systems, would be far better options, as will be discussed later in this article.

The Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972 was a unique milestone in Cold War diplomacy because it was the first time both sides accepted the immediate and automatic vulnerability that nuclear weaponry presented to the other side. This, of course, is the cornerstone of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). It is safe to say that those national leaders who might one day possess global nuclear strike capability would think twice before initiating any kind of attack on the United States or its allies. Arguments about unstable leaders and rogue states are unfounded. Even the dictatorial regimes of Iran and North Korea are led by individuals who, above all else, seek to remain in power. That instigating a nuclear war with the United States would *not* further those aims is self evident.

## Progress to Date: Truth and Cost

Over the past 25 years, there have been a number of tests carried out to develop and prove the various elements of the NMD system. While some of these tests have demonstrated sound technological principles, none have yet proven that a real operational system is close to deployment.

Arguments against the technological impossibility are, I think, unnecessary. There is no doubt that given enough funding and time, the widely capable American defense industry can overcome some of the most demanding technological challenges of a basic system. However, the exorbitant financial costs of the research, development, testing, and evaluation (RDT&E) of the system have been, and will continue to be, enormous. The Congressional Budget Office has projected total costs of the system to reach upwards of $200 billion by 2025.[5] Money so far spent on development of the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense system would have been better spent elsewhere, and further funding of future projects, such as multiple kill vehicles (MKV), airborne laser (ABL) programs, kinetic energy interceptors (KEI) focused on boost-phase impacts, and additional interceptors meant to overcome the inevitable use of decoys and multiple warheads, all present obscene financial obligations that would have drastic impacts on an already wasteful defense budget beholden to special interests in the military industrial complex.

The vast majority of tests conducted so far have been extremely limited in both their level of complexity and their realism. In several, the flight path of the dummy missile was known to the interceptor prior to launch, providing the KEI's guidance systems with information not normally

available prior to a hostile launch. Before an operational system can be fielded, these tests will have to be expanded to determine the interceptor's ability to determine real-time changes in trajectory of a given RV. This is especially important considering Russia's claims to have developed RVs capable of moving and altering their flight paths after separation from the warhead bus. In addition, there need to be more tests to measure the system's ability to distinguish between actual RVs and decoys and to determine the ability of ground-based radar systems to effectively track warheads when they are deployed in a cloud of radar-reflecting chaff. These are techniques that Russia claims to possess and could potentially export to other countries. While many call for the deployment of a system today with limited capability, such a piecemeal approach would be pointless, ineffective, and a waste of resources.

The minor diplomatic concord between Washington, Prague, and Warsaw overshadows more significant issues that have yet to be addressed. Recent objections to the current deployment timeline by the Operational Test and Evaluation Directorate, the DoD's internal testing oversight arm, indicate that the European element of the missile defense system is not yet proven and would not be operable until 2018, five years later than the initial projected date of deployment.[6] Furthermore, one must consider the potential costs for American-friendly regimes in Eastern Europe.

Leaders throughout the region have expressed their concern over Russian claims that they will retarget nuclear missiles to those countries that harbor American antimissile sites. In spite of recent agreements, there remains strong domestic opposition to the deployment of a US missile defense system in the Czech Republic and Poland. Polish parliamentary elections in October 2007 removed the Law and Justice Party from power, along with Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, due in part to its ardent support of the American antimissile system. Difficult elections in Prague in June 2006 removed the Social Democratic Party from power and replaced it with a shaky coalition. Again, this was due to the party's unambiguous support for an antimissile establishment. Public opposition to the installation of NMD sites in both countries is unlikely to wane.[7] This presents a critical question that policy makers in Congress and the White House must answer. Are we willing to spend considerable amounts of political capital by pushing the deployment of NMD systems in Europe and elsewhere?

## A Destabilizing Concept

The nuclear forces of the United States have often been called with pride the "strategic backstop of our nation," and for good reason. Over the course of 60 years and through countless international incidents, the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction and the broader idea of strategic deterrence have held strong thanks to our assured and reliable nuclear launch capability. Though the United States and the Soviet Union certainly faced some very close calls, all historical accounts indicate that the single most concerning factor in the minds of leaders was the prospect of unrecoverable, irreversible, nuclear war and the global destruction it would cause.

There is no reason to think that strategic deterrence would fail against current national actors. Deterrence as a strategy requires that the players involved hold their own continued survival as the highest national interest. Given the self-interested actions of the current regimes in Iran, North Korea, Libya, Syria, Pakistan, and others, it is logical to assume that these countries would be more willing to accept a status quo or move towards some form of reconciliation rather than initiate a hostile nuclear attack that would undoubtedly result in a devastating response. Today, the path of conciliation can be seen when we look at Libya's decision to give up its nuclear weapons, North Korea's destruction of part of its Yongbyon nuclear plant, Pakistan's arrest of A. Q. Khan, and so forth. While all of these actions certainly are not final products, they are steps in the right direction. Furthermore, critics of deterrence argue that it becomes a non-player when one considers irrational or suicidal actors, most often seen in terrorist organizations. As I previously discussed, it is highly unlikely that these groups would use nuclear missiles as their method of attack, and an NMD would provide no defense against this.

Many proponents of the NMD claim that it would be a stabilizing factor in the world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Russia has already stated its intent to withdraw from the INF Treaty if US missile defense systems are installed in Europe. It has also stated that it plans to develop hypersonic vehicles for its missile systems and to enhance its platforms already containing decoys, such as the Topol-M. China, too, has insisted that the formation of a US missile shield would likely cause it to develop more devastating nuclear weapons in larger numbers. These would not only render an NMD system impotent, they also would undoubtedly initiate a new arms race. The logic is simple. Why would any country willingly let its nuclear advantage slip away? Why would it not

enhance its nuclear forces or develop them in order to achieve some level of influence?

There is also a broader issue to address. The perception that the United States acts in a unilateral manner has increased markedly over the previous eight years. While there are various sides to this argument, there can be no denying that anti-Americanism has risen significantly in that time. Domestic opposition in other countries to housing an American antimissile shield will not deaden over time, nor will the perception that American foreign policy is one-sided in global conflicts. By installing antimissile sites in specific countries, by potentially transferring this technology through foreign military sales to allied countries, by promising protection to some and not to others, we offer a dangerous declaration. We state to the world that rather than adhere to the honest, universal ideals of civil liberty, justice, representative governance, and so forth, we are stooping to petty power politics and proxy wars. We confirm to those who might question our motives that we see the world as a chessboard free for us to manipulate by injecting money and arms into those areas we deem weak and refusing it to those we deem too strong. This is a seriously backwards way of looking at the world, especially one becoming increasingly interconnected. If we unilaterally spread our antimissile shield throughout the world, there will be no more confusion about the sources of anti-Americanism. The resulting instability of establishing a national missile defense system is too great to simply dismiss.

## Alternate Priorities

Ultimately, what supporters of the NMD consistently fail to address is, rather than responding to the continued ratcheting of tensions, how can we reduce over time the tension and the threat. There are many answers, and rather than making missile defense a high-priority item, we would be better off making nonproliferation, arms control and reduction, confidence-building measures, and theater-based missile and air defense the higher priorities.

Since the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) was passed in 1963, many meaningful steps have been taken towards nuclear disarmament. Over the past 40 years, the United States has often championed this cause. We as a country are well aware of the dangers of nuclear war and the sacred responsibilities that possession of such weapons can create. As the only

country to have ever used nuclear weapons against another state, I think it is appropriate that we have often championed the cause of nuclear nonproliferation. The history of US nuclear policy has always been one of limitation and reduction. Starting with the LTBT and moving on through the Outer Space Treaty and the Threshold Test Ban Treaty, America has historically recognized the importance of limited testing. In addition, other agreements, such as the ABM Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties, and the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, have all demonstrated American dedication towards positive control of nuclear arsenals. President Bush's withdrawal of the ABM Treaty in June 2002 and the ensuing redevelopment and testing in missile defense have only served to tread on the important principles of these agreements. The United States was, in a better time, a noble steward of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation. We can be that steward again.

We should continue to press for multilateral disarmament and move towards a reduction in the total number of deployed nuclear warheads and, ultimately, stockpiled warheads. This can be done by adhering to and enforcing the existing disarmament framework. This calls for the five recognized nuclear weapons states not to induce other NPT countries into developing similar weapons. By developing and deploying an antimissile shield, that is exactly what we are doing. However, more can be done. Instead of the current format, which many countries decry as establishing nuclear haves and have-nots, we can alter the NPT to more effectively address the goal of universal denuclearization and show the world that the United States is dedicated to this goal. Recent attempts to test tactical nuclear devices have not helped in that regard.

Those who argue for an NMD shield are all too often those who would rather choose the direct military option as a simple solution rather than consider more effective and far less destabilizing diplomatic tools (diplomatic, information, military, and economic). This could include pushing harder for countries of concern, such as North Korea, Iran, and Syria, to actively interface with organizations such as the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the like. Contrary to what some argue, further success is possible along these lines.

Specifically regarding Iran, the November 2007 *NIE* went on to state about its nuclear program that it "halted the program in 2003 primarily in response to international pressures" and that this "indicates Tehran's

decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic and military costs."[8] The report states that a combination of international scrutiny and pressure, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve security and prestige, might prompt further success. This combination of carrots and sticks is exactly the kind of effective, deliberate, and forceful diplomacy that serves American national security interests far better than a missile defense shield.

With North Korea, evidence suggests its history of nuclear weapons exportation is driven by basic monetary needs. Reports by the Central Intelligence Agency indicate that arms exports were "one of the North's major sources of hard currency." In December 2003, North Korea requested rewards in return for a cessation of its illegal arms exports.[9] Such extortion can and should be pursued through aggressive diplomacy, not with fantastic and unproven weapons systems. This behavior indicates a deeper problem. The fact that North Korea is cash-strapped is no surprise to anyone, but it gives us something to work with. We certainly cannot make demands without compromise. By providing small cash, food, and fossil fuel incentives, we induce a slow return to the bargaining table, we provide for the impoverished people, and we take steps closer to eventual disarmament. There is no question that North Korea represents a very dangerous threat to American security, but political discussions, economic sanctions, and closer work with the six-party talks would be far more effective.

We can also actively communicate with those countries that feel threatened by external factors. India has expressed that part of its nuclear force is meant to counter China's and Pakistan's nuclear threat. Israel's nuclear force, the region's "worst kept secret," is maintained due to ongoing threats against its own existence throughout the region. North Korea has insisted it is concerned by South Korean and American military presence in the region. These all represent regional security concerns. The United States can and should take the lead in resolving these oft-neglected conflicts. We can do that best by recognizing a state's legitimate concerns and its right to self defense. We should push for the country to meet those self-defense requirements through conventional means. And if nuclear disarmament is not the most immediate option, we can move towards full declaration of nuclear arms, opening up countries like India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran, and North Korea to comprehensive and verifiable inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. We can also push for a greater suite of confidence-building measures. The composite dialogue between India and

Pakistan in 2007, for example, is a great example of how hotlines between national leaders and reformed command and control processes for nuclear launch decisions can reduce tensions. We can also push for countries to publish their nuclear doctrine, eliminating unstable ambiguities. India and China, for example, have had publicly declared no-first-use policies for some time and published drafts of their doctrine in 1999 and 2005, respectively.

The development of new weapons systems always begs the question of strategic utility. If a system itself does not meet the likely needs of the American military, then it is pointless to invest in it. As we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, the future of warfare looks asymmetric, dynamic, fluid, and mobile. It will not likely be rigid nor will it require the "garrison state" mentality that dominated the Cold War. The questions that will plague American military leaders will include: How do we strike at terrorists in hard-to-reach or politically sensitive regions? What is the best way to combat transnational actors that slip through borders heedlessly, including our own? How can we better prepare our forces for increasing urban operations? How can we integrate the broad range of military operations into our own advancing national security interests? The NMD does not provide for these strategic questions because it allows for no tactical answers.

One promising option is to use enhanced intelligence, both technology based and human based, to determine preparations for missile attacks and to use quick-strike methods to cripple those attacks *prior* to launch. Early detection would be easy, considering many of the missiles currently operated by hostile regimes are liquid-fueled and require extensive movement of people and equipment before launch, thus telegraphing any attack. Preemption can include direct attacks on the silos themselves as well as attacks on the command and control nodes of launch systems. Also, these attacks can be carried out by strike aircraft, Tomahawk-armed submarines, newly reconfigured Ohio-class submarines, or even soon-to-be-developed conventionally armed ICBMs, a capable yet responsible platform the Bush administration is actively pursuing. Further advances in strategic early warning are making this kind of early response more possible.

In addition, money currently being poured into NMD could be transferred to more promising programs. For example, the Joint Strike Fighter and F-22A are great airborne platforms that promise to maintain the quality of the Air Force fleet. Unmanned aerial vehicles have proven effective in combat theaters and present exciting and unprecedented technological advances. A new-and-improved tanker fleet would allow the Air Force to

continue to carry out its all-important airlift function. The Virginia-class submarine, capable of operating in littoral regions where, in all likelihood, the future of maritime conflict will occur, is also a great weapons platform that could provide the United States unhindered access to the world's coastlines. This submarine, and its accompanying ability to deliver Navy SEAL teams, would be a valuable asset in antiterrorist operations. Given the increasing need for mobile land platforms, the Army's Stryker vehicle is also a very promising weapons platform. In addition, dollars freed from NMD testing and research could be used for procurement of more "up-armored" humvees and defensive systems capable of neutralizing attacks by rocket-propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices.

Finally, let's distinguish between the broad NMD system being pushed by the White House and the theater missile defense (TMD) systems in use and development today. The TMD is technologically feasible, financially practical, and operationally necessary. In addition, it retains the sacrosanct concepts of MAD by limiting protection to deployed forces and nothing else. The vast majority of missile systems fielded by hostile regimes are short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, those with a maximum range of 3,000 kilometers. These missiles are more likely to be used within theaters of combat and would be vulnerable to TMD systems. During times of conflict, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and especially during potential regional conflicts with China or North Korea, it is important that we are able to protect American military forces from the localized ballistic missiles used by rogue regimes. Also, by deploying the TMD only in support of our military forces, we convey an important message to other countries in the region. We make it clear that we have no intent of permanently altering power balances by leaving TMD systems in place to protect favored countries. Our TMD systems would be strictly for protection of US and allied forces during legal and internationally recognized combat events. TMD systems such as the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), the Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3), and Aegis cruisers armed with the Standard missile represent far more effective methods of integrating missile defense concepts into practical ways of waging war.

## Conclusion

When the first atomic bomb detonated in July 1945, American political and military leaders immediately realized the potentially devastating impact

of this weapon. It was not long until we made the limitation of nuclear weapons access one of the fundamental precepts of American foreign policy, for reasons both altruistic and self-preserving. The Cold War provided far too many opportunities for the fallibility of man to give way to nuclear annihilation. This was a danger recognized beyond national boundaries and political ideologies. It was a globally shared fear and understanding that the end of humanity was in our hands. We recognized that hostility and antagonism had no place next to the lofty goals of nonproliferation and eventual disarmament. There is no reason why this should change now. As new conflicts arise, and they will, we must be willing to ask difficult but necessary questions. We must decide what the ultimate goal is and how best to accomplish that goal.

National missile defense is not the correct strategy. The current geopolitical spectrum does not warrant its development. The financial obligation to overcome the technological challenges would be obscene and, once accomplished, global instability would be insurmountable. It would ignite an arms race, exacerbate anti-American sentiment abroad, and push back our foreign policy goals by years. NMD is not the best answer to the critical questions. There are others.

We would do well to appreciate the successes, however minor, that have been made with regards to nuclear disarmament in the Middle East and on the Korean Peninsula. There is certainly still a long way to go, but we do not have to go it alone. Evidence suggests that the United States is greatest when leading a group based on a noble cause. And if we are willing to do so, we can take this cause to the world and seriously tackle the issues of nuclear disarmament. We can pursue nuclear nonproliferation actively. We can develop new reduction treaties and signal our dedication to a nuclear-free world by ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. We can stabilize the community of nuclear weapons states by pushing for formal declarations and doctrine. There are many promising weapons platforms that can and should be funded to maintain our strategic advantage in the midst of future warfare. We can successfully secure our interests and those of our allies with smart, informed decisions about the nature of future threats. With open dialogue and straightforward answers, we can engage in the strategic conversation and secure our future for years to come. SSQ

**Notes**

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