Security: The Bottom Line

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President Bill Clinton wisely decided to leave the question of a national missile defense (NMD) to his successor. The systems considered—either the limited system of 100 interceptors based in Alaska or a much more elaborate network—are as yet technologically unproven. Furthermore, the opposition of the other nuclear powers, including U.S. allies, to the concept raises the question of whether such a system, even if technologically feasible, would enhance the security of American citizens. In other words, it is a concept that, at the moment, cannot be justified on either technical or diplomatic grounds.

Nevertheless, the NMD question may well be the central foreign policy and defense issue for the next president. If mishandled, it has the potential to undermine alliances, unleash new arms races, and ultimately leave the American people less secure than they are today. Therefore, it is important that the debate be conducted with a clear understanding of what is at stake—the bottom line, to use the language of business.

The bottom line is security, not a given military system or a given set of alliances or even specific treaty commitments. Weapons systems may or may not contribute to security, and the same can be said of alliances and treaties. They all must be judged in the context of the threat they are designed to counter.

What works for some threats does not work for others. Arrangements designed to counter threats of the past nearly always prove inadequate to threats of the future—just ask the French, who constructed the Maginot Line to avoid World War I-type trench warfare on their own territory, only to fall victim to Hitler's blitzkrieg, which simply bypassed French defenses. Meanwhile, with a mistaken confidence in their security, the French backed policies, such as punitive reparations, that helped bring Hitler to power, then failed to move decisively as Hitler gathered strength by remilitarizing the Rhineland, absorbing Austria, and dismembering Czechoslovakia. (In the latter case, the French even succumbed to British pressure to bless the action!)

Alliance commitments and treaties should also be subject to review as strategic conditions change. Alliances generally require periodic renewal, and treaties, too, normally have exit provisions if either of the parties feels that the restrictions are no longer in its interest. Furthermore, it is a basic principle of international law that treaty commitments are valid so long as the conditions under which they were signed remain the same (rebus sic stantibus). If it can be plausibly argued that current conditions are fundamentally different from those under which an obligation was undertaken, withdrawal from treaty commitments, with proper notice, can be justified.

The question to be debated, therefore, is not whether the U.S. government should act to protect its citizens. Of course it should. Nor is the question whether NMD would undermine "arms control." Even if it did, it would be justified if it enhanced American security without detriment to America's allies, whose cooperation is important to its security. The critical question is also not whether the United States should continue to adhere to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. If American security requires actions contrary to provisions of the treaty, the U.S. government has not only a right but a duty to insist upon appropriate amendments and to withdraw if those amendments are refused by
treaty partners.

The true question is whether the proposed NMD, if proven feasible, is likely to make Americans safer, and the only way to answer that is to determine the most likely threats of the future and the best way to secure the nation against them.

The Threat

Since the end of the Cold War, the threat of a missile attack on the United States has receded substantially. The threat from smaller states, such as those often described as "rogue states," is so slight as to be practically negligible. If any of these states acquire nuclear or biological weapons and decide to attack the United States, they will do so not with ballistic missiles but through other means. The United States would know instantly the location from which a hostile missile was fired and would presumably retaliate and annihilate the command center of the country that launched it, if not the entire country. On the other hand, the United States would not necessarily know quickly or with certainty which country or group delivered a nuclear device or biological agent by terrorist means, particularly since such an attack could be mounted from a third country not at all complicit in the action.

The principal incentives for aggressive non-nuclear states to acquire weapons of mass destruction and missile technology are to affect the balance of power in their region and to prevent military action against them by other powers. If Iraq had possessed usable nuclear weapons and advanced missile technology when it occupied Kuwait, it is unlikely that the United States and its allies would have undertaken the Persian Gulf War. Similarly, if Serbia had been armed with nuclear weapons, it is unlikely that NATO would have resorted to bombing in order to end, and then reverse, the expulsion of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. In other words, the threat posed by advanced missile technology at the disposal of aggressive states is to the region and the U.S. bases there, not to U.S. territory as such.

A national missile defense would also do little to prevent blackmail of U.S. allies by an aggressive regional power. In fact, by appearing to decouple U.S. nuclear security from that of its allies, an NMD would enhance rather than diminish the blackmail potential of rogue state weapons of mass destruction. We would have done to ourselves what we thought the Soviets were trying to accomplish through their SS-20 deployments in the late 1970s.

While an NMD makes no sense as a means to deal with the rogue nation threat, might it be necessary to deal with the threat that Russia or China might pose in the future? If a foolproof defense were technically possible in the medium term, say a decade, and its cost were not prohibitive, it would deserve careful consideration. However, given the number of Russian weapons and Russia's ability to produce sophisticated decoys, nothing approaching a foolproof system will be feasible in the foreseeable future, regardless of the amount of money allocated to the problem. Furthermore, a U.S. decision to deploy NMD, even one that probably would not work, would create a powerful incentive for China to rapidly expand its ICBM force. The Chinese will probably increase their ICBM force regardless of what the United States does, but their buildup is likely to be more modest if there is no U.S. decision to proceed with NMD. Deployment would also provide Russia and China with an incentive to develop closer military relations, including in nuclear and missile technology.

This leaves us with defense against accidental or unauthorized launches as the only plausible threat that an NMD might be effective in mitigating. An effective system, however, would have to cover most of U.S. territory and have an accuracy and reliability well beyond the demonstrated capability of any system designed thus far. In fact, a decision to embark on an NMD could actually increase the danger of accidental or unauthorized launches since it would discourage further reduction of nuclear arsenals and encourage maintenance of strategic forces on hair-trigger alert. Deployment would also inhibit cooperation among the nuclear powers to prevent accidental or unauthorized launches.
In sum, NMD would do nothing to protect U.S. territory from the main threat it faces today: terrorism. Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missile technology is, however, a threat to U.S. bases abroad, to U.S. allies, and to regional stability and is therefore of major concern to the United States. Dealing with it effectively requires an approach that would defend allies and friendly nations against regional bullies.

Boost-Phase Defense

As scientist Richard Garwin and others have argued, it is technically much easier to intercept a missile in its boost phase than to intercept a warhead after it has separated from its launch vehicle. The launcher moves much more slowly than a warhead in orbit, it presents a much larger and more vulnerable target, and the interceptor has no need to distinguish between a weapon and decoys. Such a system is also more likely to appeal to allies than an NMD since it would protect them as well, along with U.S. bases abroad. It can also be developed and tested without major alteration of existing treaties. Effective boost-phase defenses would discourage proliferation of advanced missile technology since they would deprive the rogue states of the blackmail potential such weapons possess today.

Boost-phase systems could be developed unilaterally by the United States for deployment at sea or at U.S. bases abroad. However, they would be most effective and could be deployed more flexibly if they were developed cooperatively with other powers. Russia, in particular, has technical capabilities relevant to missile defense. President Vladimir Putin has suggested a cooperative approach to the problem since Russia is itself vulnerable to rogue state threats—it is more vulnerable than the United States, in fact. His remarks on the subject have been vague, but they should be taken seriously. The possibility of a cooperative project with Russia—and perhaps other interested countries—to develop boost-phase defenses should be explored.

An international program to develop boost-phase defenses would have collateral benefits: it would encourage further cooperation to reduce offensive weaponry and improve the security of nuclear weapons and fissionable materials. It would also facilitate cooperation to eliminate any possibility of accidental or unauthorized launches. The program itself would thus enhance American security even before an effective system could be developed and deployed.

Some Illusions

Advocates of an early decision to deploy defenses against incoming warheads seem to believe that an effective system requires only a political decision and adequate funding. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The failures of recent tests should not be exaggerated—given a few more tries it will probably be possible to create a weapon that can destroy an incoming warhead—but it is uncertain that we can develop a weapon that can reliably distinguish a nuclear warhead from sophisticated decoys. This is the real challenge, and until it is effectively solved, any decision to deploy would be premature on technical grounds alone.

A second claim that cannot be substantiated is that the restrictions in the ABM Treaty prevent the development of effective missile defenses. The fact is that the research and testing necessary to determine whether a weapon can distinguish a warhead from a decoy can be done within the constraints of the ABM Treaty. Until that key technical problem has been solved—if it can be—withdrawal from the treaty would serve no purpose whatever.

It is also an illusion to believe that any Russian government will be willing to amend the ABM Treaty to permit the United States to deploy a national missile defense. Even the administration’s proposed limited system would require numerous changes in the treaty either by specific amendments or a stand-alone protocol. Russian officials at all levels have adamantly opposed even discussing such
amendments as a matter of principle. The Russian State Duma cannot be induced to ratify amendments or a protocol if they appear to benefit the United States alone.

It is sometimes argued that the current opposition of Russia and U.S. allies to the concept of a national missile defense will eventually dissipate since the defensive weapons could be shared with them. That argument is dubious. In the first place, unless there is joint development, which would be extremely difficult to manage, there can be no confidence that, if and when the time came, the United States would in fact be willing to share. Moreover, since any effective system will be extremely expensive, it is most unlikely that any other country would be able to afford it, even if given access to the full technology, or that the U.S. Congress would be willing to foot the bill for others.

A truly joint program to develop land- or sea-based boost-phase defenses focused on specific states of concern might be undertaken without any significant amendments to the ABM Treaty. This would be along the lines of the cooperative program in which the Russians appear to have expressed some interest. If Russia agreed to such a program, it would presumably be willing to approve any amendments or treaty interpretations needed to permit the joint effort to proceed. This, however, would be a very different program from that presently proposed by either presidential candidate.

America's security depends on the strength of its alliances and the wisdom of its diplomacy as much as it does on capable armed forces. To undermine our alliances and encourage a renewed arms race in pursuit of a still dubious technological fix to a largely nonexistent threat would be sheer folly. It would, in fact, undermine many of the benefits we have gained from the end of the Cold War and leave the American people significantly less secure than they are today.

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