

NMD and the Wistful Pursuit of Common Sense

John D. Steinbruner

THE BEST THAT CAN PLAUSIBLY BE claimed for the national missile defense scheme currently proposed by the United States is it would provide unreliable protection against an improbable form of threat. However well the proposed system might perform in controlled tests, it always would have to be assumed a strategic opponent capable of developing a long range ballistic missile would also be able to equip it with penetration devices likely to be effective under operational conditions. Of course, a “state of concern” (the new name given to states formerly known as “rogue”) would presumably bypass the envisaged system with more readily concealed means of attack. The entire project promises to stimulate threats it cannot handle.

Therein lies the reason it is considered to be so provocative. No one is prepared to believe the United States—or more precisely, its decision makers—is now or would forever remain that stupid. Potential strategic opponents are compelled to assume the nonsensically

limited system is but a stalking horse for a more serious effort, and the principal U.S. advocates of ballistic missile defense loudly encourage that assumption. The initiative is interpreted, moreover, in the context of very assertive plans for further elaboration of the already imposing offensive capabilities of U.S. forces. Against an initiating opponent who can choose the timing and operational details of an attack, the proposed U.S. system is basically worthless. Against an opponent who had first been subjected to a U.S. attack, an expanded version of the proposed system could be a very serious matter indeed—the final element needed to establish decisive, intimidating superiority. The real issue in question is the balance of offensive capability and more generally the fundamental terms of international security.

THE ADVOCATES’ ARGUMENT

Within the inner circles of U.S. politics, it is widely assumed the limited national missile defense (NMD) system proposed

Dr. John Steinbruner is director of the Center for International and Security Studies and professor of public policy at the University of Maryland.

by the Clinton administration is largely an exercise in political triangulation—an effort to neutralize whatever partisan advantage the Republican party might derive from the issue without incurring too much cost or inciting too much international opposition. It is also widely assumed the maneuver is yet another of the administration's recurring misjudgments. Dedicated advocates of NMD deployment will certainly not accept the proposed limitations of the system and in fact are contemptuous of them. They support the project as a means of eliminating the legal restriction on NMD deployment established by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Once this has been accomplished, they will campaign for a more robust system with a more extensive sensor network, multiple layers of interception, and presumably additional methods of warhead destruction to back up the operationally fragile hit-to-kill mechanism. None of these promises complete success for the stand-alone intercept mission, but it would provide a more plausible technical design. Once the mission is established, it will be politically difficult to restrict the effort made.

To the extent they articulate their general strategic purpose, the dedicated advocates tend to emphasize the moral superiority of the defensive mission. It is better, they say, to defend against attack than to threaten retaliation. They implicitly acknowledge, however, no feasible elaboration of defensive technology would make it a reliable substitute for the threat of retaliation,

and they do not propose to accompany a more robust NMD deployment with the very drastic restrictions on U.S. offensive capability that would be necessary to make it plausibly acceptable to the principal potential opponents. In fact most of the assertive NMD advocates also aggressively support the development of advanced conventional offensive capability that is the principle concern of such opponents. That effort is being pursued in alleged response to an impending “revolution in military affairs” and is most flamboyantly embodied in the development plans of the United States Space Command (USSPACECOM). USSPACECOM proposes to develop the capability to observe virtually any military activity of significant size as it occurs, to attack it immediately, and to deny similar capability to anyone else. NMD is presented as an integral element of this overall effort. When viewed from the perspective of a potential opponent, that program appears to be an effort to establish a degree of superiority sufficient to eliminate any threat—that is, any opposing deterrent capability.

THE OPPONENTS' FEARS

That, of course, is an alarming prospect to the two major societies, Russia and China, who consider themselves to be potential opponents and are committed to preserving a credible deterrent capability. In principle, Russia's deterrent force is based on thousands of nuclear weapons, more than enough to overwhelm a U.S. defensive system, but

Russia does not have the financial base to sustain that force. The portion normally kept sufficiently alert to avoid an initial attack is already quite small and the ability to sustain that capability against the pressure of the U.S. development effort is in question. The portion of China's deterrent force directed against the United States is much smaller—on the order of 20 ballistic missiles—and they are not kept on alert status. China's deterrent has long been vulnerable to a deliberate first strike and even the limited NMD deployment by the United States would compound that vulnerability. At some point that cannot be precisely calculated, a deterrent force that is sufficiently vulnerable would lose its essential credibility and become a provocation.

Such a fear is not lightly dismissed. In comparison with the United States, Russia and China both face large and enduring disadvantages in their economic and technical base and in their annual rates of defense investment. Both have reasons for concern that the eroding credibility of their deterrent capability would expose them to serious intimidation from the ever more capable and intrusive U.S. conventional forces, even if the United States remained reluctant to initiate the use of nuclear weapons. Each in their own way can be expected to resist such an outcome with every means at their disposal, and it is important to realize some very high leverage reactions are available. Usually this is assumed to involve an

expansion and technical elaboration of offensive weapons deployments in order to assure survival and penetration of the missile shield, but that is not necessarily the exclusive or even the primary choice they would make. They could counteract the U.S. program much sooner and with much less effort if they were willing to interfere with U.S. assets in space, which are at once very valuable and very vulnerable. China, at least, has noticed this and has bluntly pointed out the United States must choose between the continuation of current commercial and military support activities in space on the one hand and pursuit of the NMD/ USSPACECOM program on the other. When that message is absorbed, as it eventually will have to be, the politics of NMD deployment will assuredly change very dramatically.

COMMON SENSE

So far common sense has been a casualty of the intense emotions that have long accompanied the NMD issue, but it is reasonable to assume it will eventually enjoy some resurgence. The sheer destructiveness of what otherwise is likely to happen presumably will induce some corrective judgment. As guidelines for what that means, there are some simple rules. Missile defense will have to be deployed with general consent or not at all, and it therefore will have to be done on equitable terms. Although the United States and all other countries as well will surely proclaim the right to defend their national

territory by any reasonable means, in the end that can only be accomplished by mutual accommodation. As a practical matter, no one will be reliably defended unless everyone is. The most objectionable feature of the current NMD effort is that it is being conducted as a unilateral initiative for the United States alone in defiance of legitimate opposing security concerns. That, we all should know, will not work.