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Missile Defense Reckoning is Coming. Will the United States Choose to be Vulnerable to All Long-Range Missiles?

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Introduction

The U.S. homeland missile defense system is not designed to counter Russia's or China's ballistic missiles. But the time of reckoning is coming. With advances in Iranian and North Korean long-range missile programs, the United States will soon have to make a decision – cap its homeland missile defense in the name of preserving the chimera of strategic stability with Russia and China or pursue the best missile defense system it can against North Korea's and Iran's missiles while accepting that the system might also be capable of shooting down some of Russia's and China's missiles. Which will it be?

The usual claim by critics of U.S. missile defense is that U.S. deployment of missile defense compels opponents to pursue additional offensive armaments in response, thus creating a U.S.-led “action-reaction” arms race cycle. The U.S. typically is deemed culpable of the arms race in this way, while opponents are presented as benign cogs caught in this U.S. driven action-reaction dynamic. Critics occasionally refer to this supposed explanation of arms racing as a “law” of international relations.¹ They also assert as the logical corollary of this action-reaction



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 465 | August 20, 2020

“law” that if only the U.S. would *not* take that first triggering action, opponents would not be compelled to react. An inaction-inaction cycle would then replace action-reaction and arms racing could be avoided in favor of arms control. Here we have the supposed cause of arms racing, i.e., initial U.S. actions, and the solution to arms racing—U.S. inaction. Critics have advanced this argument against U.S. missile defense for six decades.

A historical perspective on the relationship between U.S. missile defense choices and other states’ armament decisions empirically demonstrates that this supposed “action-reaction” relationship attributed to the interaction between U.S. missile defenses and other states’ armament programs is time and again a misrepresentation of available evidence. U.S. missile defenses have not started arms races nor has U.S. missile defense restraint led opponents to halt their offensive force buildups. As strategist Colin Gray pointed out over four decades ago, there has been no mechanistic action-reaction dynamic led by the United States and, “...the nuclear arms race—like all arms races—must be seen as an expression of political conflict.”²

Case One: Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty

Between 1972 and 2002, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty strictly limited strategic missile defense development and deployment.³ The decision to rely almost exclusively on mutual “deterrence by threat of punishment” was unprecedented. Never before in U.S. history had the government decided to give its adversary a “free ride” to strike U.S. territory as a matter of official policy and to hold U.S. citizens hostage in the interest of something as ill-defined and ambiguous as “strategic stability.”

Opponents of U.S. missile defense systems at the time when the ABM Treaty was being negotiated with the Soviet Union argued that any U.S. missile defense deployments “would probably start a new round in the arms race, and would seriously impede the conclusion of an arms control agreement [referring to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks].”⁴ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara stated that “we can be certain that the Soviets will react to offset the advantage we would hope to gain [by deploying a heavy missile defense system].”⁵ Should the United States stop missile defense deployments, the arms race would end because “...in such a climate, there would be little excuse for the Russians to continue building additional ICBM sites. In such a situation of frozen stable deterrence, they would not be needed.”⁶ Jerome Wiesner, the Chairman of President Kennedy’s Science Advisory Committee, argued that U.S. unilateral disarmament steps could “even start a peace race” in which both sides realize that large numbers of offensive nuclear forces are unnecessary and resources would be better spent on other priorities, e.g. social programs.⁷ Henry Kissinger testified that “By setting a limit to ABM defenses, the [ABM] [T]reaty not only eliminates one area of dangerous defensive competition, but it reduces the incentive for continuing deployment of offensive systems.”⁸ Here were both confident predictions that U.S. missile defense would cause an action-reaction



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 465 | August 20, 2020

arms race, and that U.S. missile defense restraint (inaction) would lead the Soviet Union to stop its offensive missile buildup (inaction). How did these expectations stack up against reality?

U.S. critics of missile defense claimed that the Soviet Union would halt its continuing nuclear buildup after the ABM Treaty entered into force, but instead the Soviet nuclear weapons stockpile increased from about 15,000 in 1972 to more than 40,000 in the mid-1980s. In contrast, the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile stood at about 28,000 in the early to mid-1970s and steadily declined thereafter.⁹ How did the critics of U.S. missile defense so misunderstand the actual dynamics of the arms race? A senior Soviet military official indicated that, “the ABM Treaty appeared to have allowed a considerably larger number of offensive nuclear weapons in the Soviet arsenal than there would have been without it.”¹⁰ As another analyst noted, “the treaty plainly enabled the Soviets to avoid an expensive competition in a domain of U.S. technological advantage. By relieving the Soviets of a resource dilemma, the ABM Treaty allowed them to invest more in other capabilities, including ICBMs.”¹¹

Case Two: Strategic Defense Initiative

The role of missile defense was prominently featured in U.S. national security discussions during the Reagan era. By announcing the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), President Reagan indicated his preference for deploying effective missile defense and moving away from the balance of terror as a primary basis for protection against Soviet missiles. In addition, the SDI was considered a potential way to nullify the Soviet Union’s investment and competitive advantage in offensive missiles through the deployment of a defensive system.

Opponents of the SDI again launched the usual action-reaction criticism against U.S. missile defense, predicting that it would trigger an arms race and possibly a nuclear war. They argued that the SDI would lead to “unceasing competition without stability.”¹² They predicted that the program could instigate “an expensive arms race” that could “bankrupt not only the Soviet, but the U.S. economy as well.”¹³ Yet others argued that “you cannot have SDI and arms control at the same time.”¹⁴ Thousands of professors and graduate students pledged they would not participate in SDI work for fear that the program “will only serve to escalate the nuclear arms race by encouraging the development of both additional offensive overkill and an all-out competition in anti-ballistic-missile weapons.”¹⁵

Opponents of the SDI rarely acknowledged that it was a response to the Soviet Union’s unceasing expansion of its strategic nuclear weapons and investments following the ABM Treaty. Despite the ABM Treaty, the Soviet Union did not stop building when it reached parity with the United States—it continued to build to the point of threatening U.S. land-based forces.¹⁶ As President Carter’s Secretary of Defense Harold Brown observed, “Soviet spending has shown no response to U.S. restraint—when we build, they build; when we cut, they build.”¹⁷



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 465 | August 20, 2020

Domestic critics of U.S. missile defense also typically neglected to mention that, unlike the United States which cancelled its missile defense programs in 1970s, the Soviet Union deployed and sustained a nuclear-armed missile defense system around Moscow and engaged in the clear violation of the ABM Treaty by deploying a large phased-array radar near Krasnoyarsk.¹⁸ Contemporary critics of U.S. missile defense continue to neglect the key same points, that Russia has sustained and modernized this nuclear-armed missile defense system and violates arms control agreements—perhaps because it is inconsistent with the presentation of opponents as benign cogs caught in a U.S.-driven action-reaction dynamic.

The predictions that SDI would start an arms race that would bankrupt the U.S. economy and preclude arms control agreements were, of course, wrong. SDI did not prevent arms control and the ultimate U.S. decision not to deploy SDI did not halt the continuing Soviet nuclear buildup. Perhaps more importantly, the SDI was a catalyst for Soviet recognition that the Soviet Union was unable to compete with the United States. It became a powerful impetus toward reform of the Soviet political system—and the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union.

Case Three: ABM Treaty Withdrawal

Most recently, similar action-reaction arms race arguments were leveled against U.S. missile defense after the George W. Bush Administration's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002. The expressed impetus behind the decision was not a desire to get away from a balance of terror with the Russian Federation but a recognition that such a policy was undesirable with states like Iran and North Korea, now developing long-range ballistic missiles and on their way to obtain nuclear weapons (which North Korea accomplished in 2006). In fact, all administrations since 2001 have affirmed they would deploy missile defense to protect against rogue missiles, but not seek missile defenses that would undermine Russia's (and China's) nuclear deterrent. This issue will arise again when that latter commitment impedes the U.S. ability to defend itself against increasingly capable Iranian and North Korean ballistic missiles.

To date, the United States has deployed 44 Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) interceptors in Alaska and California, fewer than Russia's nuclear-tipped interceptors around Moscow. U.S. interceptors protect the homeland from limited and relatively unsophisticated ballistic missiles of the kind that North Korea and Iran could deploy at the time.¹⁹

Nevertheless, in familiar echoes of the past, following the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, then-Senator Joseph Biden criticized the Bush Administration for "walking away from a treaty that has helped keep the peace for the last 30 years."²⁰ Others predicted that withdrawal "would be a foreign policy disaster"—that it would unleash an action-reaction arms race and prevent any strategic arms control agreement with Russia. But again, the action-



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 465 | August 20, 2020

reaction based predictions that Russia would abandon arms control and that a “foreign policy disaster” would ensue were wrong.

Following the announcement of the withdrawal, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that “the decision taken by the president of the United States does not pose a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation.”²¹ The Russian Federation and the United States went on to sign in 2002 the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (“SORT” or the “Moscow Treaty”), in which both sides agreed to reduce the number of their operationally deployed strategic nuclear weapons to 1,700-2,200 by the end of 2012. This was precisely the opposite of what critics of the ABM Treaty withdrawal predicted.

The Russian tune later changed when it became politically expedient for the leadership in Moscow. Yet again, the Russian Federation started to deploy all the familiar arms race arguments against U.S. missile defense while continuing to modernize its own larger missile defense system.

Conclusion

As North Korean and Iranian long-range missile programs advance, so too must U.S. missile defenses if the country is to keep ahead of these threats. Implicit in this statement is a recognition that it is cheaper, and more importantly safer, to invest in missile defense than it is dealing with the consequences of a successful missile attack. The FY 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) stated that the United States will *as a matter of policy* “rely on nuclear deterrence to address more sophisticated and larger quantity near-peer intercontinental missile threats to the homeland of the United States,” while improving missile defenses against “rogue states.”²² The question, of course, is: What happens when these “rogue threats” advance their missiles to be more sophisticated and in larger quantity? Will the United States depart from over 20 years of a bipartisan consensus, dating at least to the 1999 National Missile Defense Act, and choose to be deliberately vulnerable to North Korea’s and Iran’s more advanced missiles or, in the expectation of an action-reaction dynamic, reimpose limits on its strategic missile defense to try to preclude whatever additional Russian or Chinese forces those defenses might inspire? The United States pursued the ABM Treaty in 1972 to avoid such an expected action-reaction interaction with the Soviet Union, but back then the United States did not have to face rogue states armed with long-range missiles and the fallacies of the action-reaction arms race explanation were not as apparent.

If history offers any clues, opponents of U.S. missile defense programs will apply the same fallacious U.S.-led action-reaction arms race arguments of the past to prevent any significant improvements to existing U.S. missile defense systems. But while the ABM Treaty did not lead to the expected Soviet moderation in offensive arms, it did leave the United States vulnerable to the limited rogue missile threat that emerged in the post-Cold War era. Empirical evidence



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 465 | August 20, 2020

shows that countries make armament choices for a multitude of reasons that sometimes have nothing to do with U.S. choices and that their choices are almost never driven solely by U.S. actions. In fact, in the case of missile defense, the track record is almost perfect – missile defense opponents have consistently been wrong about the impact of U.S. missile defense on the U.S.-Soviet/Russia arms race dynamic. That is why the United States ought not again be swayed by these arguments when planning for the best possible defense of its citizens and territory as rogue missile threats mature.

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INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 465 | August 20, 2020

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