

STAR WARS 2: DAYDREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

MALCOLM K. SAVIDGE

*MP for Aberdeen North (Labour)
Convener, All Party Parliamentary Group, Global Security and Non-Proliferation
House of Commons, London, UK*

The US rationale for National Missile Defence is the perceived threat that “rogue states” could obtain weapons of mass destruction and the missile delivery systems for them.

The British House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs report on “Weapons of Mass Destruction” investigated this claim. The Select Committee is All Party, non-partisan and objective. It reached unanimous decisions. The report records that the consensus of the expert evidence that it received was that both the extent and the immediacy of that threat had been massively hyped in the United States. It suggests that political and commercial interests, rather than objective strategic assessment have driven the US agenda.

The United States has believed for half a century in deterrence. It should not underestimate the enormous deterrent effect of its vast nuclear and conventional forces. Even the most unpredictable and ruthless tyrant can have a very strong sense of self-preservation.

However there is always a possibility that weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems could fall into the hands of a maniac who was simultaneously genocidal and suicidal.

Recent political and diplomatic developments have led the US to redesignate “rogue states” as “states of concern” presumably recognising a reduction in this particular threat and an increase in the timescale for its potential emergence.

Despite this, the new Bush administration appears to be considering an extended NMD system, which might be sea-launched, space-based and land-based, and could cover boost-phase, mid-phase and final-phase interception.

This would be a total abrogation of the Anti Ballistic Missile treaty. Some US Republicans show deeply disturbing disregard for international treaty obligations: either claiming that the treaty no longer exists because the Soviet Union no longer exists, or that since the treaty has lasted 30 years it is an “anachronism of obsolete strategic thinking” [Republican Election Platform 2000] or even “ancient history” [Rumsfeld]. However, ABM is central to arms control and to other treaties. The 2000 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference gave a commitment to “preserving and strengthening the ABM Treaty as a cornerstone of strategic stability and as a basis for further reductions in offensive weapons”. The USA was party to both

that agreement and its subsequent endorsement at the UN [Nov 2000]. Ambassador Yuriy Kapralov says Russia sees linkage between ABM and SALT, START and other treaties. NMD could undermine the entire non-proliferation and disarmament process.

Since NMD threatens limited forces, what it may really deter is multilateral disarmament.

Indeed NMD could encourage Russia to update its nuclear forces or China to greater expansion. Particularly as extreme advocates of NMD already argue that it should be used against China. If NMD is developed, that lobby would become increasingly vociferous. Chinese nuclear expansion could trigger escalation in India and hence Pakistan and possibly other countries in South East Asia.

Some extreme exponents of NMD discount Chinese concerns - and even Russian concerns - on the grounds that neither can afford to rival any US arms expansion. However the economic destabilisation of any major nuclear weapons state is dangerous in itself, and can further encourage export of nuclear and rocket technology at state or private criminal level.

That can encourage proliferation not just to states but to terrorists – whether political, religious or criminal. Terrorists can be impervious to deterrence, since they are difficult to identify or locate. NMD is impotent against the Weapon of Mass Destruction carried by boat, lorry or brief case.

Proponents of NMD talk about ‘protecting US cities and families’, but some of their rhetoric implies reckless adventurism in dealing with present or future nuclear weapons states in the confidence that the US had an impenetrable missile shield. Unless the technology proves infallible, those US cities and families - and US allies - might find themselves in greater jeopardy.

NMD could increase the threat of catastrophic accidents. Other nuclear weapons states could be motivated to go on to hair-trigger alert through fear of a pre-emptive strike by the USA. The weaponisation of space would be very dangerous. Boost-phase interceptor missiles could pose a particular threat.

Various forms of boost-phase interception have very diverse advocates in the USA, from Professor Theodore Postol and former Defense Secretary, Harold Brown, through to Richard Perle, and it seems to be favoured by the Bush administration.

It may be easier to intercept missiles during the initial boost phase; the target is larger, slower, hot and no decoys or multiple warheads can be used. If a missile is intercepted over the country which fired it; dangerous debris is ‘returned to sender’. However, interceptor missiles would be dispersed around the world and in close proximity to nuclear weapon states. The boost phase lasts less than five minutes. An interceptor missile would take time to reach its target. So within how many seconds of suspected detection of the launch of a missile would a decision have to be taken to fire an interceptor missile? At what level of the chain of command would the decision have to be taken? If an interceptor missile was accidentally fired towards a nuclear weapons state and that act was misinterpreted, what could the consequences be?

Britain may hope to have some influence on a US decision on NMD. Not merely as a fellow member of NATO, nor just because of a claimed ‘special relationship’, but because potential surveillance facilities at Fylingdales and Menwith in the UK could have a significant role in any proposed scheme.

William Hague, the Leader of the Opposition Conservative Party, has declared unconditional readiness to agree to anything Bush asks over NMD; before Bush is inaugurated, or takes any detailed decision on NMD deployment and whether British involvement would be requested and on what terms.

Hague's rash opportunism complicates the delicate diplomatic task facing the British Government.

Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has expressed his position judiciously: "We are trying to ensure that the fear that the United States has – perfectly legitimately and justifiably – is taken into account of in a way that does not put at risk the substantial progress that has been made on nuclear disarmament over the past few years. It is vital, therefore, for us to continue a dialogue on what will be one of the most important issues that we shall have to face over the next few years."

The Foreign Affairs Select Committee unanimous Report concludes:

"We commend the Prime Minister's approach, whilst urging the Government to impress upon the US Administration that it cannot necessarily assume unqualified UK co-operation with US plans to deploy NMD in the event of unilateral US abrogation of the ABM Treaty"

"We recommend that the Government articulate the very strong concerns that have been expressed about NMD within the UK. We are not convinced that the US plans to deploy NMD represent an appropriate response to the proliferation problems faced by the international community. We recommend that the Government encourage the USA to seek other ways of reducing the threat it perceives."

In response to the Select Committee, the British Government states that it "has repeatedly made clear that it values the stability that the ABM Treaty provides, and wishes to see it preserved. ... At no point has the Government given the US Administration reason to assume unqualified UK cooperation with NMD deployment ... the Government is strongly in favour of deeper, carefully considered international dialogue on this complex and difficult issue. "

Magic technological fixes for complex strategic problems are seductive, but impregnable defences can prove as flawed as the Maginot Line. Individual national invulnerability may sound a tempting prospect, but it is dangerous and unattainable. Increasingly security for any nation depends on the common security of all nations.

The potential danger of NMD is that in seeking to reduce a comparatively remote threat, the United States could indirectly contribute to increasing greater ones: regional nuclear war; terrorism; proliferation; renewed nuclear arms racing; the firing of nuclear missiles through accident or misunderstanding. There is the horrific possibility that this last contingency could lead to an uncontrolled situation resulting in a holocaust.

