

Missile Defence: Pretext Absurd

Joseph Rotblat

It may be right that the US ballistic missile defence (BMD) system will be built, even though it is unlikely ever to be 100 per cent effective. But it is wrong, in my opinion, to imply that BMD would enhance world security. On the contrary, it would endanger world security.

The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972 will almost certainly be the victim of the decision to proceed with ballistic missile defence, and it is important to remind ourselves of the significance of this treaty. At the time the treaty was negotiated, the US Administration was in favour of it while the Soviet Union was strongly opposed to it. At the Pugwash Conferences we managed to convince our Russian colleagues to persuade their Government that ballistic missile defence would be bound to result in an intensification of the nuclear arms race, because any such system could be saturated by the use of a larger number of missiles, and offensive missiles are much cheaper than defensive ones. Three decades later, and this argument is still valid.

Although the Cold War is over, the mindset on nuclear issues has survived: we still seem to rely on the nuclear deterrent for world security. But if the US were protected by a ballistic missile defence system, Russia and China would have lost their deterrents and be compelled to restore the balance by increasing their nuclear arsenals – a new nuclear arms race. Officially, of course, ballistic missile defence is not intended to defend against Russia or China but against ‘rogue states’ (or ‘states of concern’ in current jargon). But this pretext is absurd. Any nuclear attack with ballistic missiles would be suicidal for those states. If such states, or terrorist groups sponsored by them, wanted to injure the US, this could be achieved by cheaper means and with less risk of reprisal.

Anyhow, there is an alternative way to deal with the nuclear threat, whether from rogue

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states or from overt or covert nuclear states, namely, by the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free world, safeguarded by a robust verification and enforcement regime. The United Kingdom (as well as the United States) is legally committed to the elimination of nuclear weapons. In pursuance of this policy – and for the sake of world peace – the United Kingdom should make an effort to convince the US Administration to abandon the Ballistic Missile Defence project.



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