

Star Wars

David Webb

David Webb is Professor of Engineering Modelling and co-director of the Praxis Centre for the Study of Information and Technology in Peace, Conflict Resolution and Human Rights at Leeds Metropolitan University. In June 2007, he addressed the Security and Defence Subcommittee of the European Parliament on plans for anti-ballistic missile systems in Europe. This is what he said.

Does Europe need an anti-missile defence shield? The question is being posed at this time because of the recent request by the United States to position bases in the Czech Republic and Poland as part of its own National Missile Defence (NMD) system.

To help tackle this question I would like to consider four associated ones:

- What is the threat of missile attack?
- How effective is missile defence likely to be?
- What are the consequences of deploying a European missile defence system?
- Are there alternative forms of action?

What is Missile Defence?

The US Ground Based Mid Course Defence (GMD) system currently consists of some 15 silo-based interceptors at Fort Greely, Alaska and two at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California. There are also associated ground-based early warning and tracking radars, including those at Thule in Greenland and Fylingdales in North Yorkshire in England (recently upgraded for its role in National Missile Defence), and a \$1 billion sea-based X-band radar to track, discriminate and assess targets from a mobile, semi-submersible platform in the Aleutian Islands between the Alaska and Kamchatka peninsulas.

The United States proposes that 10 more interceptors be based in Poland, and a modified X-band radar system moved to the Czech Republic. The US claims it needs to have these sites operational by 2012 in order to counter any possible future threat from Iran or North Korea.

Although originally conceived as a system for long range missiles aimed at the United States, the suggestion now is that it be combined with the missile defence system under consideration by Nato to form an integrated European defence system. A Charter for an Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence (ALTBMD) was approved by Nato in March 2005. The 20-year cost of this undertaking is reported to be 1 billion euros and, in addition, some 20 billion euros would be spent by individual member states on

missile defence batteries. Increasing costs cause some concern; most European Nato states are unable or unwilling to increase spending on defence as other concerns such as education and health take precedence. Despite this, Nato is considering extending the system to protect population centres – leading to possible eventual integration with the US National Missile Defence system.

What is the threat?

None of the European Union member states appears to have any immediate concern about the threat of a missile attack. There are differences of opinion within Nato on the assessment of threats from ‘states of concern’, but even Nato’s own parliamentary assembly does not have immediate access to classified threat assessments carried out on its behalf. It does seem odd that parliamentary democracies are expected to act on and pay for threat assessments and feasibility studies that they are not even allowed to see.

The United States is very concerned about the threat of missile attack. Successive US governments have continued to fund and develop a cut-down version of President Reagan’s unrealistic idea of a missile defence umbrella. In justification of their 2008 budget request for European National Missile Defence sites, the US Missile Defence Agency stated that the bases are needed to improve protection of the United States by protecting its existing European based radars, and providing additional and earlier intercept opportunities. In addition, they would extend this protection to allies and friends and demonstrate an international support for ballistic missile defence. The major threat to these installations and/or the United States itself is believed to come from Iran. Let’s examine this threat in more detail.

Currently, Iran has no nuclear warheads, and may not obtain any for some time (if at all). It does, however, possess a medium-range ballistic missile with a range of 1,200kms, but has denied that it is developing the next generation with a range of 2,900kms. Although that denial may be controversial, what is certain is that they are not developing the Shahab-5 which, with a range of 6,000kms, would be able to reach greater parts of Europe but still not threaten the United States (some 10,000kms away). It has been predicted that Iran may possibly develop missiles that could reach the United States by 2015 at the earliest. However, placing a primitive nuclear warhead on an unreliable ballistic missile would be a risky and costly business. Even if successful, it could result in a retaliation so devastating that it would mean national suicide.

The United States is preparing for a future potential threat rather than an imminent one. Their desire to place interceptors in Europe requires European co-operation and this can be hastened by persuading Europe that there is an imminent threat to them. There is no evidence that Iran wishes to attack Europe. Their reason for developing a nuclear capability (if they are) could well be the same as that claimed by all nuclear states – for deterrence purposes.

Effectiveness

In 2002, President George W. Bush unilaterally withdrew the United States from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to build an ‘effective’

missile defence system. Five years later, the system has still to prove that it can work in realistic circumstances (see box). During controlled tests, under unrealistic conditions where information is made available in advance that would not be supplied by an enemy, successful intercept has been achieved in only six out of 11 attempts. The satellite networks required for detecting missile launches and tracking trajectories are years behind schedule and way over budget, and an effective and operational command and control network has not been established. The annual report of the Pentagon's testing office, released earlier this year, stated that a lack of flight-test data 'limits confidence in assessments' of the system.

A report by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), in March 2007, concluded that the system 'has not completed sufficient flight testing to provide a high level of confidence that [it] can reliably intercept inter-continental ballistic missiles'. In addition, the system can readily be overcome by numbers. Ten interceptors would be seriously challenged by eleven or more real or decoy warheads.

There is an added complication for the proposed European interceptor site. The ground-based interceptor missiles in Poland will need only two-stage missiles rather than the three-stage interceptors in Alaska and California. Research and development on a two-stage interceptor has only just begun. Given the problems encountered when developing the existing interceptor missile, can we expect a much easier time for the development of the new one?

There is also a question as to whether testing the new intercepts would be illegal under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which eliminated nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500kms. If it can't be tested, how will we know if it works?

So, with missile defence we seem to be considering the use of interceptor missiles that have not so far been developed, as part of a costly, unproven system that is easily overcome, to defend against a threat that probably doesn't exist.

What are the consequences?

The cost of building the bases in Poland and the Czech Republic is estimated to be some \$3.5 billion. There is also a probability that the programme would later be extended to cover all European territory by the inclusion of sea-based missiles and missile tracking systems in space at considerable (but unspecified) extra cost. The technological problems encountered in developments of this kind are complex and cannot be accurately predicted. Massive extra costs and overruns are common.

Perhaps the biggest problem with missile defence, however, is how its development is perceived by others. It is argued by some that a workable missile shield would enable the United States to strike first with nuclear weapons as any limited retaliation could be dealt with effectively. Even if this is not the intention, it is easy to see how the antagonistic nature of US defence policy leads many states to this conclusion. The highly accurate nuclear missiles in the US arsenal are not required by deterrence, but could be used to destroy enemy missile silos. The proposed new US National Missile Defence bases are in states formerly in an alliance with Russia, which the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently

included in a list of potential threats to US security. Is it so surprising, then, that Russia has reacted strongly to the National Missile Defence proposals, calling them an ‘unfriendly step’, with President Putin threatening to target European sites with nuclear weapons?

The United States says that the missiles are not aimed at Russia. However, an analysis of the geographic locations and missile trajectories shows that the radar and interceptors could be deployed against Russian missiles from some of its western launch sites and even though 10 interceptors clearly do not pose a threat to the 500 or so missiles in Russia’s nuclear arsenal, a Russian Foreign Ministry statement suggests that ‘one cannot ignore the fact that US offensive weapons, combined with the missile defence being created, can turn into a strategic complex capable of delivering an incapacitating blow’.

Missile Defence Doesn’t Work

Theodore Postol is Professor of Science, Technology and National Security Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is a former scientific and policy adviser to the Pentagon on nuclear weapons and related matters, including missile defense. On 3 July 2007, following President Putin’s meeting with President Bush in Maine, he participated in a discussion on Democracy Now radio chaired by Amy Goodman, from which these excerpts are taken. The full discussion is available online (www.democracynow.org).

‘... The missile defense that the Bush administration has proposed is going to have a radar in the Czech Republic and missile interceptors in northern Poland. Now, the administration has stated that this system could not engage Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles if they were fired toward the United States, and that does not appear to be true, if one accepts the capabilities of the system as described by the Missile Defense Agency. We’ve done an analysis that shows that this is not a true statement. And in fact, we’ve also looked a little bit at variants of the Putin proposal, and we find that placing radars much closer to the launch sites, that is to say to the postulated Iranian missile threat in Azerbaijan or in Turkey, would in fact do a much better job of actually achieving the defensive capability that the Bush administration states it wants to achieve ...

The problem that adds even more complexity to this issue is the completely unrealistic character of the technical system that the administration claims will do missile defence. In fact, my earlier statement was caveated in a very important way. I said ‘if’ the system components work as the Missile Defence Agency claims they would. In fact, these missile defence components will never work the way the Missile Defence Agency claims they would. But, in fact, the United States claims they would work, and the Russians, at some level, have taken us at our word. So we’ve got the worst of both worlds. We’ve got a system that the Russians treat or perceive or treat politically as if it has some capability, which means this raises big political questions ..., and at the same time we have a system that really will provide no realistic defensive capability ...

The United States proposal to include Russia in further cooperation on missile defences has generated an interesting response from President Putin who has suggested joint US-Russian use of an early warning radar in Gabala, Azerbaijan. This radar would give good coverage of missiles from Iran but not of Russian launches, because of an intervening range of mountains. However, the United States has now said this cannot replace the proposed Czech radar.

Within Europe there is some unease about the deteriorating US-Russian relationship. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has been quoted in a newspaper article in March as saying that, in protecting against a possible Iranian threat, 'the price of security must not be new suspicion or, worse still, fresh insecurity'. He also stated that, '[W]e cannot allow a missile defense system to be either a reason or a pretext for a new arms race'.

The MIT Lincoln Laboratory ... was involved in concealing the failure of a very critical missile defence experiment, which was supposed to show whether or not the current system could tell the difference between a basketball-sized balloon and warheads, and the system was unable to do this. So this basically means that in no realistic combat situation that is imaginable, the system has no chance of working. The MIT Corporation, including its board of directors, known as the Executive Committee, have been involved, in my opinion – in my opinion, have been involved in concealing this from the Congress and the American people. And I've been pursuing this matter, and I think the Congress will almost certainly be picking up on this ...

... What my colleagues and I found is that the Patriot was essentially a total failure in the Gulf War of 1991. This is now widely accepted as truth. When we first raised the question, the US Army had told the Congress that the Patriot was 96% effective in the Gulf War of 1991. We found that it almost certainly failed to intercept a single Scud warhead in the entire war. So this was an important result, not so much because of its implications for the war of 1991, since very little was done in terms of military consequence from the incoming Scuds, but it was very important in the political debate that followed, where people were trying to make this falsely represented success into an argument for a complete and comprehensive missile defense that would be global ...

What Putin proposed – and I think it's a fluid proposal – he proposed to make a large early warning radar, that is currently operating in Azerbaijan and looks out over Iran, available to the United States for monitoring Iranian missile tests. Now, this radar is not an ideal radar for monitoring missile defence tests, but it actually would do a pretty good job in assisting a missile defence of the kind that the United States has proposed for Europe in acquiring attacking warheads so that they could be engaged. I'm not arguing this is a good idea. I'm just simply explaining that this radar could play a very useful practical role. So I was in Washington, and all of the people are repeating these arguments that sound plausible but have no basis, that somehow this radar is inappropriate. It's a fine radar for that purpose.'

The arms race may already be with us. Russia has announced new additions to its armoury to overcome the missile shield, and missile defence encourages nuclear states to enlarge their arsenals so as to keep their deterrent effective. It can therefore be accused of being responsible for contravening the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Ballistic Missile Defence is not mentioned in the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), or European Union Strategies on Security or Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Secretary General of the Council of the European Union, Javier Solana, has said that the EU has no plans to participate in a US anti-missile system but that its member states are free to join if they wish. However, members may consider that the relevance of the issue to the whole of Europe would suggest that Poland and the Czech Republic should at least consult with other member states before making a deal with the United States.

So how will this situation develop? Will European Union member states continue to develop their own missile defence systems individually within the framework of the Nato/US proposals? If so, then it appears that the European Union has accepted by default that Iran is a threat to European security. This surely is too important an issue to be decided in such a way? It will have major consequences in terms of European security and Middle East policies. There needs to be a much more serious and prolonged debate.

We should also not forget the problems associated with hosting US bases. The UK experience can inform the Czech and Polish governments that they are very unlikely to have control over launching procedure decisions. The 500 or so US staff to be employed will not be subject to Polish or Czech law. It is clear that the majority of the citizens (more than 60 per cent) of these two countries, especially those that live near the proposed sites, do not want the bases.

From a future international perspective, any European systems integrated into US missile defence could eventually be used to target space-based interceptors which the Pentagon is keen to develop. Do we in Europe really want to be involved in the weaponisation of space? In 2005, Canada withdrew cooperation with US missile defence because its citizens considered it a first step to the weaponisation of space.

The Alternatives

Participants at an International Conference against the Militarization of Europe, which was held in Prague on 5 May, put their names to a declaration which included the words:

‘The governments of Poland and the Czech Republic ... risk ... jeopardising the present framework of international agreements on nuclear non-proliferation and conventional arms control throughout the world, but especially in Europe. What we really need is disarmament as a precondition to peace and genuine human security. To face the impending ecological crisis we need international cooperation and trust, not confrontation.’

The people of Europe have high expectations of their governments. Extending missile defence to European Nato allies may seem logical to some, but it will

mean that diplomacy and multilateral arms control are sacrificed to the unilateral use of force – as was the case in Iraq. Clearly, the developing US agenda of missile defence does not fit with the cooperative security model that European governments support. There are other ways.

The statement to the Preparatory Committee for the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference by the European Union's Ambassador includes the following:

‘The European Union attaches a clear priority to the negotiations without precondition in the Conference on Disarmament, of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other explosive devices, as a means to strengthen disarmament and non-proliferation. It constitutes a priority that waits to be seized.’

European Union countries must seize it and encourage others to do the same. If we are really concerned about nuclear weapons proliferation we must pursue with increased vigour a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, develop new international monitoring systems, and abide by and strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If we are worried about ballistic missiles we can negotiate a new Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty or a missile test ban, and work for missile-free zones. If we are troubled about the weaponisation of space we can work harder for more cooperative agreements for the use of space, a new Outer Space Treaty, and a ban on space weapons. We could make a real attempt to rid the world once and for all from the threat of nuclear annihilation by seriously pursuing a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

But agreements must be effective. The Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, agreed in November 2002, established both international norms against proliferation and modest confidence building measures, and has attracted a great deal of diplomatic support. However, much more effort is needed to turn it into a set of legally binding obligations and to provide real inducements to states such as North Korea and Iran to abandon missile development. Without these, the Code will have little effect.

In the 2003 European Union document entitled ‘A Secure Europe in a Better World, European Security Strategy’, we find the following:

‘In contrast to the massive visible threat in the Cold War, none of the new threats is purely military; nor can any be tackled by purely military means. Each requires a mixture of instruments.’

Missile Defence is an example of an instrument applied too late. There is a danger that if a convincing defence against missiles did exist, we would put too much faith in that and not enough effort in preventing situations getting to the stage where it might be deployed.

The world is looking to the European Union for inspiration – the threat of war between traditional enemies in Europe has been eradicated in a generation. This is a tremendous accomplishment. By building a wall around Europe we would be resorting to the politics of the past. We should be proud of our achievements and

engage with states outside the European Union to build mutual trust and security. Indeed, if we are to survive as a civilization, as a species, even as a planet, we need to learn how to develop technologies for a positive future and tolerate cultural differences. This is our greatest challenge and to fail is unthinkable.

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