Ballistic Missile Defense: Another Bad Idea Whose Time Has Come?

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The recent furor over a balanced budget in the United States overshadowed what was a potentially more consequential debate concerning the development and deployment of ballistic missile defenses. A provision in the 1996 Defense Authorization Act requiring deployment of a national missile defense system by the year 2003, part of the Republican Party’s “Contract With America,” elicited a Clinton administration veto. After some posturing, the provision was removed. The initiative, however, is likely to reemerge as a major security issue for the upcoming U.S. presidential campaign. It was the only defense issue raised in the Republican response to the president’s State of the Union Address and has since been introduced as free-standing legislation entitled the “Defend America Act.” However, neither electoral politics nor pending legislation are likely to resolve the larger security questions raised by the deployment of ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems at either the theater or the national level.

Acknowledging the issue to be “emotional and ideological,” David Denoon sets out to clarify this sometimes arcane subject in Ballistic Missile Defense in the Post–Cold War Era. He analyzes the historical concentration on offensive systems and the mutual vulnerability that supported strategic nuclear deterrence during the Cold War. His analysis also usefully dissects the debate surrounding Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative and examines the contemporary linkages between theater missile defense and the prospect for a national missile defense. Denoon’s purpose is to “lay out the main variables that Americans should consider in evaluating the economic aspects of BMD” (p. 153).

On balance, however, Denoon seems less interested in laying out economic concerns than in advocating early deployment of BMD systems. He concludes that: “The U.S. could benefit today from having an effective, thin National Missile Defense and upgraded Theater Missile Defenses” (p. 181). The latter he characterizes as “an immediate need” and the former as “a reasonable catastrophic insurance” (p. 181). As the transition from investigation to advocacy becomes more evident, Denoon’s analysis begins to look more like a position paper, and his argument becomes less persuasive.

Denoon systematically reviews the conditions that make the contemporary issue of BMD so complex and so perplexing for U.S. policy. The spread of theater-level ballistic missile capability, particularly but not exclusively in the Third World, poses a demonstrable threat that justifies development of an effective theater missile defense capability. This need was evidenced by the SCUD attacks and Patriot deployments during the Gulf War. As the regional ballistic missile threat increases, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, so will the technology required for an effective theater missile defense. For example, improved sensors, such as those envisioned
for the satellite-based "Brilliant Eyes" system, will be needed for targeting defensive systems and for discriminating between warheads and decoys. Similarly, the speed at which interceptors fly to their target will need to be increased. Developing and deploying new systems with these capabilities will necessarily impinge on the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) regime put in place during the Cold War and held in place by such post–Cold War arms control negotiations as START I and START II. Yet, renegotiating the ABM regime, which is bound to happen sooner or later, promises to launch a major reconceptualization of the security environment from one that is offensively oriented to one that is defense-dominant and technology-intensive.

Denoon approaches the BMD dilemma from two principal perspectives. The first is the evolution of U.S. strategic doctrine. He sees the continuing attachment to offensive over defensive systems—the deterrence paradigm—as a function of a largely bipolar strategic nuclear relationship. Because deterrence is clearly less compelling in the post–Cold War world, he contends that this attachment is no longer supportable. Therefore, it is time to shift to a defensive orientation.

The second perspective focuses on the rising theater ballistic missile threat. Denoon cogently makes the case that, given this threat, deploying an effective theater missile defense is critical—all the more so given the regional strategy that both the Bush and Clinton administrations have adopted. Once the requirement for an effective theater missile defense is accepted, the increasing blurring of the technological distinctions between an effective theater defense and a national missile defense, according to Denoon, necessitates a further shift in thinking toward defensive systems.

The problem is that such a prospect engages a tangle of issues for the overall U.S. security posture and promises to produce considerable political fallout internationally. On these matters Denoon’s analysis is less informative. Four such issues are particularly relevant.

First is the question of strategic change. Security specialists generally recognize that the use of the deterrence paradigm, developed for broad strategic situations, to contend with conventional conflict at the regional level is theoretically problematic (George and Smoke 1989; Cimbala 1991:59–65). However, the same holds for a defensive paradigm. Transposing a defensive paradigm developed for theater defenses to the higher level of overall defense strategy is equally problematic (Cimbala 1991:177–252). Denoon does not confront this problem.

Second is the operational context. Denoon dismisses the utility of offensive strikes against theater ballistic missile sites based on the failure of such actions in the Gulf War. Advances in operational intelligence systems, which enhance strike capability against theater ballistic missiles (Shaver and Mesic 1995), however, parallel the advances in theater missile defense systems upon which Denoon’s argument relies. Some of these operational intelligence systems have been deployed and are operating with apparent success in Bosnia (although not against ballistic missile systems).

Third are the weapons themselves. The determining factor that has made theater missile defense critical is the addition of weapons of mass destruction to short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Once that element is introduced, leaving aside its implications for the battlefield, discussion of a defensive system takes on a different meaning (Falkenworth 1994/95:144). Technologically, the question of whether such a system will work becomes a question of whether it will work perfectly. Otherwise, extremely difficult political questions about who will or will not be protected are raised.

Finally, the larger question of the future of the ABM regime must be addressed. This question is treated by Denoon as a complicating rather than a defining factor.
Yet, in disclaiming ABM as a remnant of the Cold War, Denoon tends to disregard the strategic culture that the ABM regime represents. For example, he asserts that the “passive defenses” maintained to protect retaliatory systems under strategic nuclear deterrence constitute a tacit acceptance of defense. “We have a strange situation where the commitment to ensuring the success of offensive weapons goes uncontested, whereas the efforts at missile defense are considered heretical” (p. 96). But there is a profound doctrinal difference between ensuring the survivability of retaliatory systems and a defensive posture intended to negate such systems. More important are the considerable political and economic costs that such a doctrinal shift would entail.

It is evident that, as it has grown increasingly politicized, BMD has also grown increasingly central to decisions about U.S. strategic doctrine in the post–Cold War period. This centrality makes the issue of BMD more than simply a partisan debate over the budget. Denoon offers criteria for evaluating the entire issue: “If BMDs are to be deployed, they should meet four criteria: (i) promote strategic stability, (ii) be survivable against direct attack, (iii) provide greater flexibility in U.S. foreign and defense policy, and (iv) be sufficiently effective that the present value of their protection will be greater than the cost of their procurement” (p. 181). But the key doctrinal and political variables supporting these criteria are rather superficially addressed. In accepting that “greater use of BMDs” would result in “changes in military policy,” for example, Denoon demurs: “There is not space here to elaborate these in depth, but the changes would be related to hardware, doctrine and strategy” (p. 179). Indeed they would.

Decisions about BMD should follow from decisions in the larger strategic debate—being conducted within both the foreign policy and defense communities—regarding the proper course for the United States in the post–Cold War world (Art 1991; Cimbala 1991; Tarr 1991). It would be just as unwise to consider BMD apart from this debate as it would be to fail to confront the BMD question as essential to it. A commitment to deploy now, as Denoon advocates, would likely prove technologically constraining vis-à-vis future threats emerging from more sophisticated theater missile systems. It might also prove politically constraining vis-à-vis a negotiated nonproliferation regime. Prudence dictates both preparedness and an economy of commitment, which for the time being is the posture of the U.S. Defense Department.

References