



Missile Defenses: Dangerous Obstacle to Disarmament

*A Briefing Paper from
International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War*

The Bush administration's obsession with Star Wars-style missile defenses against nuclear attacks by so-called rogue nations is inconsistent with its professed goal to promote national security and indicates a continuing addiction to nuclear weapons. Mr. Bush has called for an expansive, multi-layered missile defense system that, contrary to the administration's claims, would increase the dangers of nuclear war, start a new arms race, fuel proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world, exacerbate military and political confrontations between the US and its adversaries, further alienate the US from many of its allies, and squander hundreds of billions of dollars - all for a system that cannot deliver the protection it promises.

In short, missile defenses are a dangerous, wastefully expensive, high-tech duck and cover scheme that cynically appeals to the US public's legitimate desire for protection against attack by nuclear missiles. But just as telling school children to hide under desks and telling their parents to build fallout shelters perpetuated the myth that citizens could survive nuclear war in decades past, so will missile defenses lull people into a false sense of security. The use of nuclear weapons will become more likely, not less likely, in the perverse logic of nuclear war planning.

If the US were truly committed to international security, it would ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and fulfill its commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to eliminate nuclear weapons. It would continue the framework negotiations with North Korea and work to support and improve the safeguards regime that will prevent development of nuclear weapons by other states. Instead, the US plans to pursue an impossible defense fantasy that will actually undermine US and international security.

Administration officials such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who have extensive ties to defense contractors that stand to make hundreds of billions of dollars on this misguided system, argue that the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty is "ancient history." To the contrary, policies that rely on bankrupt Cold War-era notions of national security are the real relics of antiquated thinking. In fact, Bush does not abandon Cold War logic since he plans to maintain a US nuclear force and has reaffirmed the "vital role" of nuclear weapons in US security policy. Rather, he seeks to add a provocative new element to those forces, driven by big money and ideology.

Health Consequences of Nuclear Weapons Use

As physicians who have worked for more than 20 years to make prevention of nuclear war the cornerstone of international security policy, we understand in terrifying detail the consequences of a nuclear explosion over a populated area.

According to the most recent study of the Natural Resources Defense Council,* a one-megaton nuclear weapon exploded over New York City would kill 1.25 million people within minutes and would injure another 2.65 million. Physicians would be helpless in the face of such devastation.

As doctors who have studied and, in some cases, have even treated the victims of the atomic bombs dropped by the US on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we share the profound desire to protect people from the medical and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons. For that very

reason, we believe that only the elimination of nuclear weapons from the world's arsenals can offer any meaningful protection from those consequences.

Consequences of Deploying Missile Defenses

Every missile defense scheme that has been proposed to date, including the original Star Wars proposals of the Reagan administration and the land-based interceptors favored by President Clinton, have been irrevocably flawed. The new missile defense network proposed by the Bush administration, with components on land, at sea, and in space, will increase the risk of nuclear war for the following reasons:

- Missile defenses will provoke other nuclear weapons states to counter what they see as a threat to their own security by building more nuclear weapons rather than by honoring their treaty commitments. In particular, it will likely spur Russia to abandon proposed cuts under the START II agreement. It will provide another reason for China to develop its relatively small arsenal, which in turn will add fuel to the already heated nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan because India will react directly to arms buildups in China, and Pakistan will follow India.

- Abandoning the ABM Treaty, as the US administration has now clearly said it will do in order to deploy missile defenses, will undermine the foundation for reductions in nuclear arms.

- In their efforts to persuade Russian leaders to accept US missile defenses, US negotiators have encouraged Russia to maintain large numbers of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. They have said, in effect, "Russia doesn't have to worry about our missile shield because it is not meant for you, and you can always keep enough nuclear weapons at the ready to overwhelm it." This ensures that large numbers of nuclear weapons will be a permanent part of the landscape and increases the likelihood of accidental launch or miscalculation. De-alerting nuclear weapons while we work toward their elimination is essential to preventing a nuclear catastrophe. The maintenance of thousands of nuclear weapons ready to fire at a few minutes notice makes no sense in the world today, and puts us all in very real danger 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

- Previous US missile defense proposals have motivated China to state that, in addition to increasing its nuclear arsenal, it will withdraw promises to stop exporting dangerous military technologies. In other words, the very countries that the US has identified as threats to which it must mount defenses would become even more threatening, from a military perspective, if the US pursues an expansive and multi-layered missile defense system.

- Despite the name, missile defenses are not just defensive systems. The US Space Command's long term proposal, called "Vision for 2020," is a plan for the US to weaponize space for its own military and commercial purposes and to deny access to space to other states. Not only is this a breach of the Outer Space Treaty, it reveals missile defenses for what they truly are: an early phase of the militarization of space and, as such, part of an unprecedented, global offensive system masquerading as defense.

The nations of the world -- especially the impoverished countries of the global South -- are struggling to find the resources to provide health care, education, environmental protection, and a decent quality of life for their citizens. Even in the US, affordable health care is beyond the reach of millions of people. For the US administration to propose spending hundreds of billions of dollars on a weapon system that, at best, will offer only partial protection against the least plausible kinds of nuclear threat, while at the same time cutting the budgets for health care and other essential social needs at home and abroad, is morally reprehensible.

Motives and Trends

To be fair, the US administration has also proposed substantial unilateral reductions in its nuclear arsenals, and these are certainly a welcome step in the right direction. The ongoing commitment to a "credible deterrent," however, demonstrates that the administration has not moved beyond Cold War policies, as it claims. Like the missile defense proposals to which unilateral reductions have unfortunately been linked, the emerging security policies of the Bush administration reflect an

isolationist approach to security that will hinder international cooperation in responding to threats, especially the nuclear threat. The nations of the world - nuclear and non-nuclear alike - will have more confidence in reductions that take place within the framework of international law.

The US administration has called for a "flexible" nuclear arsenal. This is nothing more than code for the development and production of small, low-yield nuclear weapons (so-called mini-nukes) that the US military wishes to use in regional conflicts - especially as a counter to chemical and biological weapons. This dangerous shift in policy could open a floodgate of global "mini-nuke" proliferation, could result in nuclear conflict for the first time since 1945, and would unquestionably lower the threshold for the use of all nuclear weapons.

The indication of US intention to abandon the ABM Treaty reflects a disturbing trend of walking away from international commitments. Recent moves by the US, including refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, withdrawal from the framework negotiations with North Korea, efforts to undermine the International Criminal Court, refusal to sign the Mine Ban Treaty, and rejection of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, point to complete disregard of other countries' concerns. There is no "technical fix" to international security concerns. The only way to pursue global security in an increasingly interdependent world is through cooperative arrangements and confidence-building measures based on the principles of irreversibility, transparency, reciprocity, and accountability.

IPPNW unequivocally condemns US schemes to deploy missile defenses in a world that would then be made forever insecure by the presence of nuclear weapons. A defense policy that relies on reacting to an enemy attack only at the very last minute, rather than cooperating on a shared goal of removing the threat entirely, is no defense at all.

Prescription: Abolition of Nuclear Weapons

The global elimination of nuclear weapons is the only realistic way to be safe from the possibility of nuclear attack. Missile defenses are no substitute for increased efforts to prevent proliferation, to implement the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, to negotiate and implement a cutoff in fissile material production, and to implement the 13-step action plan endorsed at the conclusion of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. IPPNW believes that these steps should lead toward the global elimination of nuclear weapons through a verifiable international treaty. The model for such a treaty -- the Nuclear Weapons Convention -- has been drafted by a coalition of prominent legal and scientific organizations and is an official discussion document of the United Nations. A major focus of IPPNW's work is the promotion of this treaty to ban nuclear weapons.

The US, the other nuclear weapon states, and the balance of the 187 countries that are parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty made a commitment during the 2000 NPT review to an "unequivocal undertaking" to complete the process of nuclear disarmament. Missile defenses such as those pursued by the Bush administration are not only a distraction from that goal, they are a fundamental obstacle in its path.

** Source: "The US Nuclear War Plan: A Time for Change." Natural Resources Defense Council, June 2001.*