



Frequently Asked Questions About National Missile Defense

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

Q. What is National Missile Defense (NMD)?

A. NMD is a proposed military system that would, in theory, enable the United States to detect and shoot down long-range ballistic missiles that could be armed with nuclear warheads aimed at its territory. Such a system has been researched for decades and received a huge infusion of funding when President Ronald Reagan proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative [SDI, also known as Star Wars] in 1983. NMD has received renewed emphasis under George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who want to deploy the first unproven components of a missile defense system as soon as possible. More than \$90 billion has already been spent by the US military in pursuit of a ballistic missile defense system since the early days of SDI research and development.

Q. Wouldn't the ability to shoot down incoming missiles be a good thing?

A. NMD is being pursued in a complex, imperfect world that makes its deployment extremely dangerous. Indeed, deployment of NMD would actually increase the risks of nuclear war while providing only illusory protection for US citizens from the medical and environmental catastrophe that would be the consequence of such a war.

In order to deploy an NMD system, the US would have to break the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty signed with the former Soviet Union (and binding on Russia) more than 30 years ago. The consequences of the US unilaterally breaking the ABM Treaty would be profound, casting doubt on the reliability of the US as a treaty partner across the board.

Q. The Bush Administration says the ABM Treaty is no longer needed and calls it a relic of the Cold War. Is this true?

A. No. The ABM Treaty is part of the fabric of international arms control agreements, negotiated over decades, that seek to limit nuclear arms and, eventually, assure their elimination. Arms control agreements such as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the SALT and START treaties have reduced the number of nuclear weapons from the highest Cold War level of about 60,000 to the current level of about 30,000. By breaking out of the regime of treaties negotiated as binding international law, the Bush Administration will set the world on a dangerous course -- one that could lead to nuclear anarchy.

Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation (NPT) Treaty obligates the US, Russia, and the other nuclear weapons states to pursue the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. More than 160 non nuclear nations that are party to the NPT agreed to foreswear any attempt to acquire their own nuclear weapons, based in part on assurances of complete nuclear disarmament by the nuclear powers. NMD not only casts doubt on US willingness to abide by international treaties, it undermines the goal of the NPT by provoking build-ups of nuclear arsenals by other countries such as Russia and China as they seek the ability to overcome defenses deployed by the US. Russia has threat-

ened to add more warheads to its strategic nuclear missiles and to build more tactical nuclear weapons. China has indicated that it would increase its relatively small nuclear arsenal in response to NMD.

Q. What about the recent announcement by Presidents Bush and Putin that they would reduce the US and Russian arsenals of strategic nuclear weapons?

A. The November 2001 announcement that both countries would reduce their stockpiles of long range nuclear weapons by two-thirds within ten years is certainly good news. Both sides now have about 7,000 strategic weapons each, and the new levels would be around 1,700 to 2,200. While any reductions are a step in the right direction, these unilateral decisions cannot be verified and can be reversed just as easily as they were made because they will not be codified in a treaty.

It is important to remember that even reductions to 1,700 would leave enough destructive power to wipe out both the US and Russia several times over and could possibly trigger a nuclear winter that would devastate the rest of the world.

Moreover, linking reductions to a missile defense system would create a formidable barrier to complete nuclear disarmament, since Russia and China would see their national security as dependent upon permanent possession of enough nuclear weapons to overwhelm US defenses, thereby protecting them from a "shielded" US first strike.

Q. If NMD increases the risks of nuclear war, what would be the consequences of such a war on the US and the rest of the world?

A. It is impossible to grasp the magnitude of the human and ecological disaster that would follow in the wake of even a "limited" nuclear war. According to the most recent study of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a 1-megaton nuclear weapon exploded over New York City would kill 1.25 million people within minutes and would injure another 2.65 million. Using the NRDC data, researchers at Physicians for Social Responsibility determined that an attack on the US by 2,000 Russian warheads primarily directed at military targets in sparsely populated areas would cause more than 50 million deaths and nearly 10 million injuries.

Were cities to be targeted instead, as a strategic decision to counter an NMD, 500 Russian nuclear weapons could cause more than 130 million deaths and 8 million injuries. Those not fatally injured would be left to face radiation disease and severe injuries from the effects of blast, heat, and fire with virtually no medical help. All essential infrastructure, including hospitals and clinics would be destroyed. Food and water would be contaminated. Epidemics would rage. Instead of protecting lives, NMD could make nuclear devastation even more probable for tens of millions of Americans.

Q. What about North Korea and Iraq? Maybe NMD can't work against hundreds of incoming warheads, but can't we protect ourselves against one or two missiles fired by a "rogue state?"

A. The threat from small countries such as North Korea and Iraq is being exaggerated to sell the US public a National Missile Defense system. According to Senator Tom Daschle, it is the "most expensive possible response to the least likely threat."

Other than the nuclear weapon states, only India, Israel, Japan, and Saudi Arabia have long-range missiles. According to experts from the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) and MIT, none of the so-called rogue states has operational missiles of ranges greater than 600 kilometers. Iraq's missiles -- none of them long range -- are being dismantled under UN Security Council Resolution 687. North Korea has some unreliable Scud missiles that could reach South Korea and has been developing the Nodong with a reported range of 1,000-1,300 km, but according to the same UCS MIT experts, the only successful test flight of the Nodong was 500 km and took place almost 10 years ago. Concerns about one other North Korean missile -- the Taepo Dong 2 -- that, if developed, might one

day be able to reach western Alaska, have been minimized because of formidable technological hurdles and the country's desperate economic situation.

The US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) has concluded that no developing country, including North Korea, will be able to deploy a missile that can reach the continental United States for at least 15 years. Moreover, North Korea has indicated its willingness to limit its missile program and has halted all nuclear weapon development under recently completed agreements with the US during the Clinton Administration. These initiatives, along with recent attempts at normalizing relations with South Korea, represent a much more constructive path toward removing the North Korean missile threat than does an unreliable, vastly expensive missile defense system.

Q. Even if the threat is small, why be so concerned about NMD? Isn't it just a defensive system?

A. While NMD may look like a defensive system to many Americans, to those who fear US nuclear weapons might one day be used against them, missile defenses look much more threatening. Were the US to deploy even a partially effective antimissile system, its political and military leaders might no longer fear retaliation for a US nuclear attack. As the rest of the world remembers only too well, the US remains the only country to have used nuclear weapons -- in 1945, on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Q. Will NMD lead to the militarization of space?

A. There is a reason why NMD is also called Star Wars. It is becoming clear to the international community that NMD is only a small part of a far more ambitious agenda for domination of space by the US military. As The New York Times Sunday Magazine reported on August 7, 2001, the US Air Force's Strategic Master Plan states the goal of bringing military power to space this way: "To maintain space superiority, we must have the ability to control the 'high ground' of space. To do so, we must be able to operate freely in space, deny the use of space to our adversaries, protect ourselves from attack in and through space, and develop an NMD capability."

The Pentagon calls this policy "Full Spectrum Dominance," giving other nations legitimate cause for concern about their own national security should the US succeed in deploying NMD as a way of advancing its military foothold in space. To address those concerns, other nations are likely to seek ways to compete with the US in space militarily, and to strengthen their nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons capabilities.

"According to the Strategic Master Plan," says the Times, "NMD is but one part of a triad of technologies -- along with improved space surveillance and antisatellite offensive weaponry -- that, the Air Force hopes, will lead to total 'space control.'" Or, as George Friedman, author of *The Future of War*, has argued, NMD is a "Trojan horse" for the real issue: the coming weaponization of space. Thus, NMD raises fundamental questions about whether the future will be one in which space becomes the new nuclear battleground, or one in which nations seek to reduce the threat of nuclear war by moving towards the elimination of nuclear weapons on Earth and in space.

Q. How much would NMD cost?

A. Estimates vary widely, but most are in the \$60-100 billion range for a limited NMD system (on top of more than \$90 billion already spent since 1983 on ballistic missile defense). But such estimates almost always turn out to be unrealistically low. In fact, a new study by the Council for a Livable World sets the likely price tag at \$273 billion. That's a lot of money for a system that is unlikely to work and that seeks to defend against a relatively remote threat.

Instead of spending tax dollars on military systems that won't make the world safer, the money would be much better spent meeting real human needs. For the same money the Bush Administration proposes to spend on NMD, we could eradicate the six common diseases -- polio, diphtheria, pertussis,

measles, tetanus, and tuberculosis -- that take the lives of some 40,000 children every day in the developing world -- and turn the tide on the global AIDS epidemic.

A recent analysis by Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities shows that spending about half of the "low-end" of what NMD is projected to cost -- or \$47 billion -- would provide health insurance for all uninsured children in the US, provide Head Start to all eligible kids and provide Early Head Start to all eligible two-year olds, reduce the federal debt each year, repair and rebuild US schools, and reduce grades 1-3 class size to 15 students per teacher.

Q. Do America's allies support its NMD program?

A. There has been remarkably strong opposition to NMD not just from US adversaries but from its allies as well. Enormous diplomatic and economic pressure is being brought to bear on US allies to support the program. Economic incentives (through contracts to non-US vendors) are often difficult to resist -- even US labor organizations, which are typically unsupportive of Republican presidents, are joining the pro-NMD forces because of the jobs and wages associated with such an enormous government program. Nevertheless, many US allies are deeply concerned about the impact of NMD on the existing strategic balance and other international arms control treaties, its implications for increasing the risks of nuclear war and the possibility that it will ignite a new offensive nuclear arms race, and what they perceive as US insensitivity to the concerns of the international community.

Q. But isn't NMD better than living with the threat of mutually assured destruction? Shouldn't we be trying to find some way out of that threat?

A. Yes, we should seek a world in which nations, indeed humankind, is not held hostage to the threat of nuclear annihilation. But NMD cannot accomplish that task and will, in fact, make it more difficult to find real, lasting solutions to the nuclear nightmare. There are several reasons. First, NMD is technologically unproven, though the Bush Administration is eager to deploy bits and pieces of a system years, perhaps decades, before anyone knows whether the whole thing can be made to work as intended. Second, missile defenses could be easily overwhelmed by countermeasures such as a large number of simultaneously fired missiles and decoys designed to divert the "kill-vehicle" from the missile. Third, by increasing strategic instability, NMD raises the likelihood that nuclear weapons would be used in a crisis. Fourth, missile defenses, even if they worked perfectly, could not defend against the much greater likelihood that an enemy determined to strike the US with a nuclear weapon would do so by placing the device in a suitcase or on a truck or a barge. Since the US could easily determine from where a missile was launched, and could unleash massive retaliation against the country of origin, it is far more likely that other means of delivery would be used -- means that would make identifying the source of the weapon much more difficult.

Q. Then how do we get out from under the shadow of nuclear destruction?

A. There is no technological solution to the threat of nuclear war. We must look to diplomatic and political solutions if we are finally to put the constant threat of nuclear annihilation behind us. As difficult as it will be to negotiate and enforce, an international treaty abolishing or banning nuclear weapons is the only answer. The principle that no nation will threaten others with nuclear weapons must be enshrined as an international norm. Yes, there are risks in such an approach, and there will never be an absolute guarantee that a nation would not circumvent a nuclear weapons convention. But those risks must be weighed against the enormous risks we assume every day as we depend on a complex, highly fallible system of people and technology to keep the 30,000 nuclear weapons now in the world's arsenals from being used. Some 5,000 remain on high-alert status -- ready to be launched at a moment's notice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Several critical interim steps will be needed on the road to a treaty banning nuclear weapons. First, nuclear weapons on high alert must be removed from that dangerous status. Second, there must be further, deep reductions in nuclear arsenals. This means that the START 2 Treaty, signed more than

a decade ago but ratified by Russia on the condition that the US not deploy NMD, must enter into force and be implemented to be followed by additional reductions. Third, the US must ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). More than 40 years in the making, President Clinton signed the CTBT but the US Senate refused to ratify it (and the Bush Administration now opposes it). The CTBT has long been seen as a critical test of political will to reduce and then eliminate nuclear weapons. Fourth, the US and other signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty must make good on their commitment to the abolition of nuclear weapons, described by those countries as an "unequivocal undertaking" to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. All of the steps mentioned above are essential to "making good" on the promises contained in the NPT.

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