



Star Wars Revisited

By William D. Hartung and Michelle Ciarrocca

Some dreams never die. Since March 1983, when President Reagan first introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative—Star Wars—as a way to render nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete,” the U.S. has spent more than \$60 billion attempting to develop various approaches to ballistic missile defense. Enthusiasm for deploying a full-scale shield against incoming ballistic missiles waned by the late 1980s in the face of widespread technical failures, cost issues, and the initiation of the first significant reductions of U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals. But spurred on by the efforts of a coalition of Star Wars “true believers” and self-interested weapons contractors, missile defense programs have undergone a miraculous political revival in the 1990s. In its latest incarnation—National Missile Defense (NMD)—the program has been scaled back from

Reagan’s vision of a multitiered defense that could fend off thousands of Soviet nuclear delivery vehicles to the seemingly more realistic goal of defending all 50 states from an accidental missile launch from Russia or China, or from attack by a so-called “rogue state” like Iraq or North Korea.

During its first term the Clinton administration shifted Star Wars research funding toward Theater Missile Defense (TMD) programs designed to deal with regional threats. Missile defense programs still received \$3 to \$4 billion per year in R&D funding, but the political momentum toward deploying defenses against long-range missiles—a

move that would violate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, one of the cornerstones of the existing nuclear arms control regime—appeared to have been broken.

But the prospects for moving forward on attempts to construct a defense against long-range missiles increased in 1994 when the Republicans took control of the House of Representatives and introduced their “Contract with America.” The ten-point platform included a plank that stated it should be U.S. policy to deploy a national missile defense system. Star Wars enthusiasts, such as then House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Sen. Thad Cochran (R-MS), garnered enough support to force the Clinton administration to enter into the so-called “3+3” policy—three years of intensive research followed by a decision on whether to move toward deployment of a system in the next three-year period.

Missile defense advocates received another boost in the summer of 1998 when a congressionally mandated panel, chaired by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, asserted that the emerging ballistic missile threat posed by “rogue states” was “broader, more mature, and evolving more rapidly” than had been reported in previous estimates by the intelligence community. Rumsfeld’s findings—combined with reports of new missile tests by Iran and North Korea in late 1998 and sensational charges of Chinese nuclear espionage during the early months of 1999—transformed the climate in which missile defense issues were debated on Capitol Hill. President Clinton’s January 1999 announcement that he would more than double NMD funding to \$10.5 billion over the next six years, set the stage for subsequent House and Senate votes declaring it the U.S. government policy to deploy a national defense system “as soon as technologically feasible.” President Clinton signed the bill into law on July 23, 1999. In the spring of 2000, the administration’s determination to amend the ABM treaty to allow for deployment of a limited NMD system emerged as the major sticking point in talks between the United States and Russia about the prospects for seeking deep cuts in existing nuclear arsenals as part of talks on a third round of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).

Although the political fortunes of missile defenses have changed dramatically, the technical, economic, and strategic drawbacks of deploying such a system remain. “Hit-to-kill” technologies that would allow U.S. missiles to intercept incoming missiles have failed in the vast majority of tests conducted over the past decade. Larger problems, such as dealing with hundreds or thousands of countermeasures and decoy warheads, have barely been addressed. Meanwhile, major components of the overall missile defense effort have experienced massive cost overruns. And U.S. pronouncements about deploying defenses have sparked bitter denunciations by officials in Beijing and Moscow, setting the stage for what UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warned “could well lead to a new arms race.” Russia has threatened to stop reducing its nuclear arsenal if the U.S. withdraws from the ABM treaty and deploys an NMD system. In response, U.S. officials have suggested modifying the ABM treaty to allow the deployment of a limited national missile defense system, but so far Moscow has been cool to the offer.

The Clinton administration announced that it would decide in the fall of 2000 whether to deploy an NMD system. However, critics like eminent physicist Richard Garwin assert that instead of opting for deployment, “the best way to defend against possible attack is to prevent countries like North Korea, Iran, and Iraq from getting these missiles in the first place.”

Key Points

- President Clinton is scheduled to make a decision within the next six months on whether to take the first steps toward deploying a National Missile Defense (NMD) system.
- The administration’s proposal for a revision in the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty of 1972 has become the major sticking point in U.S.-Russian talks about implementing deep cuts in their nuclear arsenals.
- More than \$60 billion spent on missile defense projects since 1983 has produced precious little beyond cost overruns and technical failures.

Despite the fact that U.S. ballistic missile defense efforts have yet to produce a single workable device, they are the most expensive weapons program in the Pentagon budget, at over \$4 billion per year—and growing. This year President Clinton added an additional \$2.2 billion to the NMD budget, bringing the total over the next five years to \$12.7 billion and the projected costs for the overall system continue to increase. The Pentagon has estimated that the total life-cycle cost for a single-site system employing 100 interceptors would cost \$30.2 billion, whereas the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that an expanded phase II system would cost close to \$60 billion.

In total, only 21 tests are planned for the National Missile Defense system. By contrast, the Patriot missile system, which performed far worse than advertised in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and has a far less demanding mission than NMD, succeeded in 17 of 17 tests before being deployed. As John Pike of the Federation of American Scientists has noted, NMD is the most complex system the Pentagon has ever attempted to build, yet under current plans a decision is scheduled to be made based on far fewer tests than any other major system in the history of Pentagon procurement.

Test results notwithstanding, the overall program has been described as “high risk” and a “rush to failure” by a number of respected missile defense experts. The Pentagon’s Director of Operational Testing and Evaluation released his annual report in February 2000, and pointed out that “the aggressive schedule established for the NMD Program presents a major challenge. The NMD program will have to compress the work of 10 to 12 years into 8 or less years... This pattern has historically resulted in a negative effect on virtually every troubled DOD development program.”

A panel headed by former Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Larry Welch, released a report last November highly critical of the NMD program. The Welch report argued that the failures of NMD were not the result of “random” malfunctions, but an indication of systematic flaws in design, planning, and management, stating that, “Instead of unusual clarity, there is unusual fragmentation and confusion about authority and responsibility.”

Yet even if NMD were managed with unparalleled efficiency, there are more fundamental problems. The element of speed and surprise enjoyed by an attacker, combined with the sheer destructiveness of nuclear weapons and the ability to create relatively cheap decoys that can confuse and overwhelm even the most sophisticated defensive system, make the prospects for an effective technological defense against even a limited nuclear attack extremely daunting. Although the mission of today’s NMD system has been dramatically reduced from that of its Star Wars predecessor, it is clear that NMD is no closer to proving itself a viable defense than Reagan’s original dream.

Strangely, NMD advocates want to spend billions on one of the least likely threats to U.S. security—attack by a long-range ballistic missile. Despite all the heat generated by the investigation of alleged Chinese nuclear espionage, headed by Rep. Christopher Cox (R-CA), China still has what investigative journalist Bill Mesler has aptly described as an “aging arsenal of some two dozen single-warhead, liquid-fueled ICBMs” that “more closely

resembles U.S. warhead technology from the 1950s than anything designed in recent decades.” Even if China has made strides toward developing more capable missiles with multiple warheads, Washington’s insistence on deploying an NMD system is highly counterproductive, as it is the one sure way to prod Beijing into building new ballistic missiles in large numbers.

In regard to the threat posed by North Korea—supposedly the impetus behind U.S. missile defense efforts—North Korea is years away from developing a reliable ballistic missile system that could deliver a nuclear warhead to U.S. territory. Also, North Korea has put its missile program on hold to pursue negotiations with the United States. In response, the U.S. has eased some of its trade sanctions and, as Stephen Young of the Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers notes in *Pushing the Limits*, “Successful negotiations with the U.S. could mean the end of both North Korea’s missile development and its exports. There is solid evidence that North Korea seeks this outcome.”

Furthermore, no U.S. adversary would be foolish enough to launch a first strike on the U.S. with a small number of nuclear missiles—whose point of origin can be easily tracked—when the likely result would be a devastating counterattack by thousands of U.S. nuclear warheads. As Robert Walpole, national intelligence officer for strategic and nuclear programs stated, “in the coming years, U.S. territory is probably more likely to be attacked with weapons of mass destruction from non-missile delivery means (most likely from non-state entities) than by missiles.” Non-missile delivery means include anything from a suitcase to a truck bomb or other low-tech “delivery vehicle”—all of which are the methods least effectively deterred by the deployment of a high-tech NMD system.

A change in the direction of U.S. policy will require doing battle with the Star Wars lobby, spearheaded by companies like Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, and TRW, who have been divvying up billions of dollars in missile defense contracts. These four Star Wars contractors have spent more than \$35 million on lobbying and \$6.9 million in campaign contributions since 1997, and have been major contributors to Frank Gaffney’s Center for Security Policy (CSP)—a pro-Star Wars think tank that has worked closely with missile defense advocates on Capitol Hill. Gaffney’s organization has singled out former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—whose 1998 report on missile threats to the U.S. has been used to promote Star Wars deployment—as a “special friend” and the winner of CSP’s coveted “Keeper of the Flame” award for 1998. Although Rumsfeld’s close association with pro-NMD groups like CSP and Empower America call into question his credentials as an objective analyst of the missile threats facing the United States, these connections have rarely been mentioned in discussions of the Rumsfeld report.

Key Problems

- U.S. missile defense technology has yet to prove that it can reliably protect against even a small number of ballistic missiles.
 - The threats that an NMD system is meant to address have been greatly exaggerated.
 - The resurgence of Star Wars has been politically driven, spurred on by intensive lobbying by a network of major weapons contractors and conservative think tanks.
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While Congress and the White House bicker about how quickly to move on an ill-conceived, costly, and unreliable missile defense program, the Clinton administration is squandering valuable time that could be used to promote cooperative measures for the reduction of both U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals. A series of provocative actions

new nuclear weapons designs without conducting underground tests. The Missile Technology Control Regime, an agreement designed to limit the flow of technology needed to build long-range ballistic missiles, should be revised to provide stronger enforcement incentives and should be expanded to include more nations.

Key Recommendations

- The ultimate goal of U.S. policy must be the elimination of all nuclear weapons, for that is the only truly reliable "defense" against the threat of mass destruction.
- Instead of pursuing a costly, unworkable NMD program, the U.S. government should revive efforts to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and pursue deep reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals without preconditions.
- The U.S. should redouble its diplomatic efforts to cap—and ultimately eliminate—nascent nuclear weapons programs in North Korea, Pakistan, and India.
- The U.S. must lead the way in reducing, and finally eliminating, the world's bloated nuclear arsenals by living up to the commitments it signed over 30 years ago in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

toward Russia—from the expansion of NATO, to the bombing of Kosovo without UN authorization, to persistent statements by key U.S. officials about promoting missile defenses and withdrawing from the ABM treaty—have stalled momentum toward U.S.-Russian nuclear weapons reductions and strengthened hard-liners in Moscow who want to increase Russia's reliance on such weapons.

Repairing relations with Russia and taking innovative steps to get U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions back on track should be the top priority of U.S. policymakers. This new approach should include increased funding for the Cooperative Threat Reduction program, which has helped finance the destruction of thousands of Russian nuclear warheads and weapons facilities. Continued reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear forces

through the START process should be emphasized. These agreements have already been instrumental in halving U.S./Russian nuclear stockpiles. START II, which was just recently ratified by the Russian Duma, would reduce the number of active strategic warheads to 3,500. Russian President Vladimir Putin has indicated that he would be willing to reduce Russia's nuclear arsenal a further 1,500 under a START III agreement, but he has conditioned this offer on continued U.S. compliance with the ABM Treaty.

Within the realm of existing agreements, the Clinton administration and its successor should press for ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which was defeated last fall by the Senate despite overwhelming public support for the treaty. U.S. ratification of the CTBT should be pursued concurrently with efforts to cut the Department of Energy's 10-year, \$40 billion subcritical testing program, which would undercut the spirit of the CTBT by giving the U.S. the capability to create

At the regional level, the Clinton administration should meet its long overdue commitments under the nuclear framework agreement with North Korea. When fully implemented, these could scale back and eventually eliminate that nation's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs as part of an overall improvement in U.S.-North Korean economic and political relations. Getting U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions back on track and supporting multilateral efforts toward nuclear abolition would also give the U.S. much greater credibility in promoting wide-ranging security discussions between India and Pakistan aimed at capping and eventually eliminating their nascent nuclear programs.

Ultimately the U.S. should strive for a nuclear weapons-free world by living up to its commitments, signed 30 years ago, under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty "to reduce and eventually eliminate their vast arsenals of nuclear weaponry." As Abdul S. Minty, the South African representative to the UN aptly stated at the review conference of the NPT, "As long as these weapons exist in the arsenal of some, others will aspire to possess them." To this end the U.S. must lead the way. Thus far, the U.S. has lacked the political will to do so and has been a major political obstacle to efforts to prevent regional powers like India and Pakistan from pursuing the development of their own nuclear capabilities.

The continued pursuit of NMD will have far-reaching consequences for the future of arms control and the goal of nuclear abolition. It will mean a false sense of security for Americans and an increased threat of nuclear war for the world. A modest missile defense program of research, in the range of a few hundred million dollars per year focused primarily on improving the performance of a medium-range defensive shield to replace the current Patriot system, is justified as a way to limit the potential damage posed by the use (or threat of use) of medium-range missiles. But the main focus of the U.S. government's energy and resources should be on preventive measures, which are far more effective at reducing the threat of nuclear war than any pie-in-the-sky defensive schemes.

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