
Now May We Please Defend Ourselves?

Robert Kagan & Gary Schmitt

IT WAS major news when India and Pakistan conducted underground nuclear tests in early May; it should not have been. At least twenty countries, in the words of a 1995 report by the CIA, "already have or may be developing weapons of mass destruction and ballistic-missile delivery systems." As the cases of India and Pakistan attest, not all these countries are adversaries of the United States, although in the Middle East or South Asia, where nearly half are located, domestic instability could change their orientation rapidly. Among them, however, are some of the most dangerous and unpredictable regimes on earth. According to the CIA, five such regimes—North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria—"already have or are developing ballistic missiles that could threaten U.S. interests."

Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether the United States already faces or will soon face the prospect of a missile attack against its own territory. What should be obvious today is how limited is our ability to predict the answer. Intelligence estimates have proved wildly inaccurate in the past—compare our severe underestimation of Saddam Hussein's weapons programs before the

Gulf war with what we learned during and after it. North Korea has already deployed the No Dong-1 missile, capable of threatening Japan and U.S. forces in Northeast Asia, and within less than two years Iran may deploy the Shahab-3, capable of striking targets throughout the Middle East; both these systems have come on line far more rapidly than U.S. intelligence analysts foresaw. And of course India's tests in May took us completely by surprise.

But although we may not know precisely when the new threats will emerge, we should know for a certainty that we have entered a new strategic environment. In that environment, the number of states trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them will grow, and the threat posed by such weapons will become an increasingly standard feature of international life.

There is a logic driving this reality. The collapse of the Soviet empire, and with it the bipolar cold-war world, has loosened the constraints on states whose behavior was once fairly tightly regulated by Moscow. To cite the most obvious example, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would probably not have occurred when the Soviet Union was still Iraq's major patron and weapons supplier; strenuous efforts would have been made to head off a regional crisis so clearly involving American interests, and so fraught with the potential of escalation to a nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers. Now, however, smaller rogue states and would-be

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aggressors enjoy the freedom to pursue their goals in regions of strategic importance to the United States and its allies, constrained only by the fear that the United States itself might respond with overwhelming military force.

That constraint is theoretically considerable, as the Gulf war demonstrated. Where *ordinary* modes of aggression are concerned, American conventional military power has been and will continue to be an obstacle to most adventurism. But that is precisely why many small and middle-sized states are turning to unconventional weapons: as a means of circumventing the enormous disparity in conventional power. And this, too, was a lesson of the Gulf war—namely, that the United States and its allies have no effective answer to a hostile force equipped with mobile ballistic missiles.

Inaccurate as Iraq's Scuds were, they proved a dangerous wild card in the war, raising problems both military and diplomatic. About a quarter of all American casualties came from the launch of a single missile against our military facilities at Dhahran in Saudi Arabia. Iraqi missile attacks on Israel, designed to provoke that country's entry into the war, threatened to break apart the international coalition the U.S. had laboriously constructed and maintained. Finally, in order to find and destroy Scud missiles hidden in the Iraqi desert, American pilots had to fly more than 2,000 sorties, a tremendous diversion of valuable resources that proved, in any event, almost completely unsuccessful.

IN SHORT, despite overwhelming American superiority in the Gulf war, Saddam Hussein nevertheless retained until the very end the capacity to inflict a possibly catastrophic strategic blow. That lesson has not been lost on present and future challengers to regional peace, in the Middle East and elsewhere; unable to match the U.S. plane for plane, tank for tank, governments throughout the third world are finding in ballistic missiles a new weapon of choice.

Nor has the lesson been lost on American military planners. Until the recent shift in the strategic environment, America's ability to project power was limited only by its capacity to bring sufficient force to bear at an appropriate point and in a timely manner. Now the U.S. faces a new set of "asymmetrical" challenges—or, in the Pentagon-speak of the recent Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), "unconventional approaches to circumvent or undermine our strengths while exploiting our vulnerabilities."

Suppose, to begin with the starkest case, that a

foreign power possesses missiles capable of reaching U.S. territory. Any American President contemplating a challenge to such a regime would have to weigh the risk of a retaliatory attack on America itself. The prospect is not as remote as it may seem. In late 1995, as tensions escalated between China and Taiwan, a senior Chinese official sent a warning to the U.S. that Beijing felt free to act militarily because U.S. politicians "care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan." American strategists may not have taken the veiled threat altogether seriously, but as the Chinese missile program continues to develop—and, thanks to the Clinton administration's technology transfers, it is developing more rapidly than it otherwise would—the next time there is a crisis over Taiwan things could appear very different.

Even if an aggressor does not have missiles capable of reaching the United States, it may be able to hold American allies hostage to its designs. What would have been the effect on our ability to pull together a coalition of NATO allies to drive Saddam's army out of Kuwait if Iraq had possessed a few weapons able to strike Munich or Paris? One can easily imagine the arguments that would have been put forward to allow him to keep his territorial gains rather than evict him from Kuwait.

We can already see this kind of deterrent effect at work in Northeast Asia, where North Korea's ability to strike Japan—and, a few years hence, Alaska and Hawaii—has given that poor, starving country a vastly disproportionate degree of influence on the international scene, putting strains on the U.S.-Japanese alliance and limiting American options for dealing with potential crises on the Korean peninsula. Driven by fear of North Korean missiles, and of the regime's program to develop nuclear weapons, we and others have made otherwise unimaginable concessions to a vicious dictatorship. As more states follow North Korea's example, American diplomacy will be correlatively weakened elsewhere.

And not just American diplomacy. Ballistic missiles will have a direct impact on America's ability to project force into regions of vital importance. Even armed with high-explosive warheads, missiles can pose huge problems for American bases, troop concentrations, port facilities, airfields, and centers of command, control, and communication; armed with nuclear, chemical, or biological warheads, they can spell the unthinkable. As the QDR points out, adversaries can exploit our vulnerability in order to deter or, if it comes to that, defeat an otherwise vastly superior American military force.

The cumulative effect of these various threats—against the American population, against American allies, and against American forces abroad—is likely to be severe. It has been difficult enough these past few years to sustain an American commitment to maintain the peace and enforce international rules in key regions of the world. Increased uncertainty about America's willingness or ability to act will loosen the bonds of alliances that depend, ultimately, on U.S. military dominance. The result will be to discourage friends, encourage adversaries, and elevate the status of rogue states bent on molding the environment to their taste—in sum, gradually and ineluctably to wear out the fabric of the present international order.

CAN ANYTHING be done? In theory, the United States and its allies could rely on international nonproliferation agreements to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. Or, alternatively, the U.S. could act unilaterally to destroy plants and facilities where it suspects such weapons are being developed, as the Israeli government did in Iraq in 1981.

Unfortunately, neither option is promising. Efforts to prevent proliferation may somewhat slow the trend toward wider dispersion of weapons technologies, but for reasons of both strategic and economic self-interest, significant players in the international system—including Russia and China—cannot be counted on to cooperate. In any case, the know-how, the hardware, and the software have spread well beyond a few select powers. India's test, followed by Pakistan's answering effort two weeks later, should convince even the most fervent believer in nonproliferation accords of the inherent unreliability of any international regime.

Nor is the United States likely to act preemptively to destroy suspected weapons sites or production facilities. Presidents Bush and Clinton both balked at such action in the case of North Korea, thus bequeathing the feeble diplomatic process now under way. But even had they been more inclined to act, there is another consideration here: as our experience with Iraq and now India has shown, American intelligence cannot be depended upon to discover the extent or even the precise location of a nation's weapons program. In their early stages, such programs are hard to monitor and raise few alarms; by the time they reach more advanced stages, the existence of the weapons themselves acts as a deterrent to military action, and it is then too late anyway to destroy the technical know-how that has been acquired.

If neither nonproliferation nor unilateral action is a realistic response to the new strategic environment, there is nevertheless one thing we can and should do both to protect ourselves and to redress the international balance in our favor. That is to develop and to deploy ballistic-missile defenses. Such defenses would inure us to the threat of an attack on American soil and enable us to protect our forces and our allies overseas.

Yet here we come up against a curious combination of domestic forces. Although many Democrats have moved far enough away from their McGovernite past to embrace the view that the United States is the world's "indispensable nation," when it comes to building the defenses necessary to make that idea a reality they remain mired in cold-war habits of mind, devoted religiously to the now-26-year-old Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with the Soviet Union. Republicans, on the other hand, have mostly retained their Reagan-era zeal for missile defense, but they have conspicuously failed to place it within a broader strategic agenda. When it comes to missile defense, Democratic "old-think" has thus formed a deadly alliance with Republican "no-think."

Since it first took office in 1993, the overriding goal of the Clinton administration in this area has been to preserve the ABM treaty, which essentially prohibits any national defense against missile attack and frustrates development of the most effective regional defenses for our troops and our allies. The administration cut planned expenditures on ballistic-missile defense for the last half of the 1990's by more than 50 percent, totally eliminating the program to develop space-based interceptors, reducing funds for a national defense by 80 percent, and slicing approximately another 30 percent from programs targeted at knocking down short- and regional-range missiles. When it comes to new systems capable of protecting far larger areas against longer-range ballistic missiles—of the sort, for example, North Korea has just deployed and Iran is close to fielding—the administration has either denied funds at critical times or provided so little money that development remains largely a paper exercise. Adequate funding has been forthcoming only for what are basically "upgrades" of current systems already deployed to protect pockets of troops and ships.

Perhaps the administration's most damaging decision came in 1993, when it killed development of the program known as "Brilliant Pebbles" and thus effectively ruled out the deployment of space-based systems. Space is, simply, the best venue from which to defend the United States, its overseas

troops, and its allies from all but short-range ballistic-missile attack. The reason is that it is much easier for a space-based interceptor to find, track, and destroy a large fuel-burning missile during its boost or early mid-course phase—that is, before it dispenses its warhead(s)—than for a ground-based interceptor either to find and destroy warheads tumbling at a high velocity into the atmosphere, perhaps hidden by a cloud of decoys, or to handle a plethora of sub-munitions (bomblets) released above the atmosphere.

And space-based defense is a feasible option. Not only is much of the hardware associated with “Brilliant Pebbles” mature by now but, thanks to advances in component miniaturization and to economies in procurement, it is affordable. “Star Wars,” to use the liberals’ derisive term for Ronald Reagan’s vision of an American strategic-defense initiative, is no longer a pipe dream. But since deployment of “Brilliant Pebbles” would violate the ABM treaty, the Clinton administration put an end to it.

The administration’s pious adherence to the nostrums of yesteryear almost defies comprehension. Russian nuclear arsenals are now declining rapidly: where the arms-control process known as START II called for reductions on both the American and the Russian side to 3,500 warheads, Russia now wants to cut back to 1,000 warheads or fewer in the coming years. Moreover, the bipolar nuclear confrontation has long since ceased to be the salient feature of international relations. Nevertheless, Democrats in Congress and the White House continue to genuflect not only before the ABM treaty but before the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) that the treaty enshrines. That doctrine—as none other than Henry Kissinger, the ABM treaty’s author, has pointed out—was “barely plausible when there was only one nuclear opponent”; it “makes no sense in a multipolar world of proliferating nuclear powers,” particularly ones of a very different stripe from the largely risk-averse adversary we faced for most of the cold war.

In any case, MAD was never intended to apply to nations other than the Soviet Union, our “peer competitor” in unconventional forces, and it is utterly meaningless in the new era. Suppose a ballistic missile were fired at Saudi Arabia by a dictator like Saddam Hussein, aiming for personal glory and indifferent to the fate of millions of his own people. Is it credible that we would be willing to turn Baghdad into the next Hiroshima to punish his aggression? What if, even, a missile were launched by an unauthorized military officer in Russia or China, neither of which has adequate

safeguards against such launches? Would we risk Armageddon because one of those countries lost control of a single general? Protecting ourselves and our allies against just such contingencies is precisely the promise of a ballistic-missile defense system—and it is also precisely the promise that the Democrats repudiate.

The supreme irony of the Clinton administration’s policy is that it has allowed liberal critics to argue that we have little or nothing to show for what we have spent on missile defense. They are right, but only because the administration has consistently pulled the rug out from under the very programs that would make a difference.

AND WHAT have the Republicans been doing for the past five years? Even though anti-missile systems are professedly their defense program of choice, the answer is that they have been losing. In 1995, a national defense against ballistic missiles was one of only two items in the “Contract with America” that failed to pass the Republican-controlled House. Congress did manage to give the Pentagon a mandate to develop and deploy systems to defend against shorter-range missiles, but President Clinton, after signing the bill, allowed his Secretary of Defense to ignore it. Republicans took the administration to court, lost—and that was the end of that. They stood aside as funds were cut for precisely those programs now needed to handle the threats posed by North Korea and Iran.

Another Republican loss in 1995 occurred in connection with the defense-authorization bill, which specified a system for defending the United States itself against a rudimentary missile attack by the year 2003. Clinton vetoed the measure, and the Republican Congress capitulated. The following year, rather than risk another veto, it decided to put the measure into a separate “Defend America Act,” but the proposed bill never made it to the floor for a vote.

One reason conservatives and Republicans have been losing on what is supposedly their top defense priority is that they have been unwilling to make a sustained fight to overturn the ABM treaty. As a result, they are trapped, calling for a “national missile defense” while finessing the status of a treaty that explicitly prohibits the creation of any such defense, or even laying the basis for one. This is a circle that cannot be squared. Because of its various limitations—especially on the use of space—letting the ABM treaty stand means placing a ceiling over the progress that can be made toward defending American citizens, troops, and allies. Unless the

treaty is overturned, the most effective theater missile defenses will never be built, and no national defense that is more than marginally effective will ever be possible.*

To make a case against the ABM treaty is hardly as difficult as Republicans appear to imagine. During the 1960's and 1970's, it may have been reasonable to assume that any American attempt to build an effective defense would only lead to a more rapid Soviet build-up of missiles and warheads to saturate it. For the Soviets, this would even have made economic sense: for every dollar the United States could expect to spend on defense, the Soviets needed to spend only 50 cents to defeat what were then still rather rudimentary technologies.

In today's strategic environment, however, the calculus works in the opposite direction. No other country is willing or able to spend the kind of money that would be necessary to defeat an American system of defenses, especially one based on the advanced technologies that are now available. To the contrary, the development of such a system by the United States would almost certainly exercise a deterrent effect on states now thinking of spending lavishly on missiles, the costs of which would soon come to outweigh any likely strategic benefits.

As for Russia, the possibility exists of striking a new strategic balance with that country, one resting on a mix of offensive and defensive weapons. The right mix would leave Moscow with sufficient offensive forces to retain a reliable deterrent, while at the same time allowing the U.S. to protect itself against accidental or unauthorized launches from Russian territory. It would also give the U.S. sufficient defensive capabilities to address both China's newfound strategic arsenal and the developing world's growing appetite for nuclear-tipped missiles.

THIS IS strategic thinking for a new strategic era. So far, however, such thinking has not made a dent on the Clinton administration and congressional Democrats still in love with the ABM treaty. And unfortunately, Republicans, too, have refrained from embracing it. Indeed, the paradoxical attraction of missile defense to some conservatives and Republicans was that it did not seem to *need* to be presented as part of a coherent strategy. Rather, it looked like a sure-fire, stand-alone winner, the one foreign-policy issue that could be expected to "resonate" with Americans who might not understand why they should care about what was happening in Bosnia or even in China but who would surely be galvanized by the prospect of a missile striking Alaska or Los Angeles. In short,

support for missile defense was seen by some conservatives as compatible with a minimalist approach to foreign policy in general, a cover behind which the United States could safely withdraw from international engagement.

This political calculus has proved erroneous. In the absence of a coherent strategy, missile defense has turned out to be yet another casualty of the same bipartisan budget-cutting impulse that, although arising from different motives in the case of the two parties, has resulted in driving down defense allocations as a whole in every year since the end of the cold war. Within the Republican-controlled Congress, a new breed of "deficit hawks," led by John Kasich, has consistently worked against efforts to increase military spending above the insufficient amounts proposed by the Clinton administration. At the crucial moment in 1995, it was Kasich who led two dozen Republicans to defect on the missile-defense plank of the "Contract with America."

By the end of Clinton's second term, less money will be spent on missile defenses than at any time since 1986. This means that we will be unable to procure the defenses currently under development by the Clinton administration itself, much less those we actually need. Such is the potentially disastrous fate of a program that, for lack of strategic vision, has become just another more or less expendable budget item.

For the Clinton administration and liberals generally, the day is fast approaching when a choice will have to be made between a rigid commitment to the ABM treaty and any notion of the United States as the world's "indispensable nation." Conservatives, at least those who still believe in American global leadership, need face no such choice. As Ronald Reagan envisioned it, missile defense was not a means of reducing America's involvement in the world but was, rather, the vital shield that would free the United States to play its leading role, undeterred by the threat of nuclear annihilation or of attack by rogue states. That is still the best argument for missile defense, the necessary underpinning of an international order that can at once serve American interests and conduce to the spread of American ideals.

* Even though the ABM treaty does not cover theater-level anti-missile systems, it does prohibit giving such systems a strategic "capability." But effective theater defenses will inevitably have *some* capability against strategic missiles. Arguably, the U.S. could exploit ambiguities in the treaty to build such advanced systems; but doing so would put us in the odd position of imitating the sorts of practices we rightly complained about when the Soviets engaged in them.