Why was BMD so attractive to the Bush administration?

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Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) – a blanket term which refers to weapons systems designed to intercept and neutralise incoming Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) – has, since the dawn of the thermonuclear and missile ages, been a ubiquitous feature of US strategic thinking[1]. However, notwithstanding the limited development of the *Sentinel* and *Safeguard* programmes[2] during the 1960s and 1970s and the announcement of the overly ambitious *Strategic Defence Initiative* (SDI) in 1983[3], the Cold-War nuclear context of *Mutually Assured Destruction* (MAD) ensured that missile-defences were viewed by both superpowers as a dangerous addition to strategic arsenals[4]. The desire of policymakers and academics alike to escape this suicide pact was overridden by the need to maintain *crisis stability* and avoid the emergence of a situation whereby a disarming first-strike became practicable – a stance reflected in the arms-control treaties of the 1970s and 1980s[5]. The end of bi-polarity, however, led to a reappraisal of the challenges facing the United States. Although Bill Clinton made tentative steps towards elaborating a new defence posture, it wasn't until the election of George Bush Jnr in 2000 that BMD began to receive sustained attention[6]. Encouraged by the notion of a *Revolution in Military Affairs* (RMA) and, in light of the 9/11 attacks, acutely aware of the risks posed by the proliferation of WMD technologies, the Bush administration withdrew from the *1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty* (ABM) and outlined plans to develop multi-layered and multi-platform missile-defence capabilities – a series of moves which proved to be controversial on the international stage[7].

This essay will demonstrate that, in pursuing the deployment of a missile-defence system, the Bush administration was influenced by an approach to international relations which conceptualises technology as both a source of security and insecurity, and which emphasises the efficacy of pre-emptive action. Moreover, it will suggest that BMD has the potential to increase the threat posed by nuclear-armed ballistic missiles to international stability.

The discourse will be divided into three constituent parts. Firstly, it will examine the strategic logic driving contemporary missile-defence. Section two will assess to what extent BMD is technologically viable. The final section will focus on the impact of a US missile shield on the global balance of strategic nuclear forces.

i) Proliferation, Rogue States and BMD

In order to understand the resurgence of interest in BMD during the late 1990s and the 2000s, it is pertinent to stress that few, if any, strategic decisions arise in isolation from other ideational considerations. The Bush administration's enthusiastic support for missile-defence was indicative of a wider shift in American strategic philosophy – a development profoundly influenced by neo-conservative ideas concerning the unique nature of the post-Cold War security landscape – which emphasised the need of the United States to maintain unipolar preponderance into the 21st century[8]. Within this context, the *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) and the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) delineated a "new approach to deterrence" with BMD, alongside flexible nuclear forces and sophisticated conventional capabilities, forming one component of a 'new triad'[9]. The strategic and international political rationale for the inclusion of missile-defence in this 'transformation', as Donald Rumsfeld called it, rested upon two basic assumptions – that horizontal proliferation of ballistic-missile and nuclear technology is a) more probable and b) more dangerous in what Colin Gray has termed the *Second Nuclear Age*[10].

During the past two decades the American defence establishment began to comprehend that globalisation and the

cessation of bi-polarity greatly increased the scope and impetus for small states to gain access to information, individual expertise, and industrial hardware required to develop an ICBM and nuclear infrastructure[11]. Secretary of Defence Cohen referred to this as the "iron law of modernity", echoing a widespread opinion that "as technology spreads and improves, the security threats beyond our borders…increase"[12]. Not only was proliferation of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them perceived to be inevitable, but in light of the *1998 Rumsfeld Commission* the threat it posed to the United States was seen as more imminent than previously thought[13]. Indeed, the launch of a North Korean *Taepo-Dong I* missile a few months after the commission reported its findings reinforced the belief amongst figures in the Bush administration that diplomatic counter-proliferation was ineffective, and as such had to be supplemented, if not displaced, by the deployment of missile-defences[14].

What makes contemporary proliferation more dangerous than its Cold-War counterpart, however, is the type of regimes to which WMD technology is becoming available – namely rogue states such as Iran and North Korea, identified by George Bush in his famous *'Axis of Evil'* address as an inimitable threat to America[15]. According to the proponents of missile-defence, whereas deterrence was effective in a Cold-War context because the original nuclear powers recognised that MAD was a 'fact' and hence acted in a rational, risk averse manner, the value systems of rogue states militate against similar thinking[16]. If, the argument goes, rogue actors are motivated more by theo-ideological principles than a desire to protect their populace, they will be less inclined to accept the logic of deterrence and more likely to launch an offensive first-strike on the United States[17]. The repercussions of this for US nuclear policy, as Karp observes, are far reaching – "Deterrence now faces unprecedented limits to its effectiveness. In place of erstwhile universality, deterrence has now become discrete"[18].

For those in the Bush administration mindful of the potential this presented for America to become a victim of nuclear blackmail, BMD was central to the formation of concordant counter-strategies. In an article for *Foreign Affairs*, Rumsfeld communicated the commonly held view that missile-defences would dissuade hostile regimes from obtaining ballistic-missiles and WMD, as any attack on the US would ultimately be futile and invite full-spectrum retaliation – a strategic model known as *'deterrence by denial'* ***[19]***. Furthermore, if prevention and deterrence both proved to be unsuccessful, BMD could compliment the other two elements of the *NPRs* triad, buttressing "conventional counter-force attacks by destroying incoming warheads if…nuclear escalation dominance fails"[20]. This was particularly attractive to the Bush government as it could counteract the employment of access-denial strategies by rogue states and facilitate pre-emptive military intervention, thus perpetuating US dominance over strategically important regions[21].

However, it is questionable a) to what extent the suppositions underpinning BMD are an accurate reflection of reality and b) whether the deployment of missile-defences will reduce the threat posed by the nuclear armouries of antagonistic regimes to the security of the United States. The assertion, for instance, that the saliency of the thermonuclear revolution – a concept which describes how the fear of nuclear annihilation encourages caution amongst policymakers – is somehow inapplicable to certain revisionist states requires closer examination[22]. The supporters of BMD who contend that deterrence is irrelevant vis-à-vis rogue states fail to discern that the momentum behind proliferation is often regional and almost always defensive in nature[23]. Even the most despotic leaders draw their legitimacy and power from various sections of society, consequently wanting, at the very least, "to have a country they can continue to rule"[24]. It is thus decidedly tenuous to conceive of a scenario wherein Iran or North Korea, nations which are likely only to develop a small number of warheads, would launch an offensive first-strike on the US or its allies knowing that this would invite cataclysmic retaliation. As Waltz convincingly argues,*"one need not become preoccupied with the characteristics of the state that is to be deterred or scrutinise its leaders",* since "*in a nuclear world any state will be deterred by another states second-strike forces"* ***[25]***.

It is evident, therefore, that the arguments forwarded by the Bush administration to justify investment in an extensive missile-defence system, along with the strategic doctrine laid out in the NPR, have significant strategic and international political implications.

Firstly, the US position on BMD implicitly undermines the credibility of deterrence in relation to rogue states[26]. For that reason, rather than discouraging proliferation, missile-defence has the potential to persuade internationally maligned regimes that deliberately acting irrationally and possessing nuclear-tipped ICBMs will provide a guaranteed

means of resisting US power. The incentive to follow such a path as an insurance policy is likely to be reinforced by the centrality of pre-emption to US foreign policy, particularly after *Operation Iraqi Freedom**[27]***. Indeed, whilst missile-defences have had no impact on the progression of the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programmes, alternative avenues of counter-proliferation such as 'debt-reduction for non-proliferation', multilateral engagement and the adoption of a less aggressive posture, remained, in part due to confidence in the effectiveness of BMD, underexplored during Bush's tenure[28].

Second, the perceived protection that a missile-shield offers against limited nuclear threats diminishes, at least in the minds of its advocates, the risks inherent in launching a disarming (conventional) first-strike against a rogue nuclear adversary. As a result, the threshold at which this option becomes viable for US leaders is substantially lowered[29]. It is arguable that the NPR's failure to declare a policy of *No First Use* could infuse any such intervention with a dangerous level of uncertainty, thereby increasing *crisis instability* – a situation in which one or both sides have an incentive to pre-empt a possible nuclear attack[30]. And herein lies a perilous paradox. The smaller a nation's nuclear arsenal is, the more likely the United States is – encouraged by the deployment of BMD – to attempt a pre-emptive strike, the more likely that nation is to take measures to improve the survivability of its nuclear forces which could be misinterpreted as offensive moves, and ultimately, the more likely that nation is to be cornered into striking first. As the strategist Thomas Schelling points out, small and vulnerable nuclear arsenals "put a premium on haste"[31].

It is subsequently clear that, contrary to the aims of the Bush administration, the development of a broad American BMD structure has the potential to induce further proliferation and decrease caution amongst US policymakers, thus heightening the destabilising effect of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery on US and international security.

ii) Limited Threats and the Technical Feasibility of BMD

It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that the history of missile-defence, particularly in the United States, has been defined by a disjuncture between operational ambitions and technological realities. The fact the space based ABM architecture envisioned by SDI still falls beyond the reach of modern technology is testament to this[32]. Nevertheless, the pace of progress in information communication technology over the past three decades, in tandem with the success of precision guided munitions and information warfare during the supposedly paradigm shifting *Operation Desert Storm*, appeared to present a way to circumnavigate this impasse[33].

According to this concept of a RMA, the increasing *'smart'* integration between systems that collect, analyse and disseminate data, and those that apply directed force, will enable the US military to cut through the fog of war – an idea known as *Dominant Battlespace Knowledge* – and in doing so facilitate the application of violence with unparalleled "speed, accuracy and precision"[34]. Crucially, this *'revolution'*, which gained significant academic credibility throughout the 1990s, was fundamental to the thinking of key players in the Bush administration with regards to BMD[35]. Indeed, the Missile Defence Agency was enthusiastic about applying the RMA to 21st century missile-defences. The resulting research and procurement plan outlined to Congress in 2001, which fell under the rubric of evolutionary acquisition with spiral development, incorporated procedures such as constant information feedback with the intention of moving "beyond marginal improvements" and skipping "a generation of technology"[36]. In essence, if the rapid advances in technology and the expansion of the vectors along which it was transmitted after the Cold War made missile-defences a necessity, the RMA made their development and deployment more feasible. Bush's Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz succinctly expressed this view by claiming that *"it makes no sense whatsoever – in an era when technology allows us to take away the ability to attack us with a single missile or a few missiles – to leave ourselves vulnerable to that threat"**[37]***.

However, in spite of the admittedly impressive performance of the PAC-2 and PAC-3 theatre missile defence systems against ageing Iraqi Scuds during the 2003 war, major doubts exist as to the technical effectiveness of each layer of the planned American BMD network[38]. In particular, the primary focus of US missile-defence – the hit-to-kill *Ground-based Midcourse Defence* system (GMD) – has been plagued by developmental setbacks. A 2006 report by the *Government Accountability Office* concluded that the design process for GMD interceptors was critically flawed, resulting in "uncertain reliability and service life"[39]. In addition, the test and evaluation record of mid-course missile-

defences has been ambiguous at best. Of eleven integrated flight tests conducted between 1997 and 2004, five were successful, an equal amount failed to intercept their target, and one failed to launch due to a software malfunction[40]. The results of these tests, as well as those following them, are further problematised by the fact that the vast majority were scripted and, as the Pentagon has admitted, lacking in "operational realism"[41]. Putting to one side the revelation that a significant number of tests have employed targeting aids, it is optimistic in the extreme to presuppose that the US will know the time of an attack, the flight path of the missile and its intended target[42].

Assuming that US missile-defences did achieve a high level of operational efficacy, which is doubtful considering that even the most effective air-defences over the past 60 years have only attained a 30% kill ratio, there still remains one overriding problem[43]. Any nation that can build an ICBM or a fission/fusion weapon is also likely to be able to develop straightforward and effective counter-measures to defeat a missile-shield. The inclusion of decoys or chaff in enemy missiles, for instance, would greatly undermine the ability of an interceptor to identify the actual warhead[44]. There is also a possibility that the rhetoric emanating from the White House and Pentagon on BMD will simply persuade states like Iran to shift their focus to acquiring cruise missiles. These small sub-sonic arms are far more demanding for a BMD system to deal with when compared to ballistic missiles and could cause difficulties in theatre or if launched from a ship[45].

Ironically then, the Bush administration's anxious desire to find a solution to the perceived threat posed by the intersection of destructive technology and sub-optimal decision-making may exacerbate the seriousness of that threat whilst providing little protection from it.

iii) BMD and Offence-Defence Arms-Racing

When, much to the consternation of Russia and China (PRC), George Bush announced his intention to renege on the *1972 ABM Treaty*, he did so by justifying the move in terms of the need to progress beyond cold war mentalities[46]. According to the NPR, the incorporation of Moscow into the institutions and norms of the international system since 1991, together with widespread Russian-American cooperation on global terrorism after 9/11, had essentially rendered the relationship of MAD between the two countries as an anachronism. If the US no longer gauged its nuclear forces, nor formulated its strategic targeting with Russia in mind, then the deployment of BMD could be framed as a defensive move[47]. To be certain, Sino-Russian leaders were assured that US missile-defences only concerned their respective arsenals in so much as they could protect against an accidental launch[48].

Instead of consigning the legacy of cold war to the scrapheap of history, however, there is ample reason to suppose that the missile-defence debate may actually reignite some of its most destabilising aspects. On this point it is important to note that perception, rather than intent, is the key factor determining the unfolding of events in the anarchy of international politics. It does not necessarily matter whether US plans for BMD are exclusively defensive or not – it only matters whether Moscow and Beijing believe they are. This so-called security dilemma has considerable consequences for missile-defence and the global balance of strategic nuclear forces[49]. Significantly, both Russia and China have responded negatively towards the Bush administration's revival of BMD, going as far as to issue a joint declaration condemning missile-defence as an attempt by the US to "seek unilateral military and security advantages that will pose the most grave, adverse consequences"[50]. China is especially concerned that the adjunct of BMD to the already superior nuclear capabilities of the US will leave the PRCs twenty nuclear ICBMs ineffective as a deterrent[51].

It is certainly possible that the tensions created by the US commitment to missile-defence could lead to the emergence of offence-defence arms racing amongst established nuclear powers, or at the very least cause a breakdown of arms control negotiations. During the recent New START talks BMD proved to be a contentious issue. The Russian delegation asserted any new agreement "may be effective and viable only in conditions where there is no qualitative or quantitative build-up in [US BMD] such that it would give rise to a threat to Russia's strategic nuclear force potential"[52]. In a similar vein, there is evidence to suggest that the Chinese have, in light of US BMD, instigated a re-assessment of the utility of maintaining a posture of *'minimum deterrence'*[53]. In order to counter the impact of an American BMD system the PRC is actively pursuing the expansion of its strategic missile stockpile and may consider MiRVing its warheads in the future[54]. An often overlooked corollary of such an *'action-reaction cycle'*

between China and the US is the impact it will have on the strategic balance in South Asia. As Newhouse explains – "if China's upgrade enlarges its threat to India", then "India will expand its forces accordingly" and "Pakistan will follow suit"[55].

The deployment of a US missile-shield, therefore, could undermine existing arms regimes, regionally and globally, and in doing so greatly increase the prospect of vertical proliferation and thus international instability.

Conclusion

The Bush administration's support for missile-defence was motivated by a desire to maintain freedom of action, and thus unipolar hegemony, vis-à-vis ostensibly un-deterrable rogue states. If technological advancements and globalisation made the spread of WMD technology to malign regimes inevitable, then the parallel RMA made the development of BMD more feasible, and as such necessary. However, it is evident that BMD is strategically flawed, technically disputed and has the potential to destabilise existing arms dynamics. Rather than counteracting the dangers presented by the spread of nuclear and ballistic missile technology to aggressive states, the deployment of BMD, when placed in the wider context of the NPR and NSS, may actually *increase* the prospects of horizontal and vertical proliferation and the likelihood of a nuclear exchange, whilst providing minimal protection from these heightened threats.

The story of the search for effective missile-defences is to all intents and purposes the story of the search for a way out of the logic of the thermonuclear revolution. Although this is a noble goal to aspire to, it is fraught with conceptual and practical difficulties. If, in the age of ICBMs and hydrogen bombs, statesmen wish to avoid the perils of nuclear politics and nuclear war itself, then they are faced with two options – one potentially unworkable in the anarchical system and the other unpalatable, dangerous and even immoral. They can forsake the security conferred by nuclear weapons and follow the path of disarmament, or they can accept that ultimately, in the thermonuclear age, a state's insecurity is the source of its security. It is not a stretch of the imagination to understand why many have tried to negotiate a third option.

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