

# **US 'missile defence' – a critique**

## **1. Threat assessment**

Official assessments of the ballistic missile threat to the US or UK have emphasised opponents' potential capabilities over their likely intentions and so have tended to overstate the threat. It remains unexplained by missile defence advocates why any state or non-state group wishing to cause maximum harm to the US would attempt a difficult, uncertain and exposed pre-emptive missile attack – even if capable of doing so – in preference to covert, simpler and more reliable means.

## **2. Strategic purposes**

Whilst a pre-emptive missile attack against the US appears unlikely, a state could retaliate against a US attack using a ballistic missile if its survival were at risk. Since the US retains a first-use option on its nuclear weapons, has a long-standing willingness to engage in pre-emptive military action and has dubbed certain states as 'rogue' or 'evil', the scenario of a US attack or the threat of one is plausible. If a working missile defence system could weaken the deterrent potential of missile-capable states such as North Korea and China, the US could gain a strategic advantage in its relations with them. For this reason, US policy affirms the strategic importance of missile defence allied with nuclear weapons within its new 'strategic triad'. This rationale for missile defence is clearly strategic, not defensive, and it is puzzling that the UK continues to assert that the US programme is purely defensive in nature when its strategic purposes have been made so explicit. Why else would the Project for the New American Century, an influential thinktank led by Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and others central to the US Administration, claim that missile defences would, apart from defence, '...provide a secure basis for US power projection around the world'?<sup>2</sup>

## **3. Impact on prospects for disarmament and arms control**

Responses to the proliferation of ballistic missiles and non-conventional weapons must be based primarily on reversing the circumstances giving rise to the threat. All states with the means of mass destruction, justify it as a security against the strategic postures of their opponents. This is a bankrupt strategy with the effect of straining arms control agreements and pushing disarmament further out of reach, as IAEA Director-General Muhammad al-Baradei affirmed recently. Strategic missile defences would exacerbate this cycle, not reverse it, thus creating the conditions of insecurity they are ostensibly intended to overcome.

Despite doubts about Russian claims to have developed a missile capable of thwarting any missile defence, the fact of their efforts in this direction indicates the possible responses of states to an evolving US system. To assume that other nations will not seek to counter the strategic advantages to the US perceived in the missile defence system – or that they would fail – would be complacent and probably wrong. An intensified strategic struggle between nations would likely accelerate the proliferation of arms, especially non-conventional weapons.

## **4. Operational effectiveness**

Without rehearsing the extensive technical critique of various strategic missile defence proposals, two points of principle are worth raising. First, it is generally easier to design a missile capable of defeating a defence than the other way round. Second, the complexity of a missile defence system renders it vulnerable to failure by accident or sabotage. On account of both these principles, the attacker has an advantage that is unknowable to the defender. Confidence in the operational effectiveness of any defence system must therefore always be poor, regardless of the technological advances that may yet be made.

## **5. Costs**

The cost of the existing US missile defence programme is expected to be \$8-10 billion per annum for the next six years<sup>3</sup> with a full, layered system at \$158-238 billion in total.<sup>4</sup> The US military complex as a whole is expected to account for 50% of global military expenditure by 2007. This huge scale of resourcing could be committed instead to reversing long-term systemic causes of global insecurity, such as economic marginalisation, the degradation of the natural environment leading to climate change, oil dependence and the proliferation of arms and rising military expenditure. It is abhorrent that massive resources are committed to military expenditure while initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals are sidelined and under-funded.

## 6. Weaponisation of space

Many technological challenges of missile defence are comparable to those of space-based warfare. For this reason, missile defence research and infrastructure could provide a basis for an accelerated US space weapons programme. Not only is a role for space weapons being considered seriously within the missile defence mission, an abundance of policy statements spanning successive administrations indicates a clear long-term intention to capitalise on space as the ultimate military high ground.<sup>5</sup> Future aspirations include utilising the 'force application' potential of the missile defence system, anti-satellite weapons and the possibility of targeting any part of the Earth's surface using lasers and other weapon types.<sup>6</sup> To dismiss these intentions as closer to science fiction than reality would be complacent; \$68 million has already been earmarked in the 2005 US military budget for developing of a satellite designed to incorporate a kinetic interceptor.<sup>7</sup> Since the Outer Space Treaty does not preclude space weaponisation – a circumstance welcomed in the US Air Force Space Command Strategic Master Plan<sup>8</sup> – negotiations towards further limiting the military use of space are an urgent imperative.

## 7. Alternative solutions

Alternative solutions to the perceived threat from ballistic missiles exist. First, a greater commitment is needed to constructive engagement through diplomacy and the good offices of international institutions, as has been seen to be effective for example in relations with Iran and Libya. Second, the commitment to arms control regimes and making multilateral disarmament forums work must include a willingness to make unilateral disarmament concessions for the sake of progressive multilateral disarmament. Third, a concerted international effort to tackle the systemic causes of insecurity, particularly marginalisation through underdevelopment, is imperative. The US commitment to missile defence and nuclear weapons cannot be considered to complement these alternative approaches, as has sometimes been argued.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the US missile defence programme is:

- 1) Based ostensibly on an overstated and incomplete assessment of a ballistic missile threat
- 2) Intended primarily to gain strategic advantage rather than provide physical defence
- 3) Damaging to prospects for international arms control, disarmament and global security
- 4) Unlikely to provide a reliable defence against missile attack
- 5) Wasteful of resources that for reasons both of morality and global security could be better spent elsewhere
- 6) Likely to involve directly, or lead to, the weaponisation of space
- 7) Likely to increase the missile threat while damaging real opportunities to reduce it

Our view is that the US is pursuing strategic aims with global scope that are inappropriate for any single nation and using its strategic resources in way that undermines the norms, laws and more widely agreed interests of the international community. Missile defence is a further tool for the US in this regard, whether or not the UK would be covered by its operational reach.

We recognise that this assessment, if accepted, would present dilemmas for a UK government committed to strategic alliance and friendship with the US. Nonetheless, we believe that the negative implications of missile defence and the wider US strategic posture are not in the interests of the UK or the wider global community; they do not serve to make the world safer or more just. In particular, we are concerned that a desire to benefit UK military industry or gain political influence with the US should not cloud a careful regard for these wider considerations as the government considers the US missile defence programme.

---

Drafted by David Gee, Quaker Peace & Social Witness, on behalf of the Missile Defence Working Group, May 2004

---

<sup>1</sup> The Missile Defence Working Group (MDWG – [www.mdwg.org.uk](http://www.mdwg.org.uk)) is a forum for a number of membership-based organisations, security policy thinktanks and campaign groups resistant to UK involvement in a US missile defence system.

<sup>2</sup> Project for the New American Century, 'Rebuilding America's Defenses', September 2000, p. v

<sup>3</sup> Council for a Livable World Briefing, 'Current Status of Missile Defense Program', 10 March 2004, published at [http://64.177.207.201/pages/8\\_533.html](http://64.177.207.201/pages/8_533.html) – accessed 6 May 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Congressional Budget Office estimate cited in a Council for a Livable World Briefing on missile defence costs, 'Missile Defence 101', no date (probably 2003), published at [http://64.177.207.201/pages/8\\_277.html](http://64.177.207.201/pages/8_277.html) – accessed 6 May 2004.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see a fully referenced collation of these at <http://www.mdwg.org.uk/Spacequotes.htm> – accessed 6 May 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See 'U.S. Takes First Step To Weaponize Space', 30 March 2004, published at <http://www.spacedaily.com/news/bmndo-04k.html> – accessed 6 May 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Air Force Space Command, 'Strategic Master Plan FY04 and Beyond', 5 November 2002, p.20