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Cold War Strategies Hinder Missile Defense

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Twenty-three years ago last month President President Reagan launched the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). His historic challenge to the technical community was televised on the evening of March 23, 1983. In that speech, he said: “What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest on the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack; that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our soil or that of our allies. I know that this is a formidable task, but is it not worth every investment to free the world from the threat of nuclear war?”

The SDI did not begin U.S. research and development on strategic ballistic missile defense (BMD). That had been going on for decades, notably under the U.S. Army in Huntsville, Ala. But President Reagan’s speech gave visibility, political support, institutional power and a challenging, long-term goal to the endeavor.

Today, political thinking that remains tied to the Cold War strategic environment threatens to undermine the progress which has brought us at least the beginnings of limited BMD.

President Reagan’s challenge set in motion two government-sponsored studies that ran from June through October 1983. The Defensive Technologies Study focused on technical considerations, while the Future Security Strategy Study looked at policy. Those studies helped to establish the program for the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO) under the leadership of Gen. James Abrahamson. Numerous political challenges stood in the way of a U.S. decision to deploy strategic BMD, which was not to happen until almost two decades later under President George W. Bush. Those political challenges centered on an abstract and mechanistic concept of deterrence, the nuclear “balance of terror,” which dominated U.S. strategic thought from the early 1960s to the late 1970s. That particular concept of deterrence and its associated “rules of thumb” categorized strategic BMD as unnecessary, useless, destabilizing, unaffordable and an impediment to ending what was called the arms race.

If virtually any of these oft-repeated arguments against U.S. BMD is probed, some element of balance-of-terror thinking soon is apparent. Why? Because the balance of terror was the basis of the critics’ measure of merit for the need, performance and value

of strategic forces, and it calls for mutual vulnerability, leaving little room for defenses. By the early 1960s, the noted strategic theorist Herman Kahn had identified many of the inherent flaws in the balance of terror as a theory, the risks of its application to the real world, and the strategic reasons why BMD is necessary for the United States. Nevertheless, the balance of terror, questionable during the Cold War and wholly vapid for contemporary threats such as those posed by North Korea and Iran, amazingly retains a powerful hold on thinking in many political and academic circles.

This continuing hold is unfortunate because the changes in context from Cold War to post-Cold War should also have changed the measures of merit for missile defense. Effective missile defense for cities against the massive Soviet missile threat was considered by many to be technically infeasible and practically unaffordable. In contrast, the much more limited post-Cold War missile threats, such as those posed by North Korea, Iran and China greatly ease the technical and affordability challenges for the defense.

In addition, during the Cold War, nuclear deterrence was generally considered reliable and predictable against the Soviet leadership, so defenses were not seen as providing high value: If deterrence could be assumed to work, why defend?

There are, however, enormous uncertainties attached to predicting the behavior of contemporary opponents. And when our ability to deter missile attack is uncertain, a capability to defend takes on much greater meaning.

And, finally, the old Cold War classic that missile defense is destabilizing has no coherence against these contemporary threats: U.S. missile defense cannot logically motivate them to strike first when their fate would be equally sealed whether striking the United States first or second. That some foes may not be so logical in their thinking only underscores the uncertainties of deterrence, and the value of missile defense. The old crisis-instability critique simply does not hold against contemporary foes.

Twenty-three years after President Reagan's SDI speech and more than three years after President Bush's announcement of his decision to deploy strategic BMD, the United States is standing up a rudimentary BMD system. The future of that system remains an open question; its future will be determined, at least in part, by the degree to which the now-archaic balance-of-terror rules of thumb continue to hold sway over thinking about strategic forces.