

The Missile Defense Fallacies

Paul Kengor

Paul Kengor is associate professor of political science at Grove City College.

We face a great fallacy, a shallow argument that must be lanced, before gaining support for a national missile defense (NMD) system. This fallacy is being heard around the world and within the United States. Within the United States, not surprisingly, it can be heard from liberals. The argument is that a U.S. push for NMD would spark a new arms race, spawning the proliferation of nuclear weapons, especially in the East.

This debate picked up steam early last summer. I recall two stories highly critical of NMD that appeared (among others) on page one of both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, each of which were rerun on front pages throughout the country, as I coincidentally noticed during a road trip at the time from Pennsylvania to Wisconsin. The lead Op-Ed in the Sunday page of my local newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, featured a scathing piece against missile defense, reprinted from *The Nation*, possibly America's silliest publication. (*The Nation's* horrific record on Communism, dictated by the farthest of left-wing leanings, should have permanently discredited it long ago.)

These articles, and many more since, have been plagued by illogic concerning NMD's alleged potential to spark missile proliferation. There are a number of ways to legitimately criticize NMD, from a cost perspective to technological feasibility. The argument, however, that the pursuit of NMD should be opposed because it will spark the proliferation of more nuclear weapons among more countries is utter blather. There are a number of reasons why this argument is nonsense. I'll focus on three.

First, nuclear proliferation and development is already taking place, particularly among countries in the East and eager rogue nations. This proliferation is occurring irrespective of any U.S. effort to develop missile defense. In 1998, Pakistan and India became the first new members of the nuclear club since 1964. Neither joined for reasons remotely approaching any U.S. desire for a missile-defense system.

Iraq has done everything it could to develop nuclear weapons, regardless of whether the United States builds an NMD. Saddam's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction has been driven by interests totally separate from U.S. missile defense. Iraq has reportedly assembled the shell of a nuclear device, modeled after the Manhattan Project design, and needs only the fissile material. Saddam's nuclear ambitions predate not only Clinton's recent support of NMD but also Reagan's 1983 SDI speech. Recall Israel's 1981 bombing of Iraq—a feared early nuclear-weapons facility of Saddam. This same rationale applies to Iran, Libya, and others.

North Korea has the missile technology to send a warhead across the Pacific. The only question is whether it has the nuclear warhead needed to complete a fully workable nuclear weapon. No policy analyst worth his salt would be surprised if he opened his newspaper tomorrow morning and learned that North Korea had completed a successful nuclear test.

China, of course, has made tremendous strides in nuclear technology during the 1990s, thanks in part to thefts at Los Alamos and possibly even due to American defense contractors, some of which, as we know must be noted, were major donors to the Clinton campaign. In the 1990s, China skipped ahead an entire generation in nuclear-weapons development.

China and North Korea beg a second key point that underscores the folly of the proliferation argument. Some analysts, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, argue that a U.S. campaign to develop NMD would anger the Chinese, who would view such an effort as hostile. This would in turn compel the Chinese to further manufacture nuclear weapons.

Bad point. As noted, China is doing this anyway. In addition, any such anger by China is completely devoid of moral authority. Indeed, the United States would have far less impetus for pursuing NMD if the Chinese were not busy fulfilling their role as possibly the world's single greatest proliferator of missile technology, especially to rogue nations. It is joined in that camp by North Korea. In other words, U.S. missile defense might not be necessary if China changed its behavior.

This, of course, also applies to Russia. It is the ultimate hypocrisy that Russia bitterly complains about the U.S. desire to pursue missile defense. That desire would not be necessary if Russia were not behaving like a rogue nation itself by assisting nations like Iran with advanced missile technology that can reach New York City.

In short, how dare the Chinese and Russians protest America's desire for missile defense when it is partly their own fault that we feel we so desperately need such a system. Even Senate Democrats have voted to support NMD—by a 97-3 Senate vote in January 1998. Why the shocking switch? What was the revelation? Why the change after so many years of fighting SDI? Because they rightly fear that rogue nations will soon get the bomb. (By the way, Reagan argued that same point throughout the 1980s. However, it took support of missile defense from a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, for liberal Democrats to finally join the cause. This confirms what I've always believed: Much of the Democrats' opposition to missile defense throughout the Reagan era was motivated by sheer partisanship.)

The third point concerns sharing NMD. Totally contrary to the logic of anti-NMD forces, an extended U.S. missile defense in the form of joint NMDs with nations like Taiwan and Japan—already well in the works—will actually curb proliferation by forcing those nations away from developing their own nuclear deterrents. Rightly so, there is considerable domestic pressure in these nations to develop their own nuclear weapons, precisely because of the nuclear threat posed by their neighbors. Hence, joint NMDs could prevent these countries from going nuclear and generating a true arms race in the East. These two nations easily have the know-how to go nuclear.

Beyond Japan and Taiwan, President Clinton (like Reagan before him) has now offered to share missile defense with allies—or, as he put it, with “civilized nations.” This may even ultimately include Russia. (Reagan offered to share SDI with the USSR.) This, too, ought to slow rather than hasten proliferation.

Again, proliferation is taking place regardless of whether the United States pursues a missile-defense system. In fact, it is precisely that proliferation that has compelled even Senate Democrats to join their Republican colleagues in supporting NMD. Ω

The St. Croix Review

Post Office Box 244, Stillwater, Minnesota 55082

The *St. Croix Review* is published bimonthly by Religion and Society, an educational foundation. Subscriptions are by membership in the foundation and are \$25 per year, \$45 for two years. Gift subscriptions and associate memberships for college students cost \$20. Contributions in excess of memberships are tax-deductible and are used to enlarge our circulation.

Name _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Please send gift subscriptions to: (please enclose list of names)

I would like to make a contribution to *The St. Croix Review*.

Check Enclosed Visa Mastercard

No. _____ Exp. Date ____ / ____

To place your order by phone, please call 1-800-278-0141
Fax (651) 439-7017

This journal believes:

- * The federal government of the United States is too large.
- * Governments, like individuals, should live within their budgets.
- * A market economy is the only way to ensure prosperity and is harmonious with human nature.
- * We should preserve the values of Western Civilization:
the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions.