

Missile Defence From Cold War to Hot Peace

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When defence against ballistic missiles became a controversial subject in transatlantic relations during the final years of the Clinton Administration, one could be forgiven for thinking it was a new topic of international security. Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) had not featured in public debate in Britain or the rest of Europe for many years. But in fact, missile defence has been a persistent subject of policy deliberation and technical investigation in Britain for over 60 years, since before the first German V-2 rocket landed on Chiswick in west London in September 1944.

In the succeeding half-century or more, Britain, like other western governments, has had to respond to three distinct ballistic missile threats. The first was the V-2 itself, the world's first ballistic missile. From the late 1950s onwards, the developing Soviet missile capability became an increasingly dominant part of the overall strategic threat to the West. And finally, there is the proliferation problem caused by the diverse missile inventories of a wide range of Third World countries, including but not only most of the 'usual suspects' or so-called 'Rogue States'.

The ballistic missile is itself simply a delivery system, one of several. Others include cruise missiles, manned aircraft, artillery shells, hijacked airliners, suicide bombers and the rest. Each has its own unique characteristics, but all are simply means of delivering a military payload from point 'A' to point 'B'. To date, we have provided ourselves with defences, of varying types, against all the other delivery systems, but not against ballistic missiles. What, then, makes the ballistic missile so special that we do not treat it in the same way as all the other potential threats?

The answer is the nuclear dimension. Though the V-2 carried a 'conventional' high-explosive (HE) warhead, from the 1950s on both sides in the Cold War employed ballistic missiles almost exclusively for nuclear delivery. This was because of the high cost and relative inaccuracy of rockets compared to other delivery systems, especially manned aircraft (which can, of course, be re-used many times).

Moreover, not only was the threat nuclear, but in view of the technical difficulties inherent in intercepting a hypersonic target at very high altitudes, defence against it also had to be nuclear, given the technologies then available. Exploding one's own nuclear warheads over one's own territory could make the solution almost as bad as the problem it addressed.

This meant that defence against ballistic missiles was, in effect, nuclear defence with all that that implies. In particular, when a missile threat is numbered in the thousands and is nuclear-tipped and defence, to be

worthwhile, has to be near-perfect. Even a 95% effective defence, if such a thing were achievable, is of little use as the consequences of even the surviving 5% was too awful to contemplate. Another response to the nuclear threat, including its ballistic element, therefore had to be found.

The response, which was adopted somewhat earlier and more comprehensively by Britain than the two superpowers, was nuclear deterrence. An assured retaliatory capability which could wreak devastation in reply to an attack, under any and all circumstances, was the only sure way to prevent such an attack in the first place. Though nuclear deterrence has a complex theology all of its own, that is the essence of Mutual Assured Destruction or 'MAD'.

Britain therefore gave up on attempts to develop active defences against ballistic missiles in the early 1960s. Both the Americans and Soviets persisted, however. A nuclear-tipped BMD system was deployed around Moscow from 1968 onwards, and after much upgrading remains there to this day, though now of uncertain operational status. The United States also briefly deployed a defence in the mid-1970s but doubts about its operational effectiveness soon led to its de-commissioning.

From the 1960s onwards, missile defence came to be seen as de-stabilising. Though it was recognised that they were unlikely to defeat a large-scale nuclear attack, they could undermine the mutual vulnerability that was at the heart of nuclear deterrence. Defences were extremely expensive and could provoke another ruinous arms race to match the existing competition in offensive systems.

A consequence of this thinking about missile defences during the Cold War was the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty which severely restricted the development and deployment of active defences. Though this was a bilateral agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, Britain actually benefitted more from it than either of the two superpowers. Missile defences could undermine the credibility of the UK's own small nuclear deterrent. Indeed, even before Polaris entered service, it was assessed as potentially ineffective in the face of the Moscow BMD system. The result was the complex and expensive Chevaline Polaris Improvement Programme, to date the world's only system of full defence penetration decoys and other countermeasures. The ABM Treaty ensured that Soviet defences were of a scale that could be overcome by such a programme.

Given the long history of a wide consensus against active missile defences, the question today is therefore what has changed and, perhaps as importantly, what has not.

The end of Cold War bipolarity took with it the strategic relevance of MAD. There is therefore less scope for missile defence to undermine the 'strategic stability' that was the outcome of MAD. Europeans are much less inclined than are many Americans to believe that so-called Rogue States are any less

deterrable that were Stalin's Russia or Mao's China. Nonetheless, the applicability of threats of nuclear retaliation is clearly much reduced, especially in the face of non-nuclear (but possibly still chemical- and biological-armed) threats.

Defence technologies (such as 'hit-to-kill' kinetic energy interception) are also maturing to the point where non-nuclear defence is becoming feasible. Missile defence is no longer synonymous with nuclear defence.

Ballistic threats are also, though more widespread and diverse, less numerous and much less sophisticated than was the Soviet strategic arsenal. Missile defences currently in development in the United States and elsewhere employ the latest technologies. The missile threats they are designed to counter are, in general, several decades behind technologically. Medium- and long-range missiles currently in development by North Korea, Iran and others are similar to those deployed by the superpowers in the 1960s. Missile defence is therefore a much more technologically feasible enterprise than hitherto.

Moreover, the predominantly non-nuclear nature of current ballistic threats greatly reduces the efficiency demands of a 'worthwhile' defence, placing BMD much more in line with the effectiveness required of other 'conventional' defence systems.

Active missile defence does remain a technological challenge, however. It is also expensive. Sharply reduced post-Cold War defence budgets mean that BMD will only be funded where and when the ballistic threat is perceived to be sufficiently acute to warrant a higher priority than many other competing defence needs.

The end of the ABM Treaty in 2002 was as seminal an event as its signing three decades earlier. None of the widely forecast and dire consequences predicted arose. There was no end to 'strategic stability' (whatever that is in today's world), and none were there a renewed arms race or a breakdown in relations with either Moscow or Beijing. The world is learning to live with a renewed American determination to deploy a range of missile defences against what it perceives to be substantive threats to its security. That process of adaptation is in itself reducing or eliminating the drawbacks of such deployments.

Some forms of missile defence are also being procured by Russia, Japan, Taiwan, Israel, Kuwait, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Italy. Others, such as Spain and Denmark, are actively considering doing so. Britain, despite its limited participation in US defences (principally but not only the upgrade to the Fylingdales early warning radar) is not amongst these. The UK continues to stress the other counter-proliferation tools (arms control, export controls, deterrence, counter-force operations and passive defence). It is, however, keeping both ballistic threat and defence technology developments under review.

The future prospects for missile defence are therefore mixed. Britain faces three distinct, though related questions: The theatre or tactical defence of deployed forces, the national (or NATO) defence of the UK itself, and participation in the defence of North America. Only when the severity of the threat warrants it will any British government commit to active defences, though future US deployments in Europe may force earlier decisions than might otherwise be the case.

The Iraqi threat has been eliminated. Diplomacy, in the wake of the Iraq War, seems to be eliminating the Libyan problem. The signals from Iran are mixed, though it retains a large missile development programme. Syria's capability is likely to remain locally-focused. Europeans will never share Americans' obsession with North Korea, and no-one even wants to think about missile defence in relation to Russia or China. But Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, both with relatively long-range missile capabilities, are inherently unstable. Political developments in either country could give added impetus to missile defence.

Most of all, attitudes towards missile defence of all types need to reflect today's strategic and technological realities and not the well-worn norms derived from the very different circumstances of the Cold War.