

Questions and Answers About the US Missile Defence Program

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What is the US government proposing?

It is still not clear what the United States plans for its missile defence program. Certainly, the program would seek to prevent a missile from landing on US soil by launching another missile to intercept and destroy it.

Under former President Clinton, the US government sought a defensive shield for the continental United States - National Missile Defence (NMD). President Bush has dropped the "national" and now speaks of a shield that would protect key US allies in an attempt to secure the support of other members of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Bush has publicly suggested that his administration plans to 'scale up' the program to include space-based interceptors.

Is the proposal a new 'Star Wars'?

The original Star Wars proposal sought to intercept nuclear missiles with space-based lasers. The National Missile Defence proposal advanced by the Clinton government was similar but far more limited and focused on ground-based missile interceptors.

But the US Space Command's 'Vision for 2020' clearly links the missile defence program to its plans for "dominating the space dimension of military operations" and "integrating Space Forces into warfighting capabilities." They plan to 'scale up' the ground-based program to include space based interceptors as envisioned in the original Star Wars. They further propose to introduce weapons systems into space (so the plan goes further than the original Star Wars). Bush has yet to commit to a detailed program, but most of his close advisors are known to favour an expanded program.

Will the technology work?

With the completion of the first fully successful test in July 2001, the program now has a shred of technological credibility. But unless there are successful tests that are more realistic, the system is far from operational. Moreover, as even the US administration agrees, such a system can never be 100% effective.

The missile defence system would not address more immediate and 'low-tech' threats to the US. And it may spark a new nuclear arms race.

The objections to the US missile defence proposal raised by the Canadian Peace Alliance and others have never been fully based on the technological problems of the proposal, but rather the political dangers and ethical dilemmas that it poses.

Is a missile shield necessary to protect us?

At present, only Russia has the technology to launch a missile attack on continental North America. Therefore, there is time to explore other approaches to the perceived emerging threat from North Korea, Iran, Iraq and other so-called rogues.

The one country with nuclear capability that is most likely to develop an inter-continental missile capable of hitting the United States is China. Chinese officials have stated that they believe that the US missile defence program is hostile to China's interests. China may accelerate its own nuclear program in response.

A ban on missile flight tests would be a far less expensive and more technically feasible way of preventing the development and use of inter-continental missiles. It could be implemented immediately, rather than waiting years in the hopes that the missile defence technology becomes reliable enough to be useful.

There are many threats to human security (like poverty, AIDs, global warming and conventional wars) that are pressing right now. A missile defence shield would not address any of these. Bush's plan may cost \$200 billion, which would go a long way towards addressing these other human security threats.

Will it undermine the ABM Treaty?

The missile defence shield proposals are in clear violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) ABM Treaty. The treaty forbids the US and Russia from developing a continental missile shield.

Many supporters of a missile defence shield claim that the ABM treaty is a Cold War relic. It is true that the treaty is not perfect, but it did make later treaties possible. Together, they form the current multilateral disarmament regime. If the ABM Treaty is abrogated or substantially altered, the entire architecture of arms control and disarmament agreements could fall.

In addition to the ABM treaty, the missile defence program violates the UN Outer Space Treaty. It also contradicts the commitment made by the nuclear weapons states, including the United States, to take steps to eliminate their nuclear arsenals during the May 2000 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

Why should the Government of Canada take a position against the US missile shield?

Canada's international reputation and overall foreign policy goals could be harmed if the Government of Canada does not publicly object to the missile defence proposal.

Canada has developed a reputation as an international champion of disarmament and multilateralism. This reputation is unlikely to survive Canada's acceptance of the US missile defence program.

Would Canada's refusal to participate in the missile defence program destroy the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD)?

The Government of the United States would like the missile defence program to operate under the auspices of NORAD, and Canadian military officials involved with NORAD are among the most enthusiastic proponents of Canada's participation in missile defence. But the original purposes of NORAD did not involve a missile defence shield and need not include it - even if the US proceeds with the program. The Government of Canada's decision not to participate in or endorse 'Star Wars' in the 1980s did not end NORAD. We should expect the same of the new missile defence proposal.

Should the Government of Canada continue its 'wait and see' approach, learning more about the US plan before taking a position?

The Government of Canada originally stated that it wanted to 'wait and see' if the US really was committed to the missile defence program before taking a position.

With George W Bush installed as President, the United States clearly intends to proceed. By continuing to reserve its opinion until it has more details, the Government of Canada is signaling that it will acquiesce to missile defence under certain conditions. As suggested above, this could harm Canada's international reputation and its other foreign policy goals.

Is the Government of Canada in a position to prevent the United States from adopting a missile defence program?

The Government of Canada is unlikely to change the military policies of the US. But the US does not want to be isolated internationally on this issue, as its concerted (and to date largely unsuccessful) efforts to sell missile defence to other NATO members, Russia, China and India shows. From the beginning, the US sought Canada's involvement in part to ensure that it has at least one credible ally.

Moreover, even if Canada cannot alter the policies of the Government of the United States, that is no reason for our government simply to support them. In fact, Canada is more likely to enhance its international reputation by refusing to fall into line with misguided US military policies.

Some proponents have suggested that Canada will be punished if it does not go along with the missile defence program. But the US would be limited in what it could do by its own security concerns and its own trade agreements.

Would Canada's approval of the missile defence program lead to jobs in Canada?

Some federal politicians and other proponents of missile defence have suggested that there will be new, well-paid defence industry jobs created in Canada.

But such statements appear to be groundless. Both major defence industry associations in Canada whose members might participate in missile defence contracts say their members are not very interested at this time. Ron Kane, spokesperson for the Aerospace Industries Association of Canada, said: "it's too early to tell if the NMD will create any jobs and exports."

Only one study predicts that Canada's official endorsement will lead to jobs. Its author, Bernie Grover, claims that Canada can expect more than \$1 billion in NMD-related exports over the next 15 years, creating or sustaining nearly 10,000 jobs.

Bill Robinson of Project Ploughshares feels that these predictions are unrealistically high. But, he said, even if correct, 9,640 "jobs" over fifteen years means 643 people (on average) employed in any given year. This is only 482 jobs more than if the Government of Canada does nothing - and would require public subsidies to help secure new contracts for Canadian firms.

If Canada's trade relations with China are jeopardized by our official endorsement of the program, more jobs could be lost than gained.

Could the missile defence shield support nuclear abolition?

Some proponents of the US missile defence proposals have stated that the program may spark unilateral US cuts in nuclear weapons, and therefore could contribute to nuclear disarmament. Despite the offer of cuts, the US would maintain its commitment to use nuclear weapons to respond to non-nuclear threat and a strong capability for nuclear second-strike retaliation. Therefore, although the offer might sound impressive, its practical effect would be minimal.

Since unilateral weapons cuts proposed are outside of the context of international law, they cannot be verified or enforced and easily could be reversed.

It is extremely likely that China would accelerate its nuclear program if the US missile defence shield proceeds. Adding this to the military mix in Asia is likely to heighten tensions and hasten a regional arms race.

Can I do anything about it?

Of course you can. Write letters to your Member of Parliament, the Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet explaining how you feel about Canada's involvement in the US missile defence program. Demand that they adopt policies that reflect your wishes. All MPs receive letters at House of Commons, Ottawa, K1A 0A6.

Keep up to date with the CPA's campaign against the US missile defence proposal. Visit <www.acp-cpa.ca>. Or call 416.588.5555.