

NATIONAL MISSILE DEFENCE (NMD)

A perspective by Major-General (Ret) Leonard V. Johnson

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The American program to devise and deploy a theatre missile defence system known as National Missile Defence (NMD) is strongly and widely opposed for various reasons, including fears that it would lead to revival of the nuclear arms race. That dire outcome is by no means inevitable, however. Indeed, it is possible that a defence against the limited attack capability of so-called "rogue" states or accidental launches by nuclear weapons states could eliminate the triggering event that might otherwise ignite the nuclear holocaust of mutual assured destruction.

President Reagan's Star Wars dream was a system to make nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete," thus replacing mutual assured destruction with assured defence. Technical and strategic objections aside, the strategic defence initiative made sense to people dissatisfied with the suicide pact of mutual assured destruction. National Missile Defence, son of Star Wars, as a theoretical and not-yet practical concept, nevertheless has strong appeal to people who don't understand why defence is a bad thing. Indeed, it would be wonderful if it led to the abolition of strategic nuclear weapons.

In a recent statement on television, President Bush linked NMD to nuclear disarmament, implying willingness to scrap or drastically reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal in favour of a limited defence against "rogue" states, now "states of concern" in the jargon.

Instead of opposing NMD without a fair hearing, people should be looking at how theatre missile defences might further the nuclear abolition objectives of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Without an American strategic arsenal to justify Russian and Chinese retaliatory preparations, those states might be persuaded to follow suit, scrapping weapons no longer needed for retaliation against nuclear attack.

One incentive might be to make theatre missile defence technology available to any state that wanted it, or even to develop it jointly. Indeed, it would be immoral to deny defence to any state threatened by an emergent missile attack capability, such as Israel, Taiwan, or Japan, whether nuclear or conventional. Without the means to defend its forward bases against missile attack, moreover, the U.S. could not maintain its security guarantees in the western Pacific.

If an effective defence becomes feasible, and if the U.S. decides to deploy it, there is no good alternative to cooperation with our neighbour and ally if Canada would otherwise become a military liability to the United States. On the other hand, if Canadian cooperation is unnecessary, i.e. if access to our strategic space is unneeded, then Canada can be a passive participant and still be a beneficiary of cost-free defence. Finally, it will be difficult to persuade the Canadian public that it is better to remain vulnerable to attack than to cooperate with an ally with whom we have had beneficial military relations since 1938.

If the U.S. military-industrial-congressional complex gets its way and NMD deployment becomes inevitable, then efforts should be made to turn it to advantage in the cause of nuclear weapons abolition. It should not, and need not, provoke a revitalization of the threat of nuclear retaliation as the only deterrent to missile attack with weapons of mass destruction. The challenge is to move ballistic missile defence from the realm of strategic competition to that of strategic cooperation to the benefit to all.