

Cherry Picking the Facts with Ballistic Missile Defence

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The Senate committee's report makes some key assertions without substantiation and ignores other relevant factors. Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) is one of those recurring issues in Canadian security policy that reminds one of the hydra-headed monster featured in B horror flicks. Just when the hero seems to have dispatched the creature for good, it raises another ugly head. Although there is a considerable record of previous Canadian governments considering the matter and deciding against official Canadian involvement in this peculiar American endeavour, the question seems to be revived periodically, as if there weren't more pressing issues of foreign and security policy for our parliamentary institutions to consider.

This was the case with the latest study of the issue carried out by the Senate's Committee on National Security and Defence, which culminated in its report of June 2014. The surprising conclusion of this report was the Committee's unanimous recommendation that "the Government of Canada enter into an agreement with the United States to participate as a partner in ballistic missile defence." It is difficult to discern how the Committee came to this conclusion on the basis of the evidence heard in the course of its study, even though the witnesses invited to testify were primarily selected from pro-BMD circles. In the report some key assertions are made without substantiation and other relevant factors are simply ignored.

The impact of the U.S. BMD program on Russia and China is asserted to be benign, whereas this program and the refusal of Washington to negotiate any constraints on it has been a major impediment to progress in U.S.-Russia strategic nuclear arms reductions. Similarly, while it is easy to declare, as the report does, that BMD is no threat to China's strategic deterrent, it is not surprising that Beijing with its modest ICBM force considers the question differently, concerned as it should be with the potential of the expanding U.S. program to negate its retaliatory capacity. This in turn can have detrimental repercussions for other multilateral security initiatives, such as the long-delayed negotiation of a ban on fissile material production. China, for example, has to weigh the possibility of building up its offensive nuclear forces as a hedge against future BMD development.

The report's treatment of the threat to Canada is very superficial, drawing largely from the exaggerated projections of North Korean and Iranian capabilities contained in the Rumsfeld Commission Report of 1998. There is no discussion of why Canada would be a target, if and when these countries develop an

ICBM capability, or why any such rogue state would attack North America with a weapon that comes with a return address (as opposed to attacking with a cruise missile, or ship-borne bomb that could evade detection). The report muddles the distinction between U.S. national BMD and the theatre BMD programs being pursued via NATO despite the different impact of such defences for strategic stability.

The report is more balanced in its consideration of the technical feasibility of BMD, acknowledging the poor and deteriorating test record of the homeland BMD system and the fundamental problem of the system's inability to discriminate between warheads and decoys or other so-called penetration aids that an adversary could readily deploy. In the absence of some technical miracle, the physics of outer space suggest that this basic failure to discriminate between objects eliminates any theoretical benefit that a BMD system might bring against an ICBM. Moreover, is it not highly irresponsible for political and military leaders to suggest to the public that such unproven systems would be able to protect the country from a nuclear strike?

The committee heard some well-worn arguments that Canada needed to participate in BMD to "preserve NORAD." In our view this is a bogus line. NORAD's existing missions are in the interests of both countries and it doesn't require taking on a BMD mission (which even with Canadian involvement is far from certain given U.S. command preferences) in order to survive. The crucial issue of "opportunity cost" is overlooked in the report. Even if we assume the traditional cost-sharing for North American aerospace defence, an open question in light of new American defence budget constraints, Canada would be undertaking a major funding commitment by engaging in BMD. Given the pressing procurement demands faced by the Canadian military for new planes, ships and equipment that actually work and are in line with real world missions, would it be reasonable to divert millions to the dubious BMD enterprise? Of course south of the border there are political and commercial interests that are glad not to confuse the public with the facts when it comes to the enormous pork barrel that is BMD, but surely we are not obliged to replicate this boondoggle here.

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