

Ballistic Missiles: Assessing the Threat Assessments

The Bush Administration's plan to build "effective missile defenses" at the earliest possible date is based on the assumption of a significant and growing threat from "rogue states" with ballistic missiles armed with nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. According to the Administration the ballistic missile threat from rogue states is now "the most pressing national security challenge" the US faces.¹ But how significant is the threat from so-called rogue states, and is missile defence the best approach to dealing with proliferation of weapons of mass destruction?

Who has ballistic missiles?

The most sophisticated long-range ballistic missile arsenals are held by the five nuclear-weapon states - the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China, all of which deploy either submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) or intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) armed with nuclear warheads.² A further 32 countries are believed to have operational ballistic missiles with range capabilities of over 100 kilometers.³

What do the US threat assessments say?

In February 2001, in President Bush's first budget, the White House set out its assessment of the threat from ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction:

"In a world where more than a dozen nations possess ballistic missile technology, and a number of nations are racing to acquire weapons of mass destruction, America's most pressing national security challenge is to reduce our current vulnerability of our deployed forces and our allies and friends by acquiring defenses against missile attack..."

As old threats recede... new threats emerge... The threat of a massive nuclear attack launched by the Soviet Union has been replaced by a world in which threats come from rogue states bent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction and terrorism—threats as unconventional as they are unpredictable."⁴

US threat assessments focus on three "rogue states". According to Central Intelligence Director, George J. Tenet, the US faces "ballistic missile threats from a variety of actors beyond Russia and China—specifically, North Korea, probably Iran, and possibly Iraq."⁵

Key countries that have the potential to develop long-range ballistic missiles, along with the potential to deploy nuclear weapons, such as India, Pakistan, Israel, and Japan, are excluded from US threat assessments because they are not currently considered to be hostile to the United States or to pose a direct threat to the Continental United States.

How reliable are the US Threat Assessments?

Recent US intelligence estimates attempt to predict the threats to the United States by around 2015. These estimates generally assume that there will be no major political changes to international strategic relations during the next fifteen years. For example, the CIA report, *Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future With Nongovernment Experts*, states that the US will face “strategic WMD threats, including nuclear missile threats, in which (barring significant political or economic changes) Russia, China, most likely North Korea, probably Iran, and possibly Iraq have the capability to strike the United States”.⁶ Similarly the *National Intelligence Estimate* of September 1999 comments: “We did not attempt to address all of the potential political, economic, and social changes that could occur.”⁷

CIA National Intelligence Officer for Strategic and Nuclear Programs, Robert D. Walpole acknowledges that over the next 15 years any missile threat to the United States will “will depend heavily” on “changing relations with foreign countries, the political and economic situation in those countries, and other factors we cannot predict with confidence.”⁸

The last fifteen years demonstrate that threat assessments that assume no significant political, economic or social changes are unlikely to be reliable.

As Walpole notes:

- “15 years ago the United States and Soviet Union were superpower adversaries in the midst of the Cold War, posturing military forces opposite each other in Europe and competing for global power.
- Fifteen years ago Iraq shared common interests with the United States.
- Finally, we do not know whether some of the countries of concern will exist in 15 years.”⁹

Is there a significant threat from Rogue States?

To date, none of the three “rogue states” highlighted in US threat assessments have come close to acquiring a ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States with any degree of accuracy.

North Korea

Of the rogue states, North Korea is viewed as the state “most likely to develop ICBMs capable of threatening the United States during the next 15 years.”¹⁰ In August 1998, North Korea tested its Taepo Dong-1 missile, causing widespread concern about its intentions.

The *National Intelligence Estimate* of September 1999 concluded that North Korea “could” convert the Taepo Dong-1 into an ICBM capable of delivering a “light payload (sufficient for a biological or chemical weapon) to the United States”. This missile would be inaccurate making it “improbable” that it could hit large urban targets. North Korea would be “more likely” to develop the Taepo Dong-2 as an ICBM capable of delivering early generation nuclear weapons to the United States.

However, as a result of diplomatic efforts North Korea has maintained a moratorium on missile launches since September 1999 to date.

Iran

According to the *National Intelligence Estimate*, analysts differ on the timescale of any ballistic missile threat from Iran. Iran's first flight test of an ICBM that could threaten the United States. Assessments range from: “likely before 2010 and very likely before 2015”, to “no more than an even chance by 2010 and a better than even chance by 2015” and “less than an even chance by 2015”.¹¹

Iraq

Analysts also differ on the likely timing of any potential Iraqi flight test of an ICBM capable of reaching the United States. Assessments include “unlikely before 2015”, “likely before 2015”, and “possibly before 2010”, depending on whether Iraq was able to obtain foreign assistance.¹²

Other countries have different assessments of the possible threat from Iran, Iraq and North Korea. For example, the UK Government, a strong US ally situated much closer geographically to the states of concern in the Middle East believes that there is “currently no significant ballistic missile threat, nor any other significant threat of attack, on the United Kingdom”.¹³

Is the ballistic missile threat growing?

In January 2001, a Pentagon report asserted, “In virtually every corner of the globe, the United States and its allies face a growing threat from the proliferation and possible use of nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) weapons and their delivery systems.”¹⁴

However, according to Central Intelligence Director Tenet, the emerging missile programs from North Korea, Iran and Iraq “involve far fewer missiles with less accuracy, yield, survivability, and reliability than those we faced during the Cold War”.

This view was also held by the *National Intelligence Estimate*, which concluded that the most significant ballistic missile threat would continue to come from Russia’s nuclear forces: “The Russian threat, although significantly reduced, will continue to be the most robust and lethal, considerably more so than that posed by China, and orders of magnitude more than that potentially posed by other nations, whose missiles are likely to

be fewer in number— probably a few to tens, constrained to smaller payloads, and less reliable and accurate than their Russian and Chinese counterparts.”

Russia continues to deploy nuclear weapons on hair trigger alert, despite widespread reports of problems with its command and control systems. However, the threat posed by Russian nuclear weapons has been falling. Since the end of the Cold War, as a result of the START nuclear disarmament treaties, Russia has more than halved its nuclear arsenal from a peak of 45,000 nuclear warheads in 1986 to 20,000 in 2000. It is now capable of deploying approximately 5,000 nuclear warheads on around 1,000 long-range ballistic missiles.¹⁵

Since the end of the Cold War the number of countries outside the constraints of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has reduced significantly. Nuclear-weapon states such as France and China have joined the treaty, along with countries once regarded as a proliferation threat such as Argentina and Brazil, while South Africa has led the way by eliminating its nuclear weapons altogether. The non-proliferation regime has also been strengthened by the agreement of the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Negotiations are currently underway in Geneva to agree a verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention.

Are Ballistic Missiles the most likely way that a rogue state would deploy nuclear, chemical and biological weapons?

According to Robert Walpole, the CIA’s projection is that “in the coming years, US territory is probably more likely to be attacked with weapons of mass destruction from non-missile delivery means (most likely from non-state entities) than by missiles”. This is because “non-missile delivery means are less costly and more reliable and accurate. They can also be used without attribution.”¹⁶

The *National Intelligence Estimate* also indicates that ballistic missiles are an expensive and difficult route states or terrorist organisations seeking to threaten the United States. It suggests that alternatives such as delivering weapons of mass destruction by ship, truck or plane would be more likely:

“The requirements for missile delivery of WMD impose additional, stringent design requirements on the already difficult technical problem of designing such weapons. For example, initial indigenous nuclear weapon designs are likely to be too large and heavy for a modest-sized ballistic missile but still suitable for delivery by ship, truck, or even airplane. Furthermore, a country (or non-state actor) is likely to have only a few nuclear weapons, at least during the next 15 years. Reliability of delivery would be a critical factor; covert delivery methods could offer reliability advantages over a missile. Not only would a country want the warhead to reach its target, it would want to avoid an accident with a WMD warhead at the missile-launch area. On the other hand, a ship sailing into a port could provide secure delivery to limited locations, and a nuclear detonation, either in the ship or on the dock, could achieve the intended purpose. An airplane, either manned or unmanned, could also deliver a nuclear weapon before any local inspection, and

perhaps before landing. Finally, a nuclear weapon might also be smuggled across a border or brought ashore covertly.”¹⁷

These alternative methods of delivering a weapons would have the following advantages for countries or terrorist groups, because they are:

- “Less expensive than developing and producing ICBMs.
- Can be covertly developed and employed; the source of the weapon could be masked in an attempt to evade retaliation.
- Probably would be more reliable than ICBMs that have not completed rigorous testing and validation programs.
- Probably would be more accurate than emerging ICBMs over the next 15 years.
- Probably would be more effective for disseminating biological warfare agent than a ballistic missile.
- Would avoid missile defenses.”¹⁸

What about the impact of Republican Policies on Missile Proliferation?

US threat assessments ignore the negative impact of US policies on proliferation. The Bush Administration’s policies on missile defence and its approach to diplomacy are making the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missiles more likely.

Cooperation with Russia and China will be essential if progress is to be made to prevent proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies to countries such as Iran and Pakistan. Russia and China could also play a key role in diplomatic efforts to reduce proliferation from North Korea. However, the Bush Administration’s approach has been to antagonize Russia with its missile defence plans and enter into a serious dispute with China triggered by the downing of the US spy plane over the South China sea.

Russia

The Bush Administration has announced that it is reviewing the assistance it gives to Russia to dismantle former Soviet weapons of mass destruction and to prevent those weapons and their designers from falling into the wrong hands. A 20% cut to the amount of aid given is expected, despite the recommendation of the US Department of Energy’s bipartisan Russia Task Force that nuclear weapons and weapons materials posed a “clear and present danger” to US and international security.¹⁹ Democrat Senator Joseph Biden has described the Bush Administration’s approach as “absolutely foolhardy”.

Although Russia’s nuclear forces pose the greatest threat to the United States, no new nuclear disarmament treaty has been negotiated by the US and Russia since START II in 1991. In August 2000, a highly classified report, “Foreign Responses to U.S. National Missile Defense”, leaked to the U.S. media in August 2000, cautioned that U.S.

construction of a missile defence system could prompt Russia to place multiple warheads on ballistic missiles that now carry only one. This was something that Russia agreed to stop as part of the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), which it ratified last year.

If Bush was serious about reducing the risk of missile attack, the priority would be to negotiate further reductions and a reduction in nuclear alert status with Russia. Instead Bush's approach has been to downgrade relations with Russia and take a unilateral approach to nuclear arms reductions.

China

China is currently believed to have around 12 ballistic missiles capable of reaching the United States. However, China is modernising its nuclear forces with the aim of enabling its intercontinental ballistic missiles to survive a pre-emptive strike and stand a reasonable chance of penetrating US missile defences. China has dramatically increased defence spending since Bush was inaugurated.

In 2000, US intelligence chiefs warned the Clinton Administration that proceeding with national missile defence, could prompt China to expand its nuclear arsenal tenfold, to a quantity large enough to overwhelm any missile defense system. The report also warned that China's response could easily set a domino effect in motion. India, which considers China its main national security threat, may try to field an intermediate and long-range missile capability prompting Pakistan to try and respond in kind.²⁰

China has also responded angrily to US arms sales to Taiwan and the possibility that the US might deploy theatre missile defences in the Far East. China has already deployed around 200 short-range ballistic missiles on the coast facing Taiwan and is increasing this force by about 50 missiles per year.²¹ Its objective is to be able to overwhelm any missile defense system around Taiwan that the US might put in place.

North Korea

The Bush Administration has announced it is reviewing policy towards North Korea and temporarily suspending discussions between the two states on issues of ballistic missile testing, development and export policy. It is also uncertain whether the Administration will remain committed to the 1994 Agreed Framework under which North Korea suspended operation of its nuclear power facilities in return for their replacement by light-water reactors, reducing the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation. North Korea has responded by threatening to suspend its moratorium on testing ballistic missiles.

Bush's policies on North Korea have been widely criticised internationally and domestically. North Korea's missile programme poses a much more serious threat to its immediate neighbour, South Korea. However, South Korea strongly supports diplomatic efforts to improve relations with North Korea.

The danger is that US policy in the Far East may spark an arms race as China, Taiwan, Japan and both Koreas scramble to match each other's ability to fire and defend missiles potentially carrying nuclear warheads.

Iran

The Bush Administration's approach to date has been to isolate Iran, although a diplomatic offensive to reduce any proliferation threat from Iran is preferred by many US allies. For example, the UK is concerned by reported Iranian efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, however in recent years it has renewed diplomatic relations with Iran. The UK sees the reformist cause in Iran and getting the middle east peace process back on track as the "keys to ensuring that Iran abides by its non-proliferation commitments". Iran is a party to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention. Rather than seeking to isolate Iran, the UK's strategy has been to demonstrate "high-level support for the reformist policies initiated by President Khatami's Government."²²

Who is the real rogue state?

Bush needs the bad guys to justify his missile defence policy and continued development of new nuclear weapons. US threat assessments therefore play up the threat from North Korea, Iran and Iraq, whilst ignoring the potentially disastrous impact of the Administration's own policies for dealing with proliferation. By undermining international diplomatic efforts to control proliferation, there is a danger that US threat assessments will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Bush Administration is adopting unilateralist policies with no respect for international law. Bush has already walked away from the Kyoto protocol to reduce carbon emissions and is threatening to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty if the US doesn't get its own way in negotiations with Russia. Although Russian nuclear weapons remain the biggest threat to US security, the Bush Administration has antagonized Moscow over missile defence and is pursuing a unilateral approach to nuclear policy, which does not address the problems posed by these weapons. Bush is also opposed to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, undermining international efforts to get countries such as India and Pakistan to stop nuclear testing.

The introduction of missile defence, combined with modernised US nuclear forces will make conflict more likely and increase the risk that the US may be willing to initiate future wars, including the possible first use of nuclear weapons. Star Wars is provoking a new arms race, and is inherently de-stabilising.

US threat assessments are fundamentally flawed. They make no consideration of the possibilities of political, social or economic change, despite the massive changes of the last fifteen years. They ignore the proliferation problems caused by US allies such as Israel and Japan even though these countries play a key role in regions of proliferation

concern. They also largely ignore the missile programmes and nuclear capabilities of countries such as India and Pakistan because neither is considered hostile to the United States, despite the threat of a South Asian arms race including China.

How can the threat be reduced?

Since the end of the Cold War, the threat from ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction has been significantly reduced by the START nuclear disarmament treaties and by the multilateral treaties controlling nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

The most effective way to reduce the threat from these weapons is not by building an expensive missile shield that is unlikely to work for many years. The only way to eliminate the threat from nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, is to eliminate the weapons themselves before they can be used. The priority for all countries should now be to further strengthen the international treaties that control the spread of weapons of mass destruction, with the aim of achieving stricter safeguards and universal adherence.

¹ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "A Blueprint for New Beginnings: A Responsible Budget for America's Priorities", 28 February 2001.

² Lancaster University, Centre for Defence and International Security Studies, "Missile Resources: Selected National Capabilities", at <http://www.cdiss.org/david1.htm>.

³ Carnegie Non-Proliferation Project, "World Missile Chart - Countries Possessing Ballistic Missiles", <http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/resources/ballisticmissilechart.htm>.

⁴ *Op Cit*, "A Blueprint for New Beginnings: A Responsible Budget for America's Priorities".

⁵ Statement by Director of Central Intelligence, George J. Tenet before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on the "Worldwide Threat 2001: National Security in a Changing World", 7 February 2001.

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency Publications, "Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future With Nongovernment Experts", December 2000, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/globaltrends2015/index.html>

⁷ National Intelligence Council, "Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States Through 2015", September 1999.

⁸ Statement for the Record to the Senate Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services on The Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States by Robert D. Walpole National Intelligence Officer for Strategic and Nuclear Programs, 9 February 2000.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States Through 2015".

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon. Geoffrey Hoon MP, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 12 Feb 2001, Column: 49W.

¹⁴ US Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Proliferation: Threat and Response", January 2001.

¹⁵ *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Nuclear Notebook, "Global Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945 – 2000", March/April 2000; "Russian Nuclear Forces 2000", July/August 2000.

¹⁶ *Op Cit*, Statement by Robert D. Walpole.

¹⁷ "Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States Through 2015", September 1999.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ US Department of Energy Advisory Board Russia Task Force, "Report Card on the Department of Energy's Non-Proliferation Programs with Russia", 10 January 2001.

²⁰ Martin Kettle, "Missile warning to US", *The Guardian*, 11 August 2000.

²¹ James Miles, "US Missiles: China's view", BBC, 6 July 2000.

²² Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Brian Wilson MP, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 15 Mar 2001, Column 1278.