The Bush administration assumed office deeply committed to the deployment of missile defence and eager to modify substantially or even to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty to achieve that objective. To the new administration, this represents not simply a desirable long-term vision but an immediate policy priority. Every indication suggests that the administration wishes to move with dispatch to escape the constraints of the ABM Treaty. Indeed, some missile-defence enthusiasts hoped, if not expected, that the new administration would withdraw from the treaty almost immediately and there is already some concern and disappointment that it has not yet done so.\(^1\) Still, by July 2001, the administration had publicly stated its expectation that the United States will violate the treaty within months.\(^2\) Similarly, the administration appears determined to construct a first missile-defence site in Alaska as quickly as possible, perhaps initially conceived as a test facility rather than an operational site. The contract that would permit construction to begin has been drawn. The funds to make this possible have been requested. The work in Alaska should begin this year.\(^3\) The publicly articulated aspiration is to have initial interceptors in place by 2004. It seems clear that the Bush administration wishes to bequeath to the winner of the 2004 presidential election a world in which the ABM Treaty has been left behind and the initial missile-defence deployments have occurred.

The Bush administration must pursue this agenda in a world full of uneasiness about US missile-defence plans. There were doubts at home and abroad about Clinton’s intention to move somewhat more slowly toward very limited missile defences, whose components would be ground-based interceptors in a configuration that was largely treaty compliant. Bush’s more enthusiastic and rapid approach, aimed at the eventual deployment of layered defences, including sea-, air- and space-based components that are incompatible with the treaty, poses an even greater challenge to those who worry about the wisdom of abandoning the ABM Treaty and embarking on the deployment of missile defences. The new terms of the missile-defence debate

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have been set by the administration. Why these steps on this timetable? Is it really desirable or sensible to move so fast in this direction?

President George W. Bush and his team, naturally, are eager to persuade sceptics at home and abroad of the merits of their approach to missile defence or, at least, to minimise the diplomatic costs of and the domestic political opposition to their preferred course of action. Beseeching friends and allies to keep an open mind, the administration has launched a global sales pitch for its emerging missile-defence policies. President Bush’s speech of 1 May 2001 was the keynote of this effort. It was followed immediately by the dispatch of high-level officials to key countries to present the administration’s missile-defence message. Visits to Europe by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld followed forthwith. Then President Bush himself undertook his first European trip and his first US–Russia summit, with missile defence high on the agenda throughout his journey. The administration’s case for missile defence has now been heard, as articulated at the highest levels.

The Bush administration seems satisfied that it has made progress in selling its missile-defence policies, but wide scepticism remains and there are few true converts. It seems more likely that other powers, whether friends and allies or potential adversaries, will bow to the inevitable than that they will be genuinely persuaded by the case for missile defence. And with good reason, because the case the Bush administration has put before the world is not compelling. Every component of its argument is tendentious or debatable. Those with genuinely open minds could easily give the administration’s case a fair hearing and still disagree with its conclusions. Even those who share the administration’s concern about the future missile threat could conclude that it is premature to race ahead with immature missile-defence technologies in order to offset speculative missile threats. Even those who share the administration’s willingness to consider seriously the eventual utility of missile defences could conclude that it is not desirable to press urgently forward now.

The case that the Bush administration has offered its global audience in numerous speeches, press interviews and congressional appearances consists of at least seven frequently repeated elements. A careful examination of each indicates why the open-minded might not be persuaded.

**Deployment is warranted by new missile threats**

During the Cold War, the United States was threatened by the massive Soviet nuclear arsenal. That arsenal that was in the hands of Soviet leaders often regarded (especially by Western hawks) as ruthless, expansionist, coldly indifferent to the sufferings of their own citizens and subject to the unfathomable machinations of Kremlin politics. The primary concern today, however, is not a heavily armed superpower rival governed by stern and bloodthirsty leaders, but hypothetical capabilities that small or medium powers might (or might not) acquire at some unknown point in the future. The Bush administration’s position is that the supplanting of a large real threat by small hypothetical threats is grounds for abandoning the ABM Treaty and moving vigorously toward the deployment of missile defences.
It is not hard to understand why much of the world finds this position to be peculiar and unconvincing. None of the threatening states whose behaviour is motivating American moves toward missile defence presently possesses either nuclear weapons or intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Most do not possess any missiles with a range over 1,450 kilometres (900 miles). None has utilised solid-fuel rockets. None has extensive missile test facilities or the capacity to manufacture significant numbers of long-range missiles. Even in the worst case, none can have such capabilities for some years to come. In the best case, most of the potential proliferators (who are few in any case) will never acquire ICBMs armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The most immediate catalyst for Washington’s recent embrace of missile defences, North Korea, is a small, impoverished nation of 23 million people whose entire gross domestic product is estimated to be less than 10% of the annual US defence budget. Moreover, it is far from certain that North Korea will survive as an independent state over the medium-to-long term; many believe that it is more likely to disappear than to develop nuclear-armed ICBMs. The American preoccupation with the North Korean threat inspires wide disbelief: many abroad simply cannot believe that the United States feels so threatened by such a weak and fragile state that it must undertake to deploy missile defences at vast expense.

Certainly, proliferation of missiles and WMD is a legitimate and serious concern. Future proliferation could well produce unwelcome new threats to American security. In the current environment, however, open minds could easily conclude that there is no threat so new, so large and so imminent that it justifies the strategic revolution being proposed by the Bush administration. William Pfaff voices a characteristic response when he says of the current administration plans for missile defence, ‘They want a rush program to stop a missile threat widely held to be improbable, if it exists at all’.

The new threats cannot be deterred
Even if new missile threats do emerge, it is not inevitable that missile defences are the best, the appropriate, or the necessary response. Indeed, for the last half-century, the United States has relied on a different answer to missile threats: deterrence. With the exception of a brief period in the early 1970s, when it deployed a strategically insignificant missile-defence site in North Dakota, the United States has never possessed a national missile-defence capability. (Ironically, the decision to shut down the one missile-defence site after only one year of operation was taken by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld in 1975.) This was despite the enormous nuclear threat posed by the Soviet Union and the potential nuclear threat posed by China. The United States relied on deterrence – the threat of highly damaging retaliation – to coerce restraint in the nuclear behaviour of its foes.

Mysteriously, now that the United States is challenged primarily by much smaller, much weaker opponents, deterrence seems to have lost its value. The United States may have applied deterrence against the large, powerful threats that existed during the Cold War, but in this new era the relatively weak rogue
states who might someday threaten the United States with ICBMs are said to be undeterrable. Against today’s tyrants, President Bush said in his 1 May speech, ‘Cold War deterrence is no longer enough’. This leads to one key element of the Bush administration’s missile-defence logic: if emerging threats cannot be deterred, then it is imperative that the United States be able to defend against WMD-armed missile threats.

Why are the potentially threatening states – in particular, Iran, Iraq and North Korea – regarded as unaffected even by credible US deterrent threats? Largely on the basis, it appears, of the highly unattractive characteristics of their regimes. As Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld put it in Senate testimony, ‘We cannot rely on them being deterred … These are very different regimes’. No doubt these are hostile, brutal and unappealing regimes. However, the claim that rogue states are not deterrable is an assertion or an assumption, convenient to the case for missile defence but far from universally shared. To cite just one illustration, Shibley Telhami writes of Iraq that

While Saddam Hussein is portrayed here as one of the greatest threats to world peace, the rest of the world sees him as a ruthless dictator who is neither powerful enough to post such a threat nor so suicidal as to be immune to military deterrence.

The administration’s denigration of deterrence is not simply unpersuasive, it is unwise. Until the United States has deployed meaningful missile-defence capacities, it will necessarily rely on deterrence. Even when these defences are deployed, their perfect effectiveness cannot be assumed, which means that deterrence will continue to matter. Moreover, missile defences provide no protection against other means of delivery. Other WMD threats, against which the United States has little protection, must still be deterred. For these reasons, the administration ought to be buttressing America’s deterrent policy rather than questioning its effectiveness. And for those open minds that conclude that the United States can and should deter any future missile threats, the case for acting now to deploy missile defence is much less convincing.

**The United States can be deterred**

Massive American nuclear and conventional capabilities are thought to be insufficient to deter potential adversaries. By contrast, even small states in possession of tiny WMD inventories are thought to be capable of deterring the United States. According to the Bush administration (echoing arguments made by the Clinton administration in support of its missile-defence plans), this could prevent Washington from intervening where necessary and could even fundamentally alter US foreign policy. As Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz argued in forceful testimony before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, hostile potential proliferators believe that if they can hold the American people at risk, they can prevent us from projecting force to stop acts of aggression and deter us from defending our interests around the world … They may secure, in their estimation, the capability to prevent
The solution to this problem, in the Bush administration’s view, is the deployment of modestly capable defences. If the United States has some capacity to defend itself against future missile threats, goes this logic, then it will not fear the consequences of an internationalist foreign policy and it will not be intimidated when contemplating intervention.

This argument is widely made and is commonly assumed to be one of the strongest elements of the case for limited missile defence. At first glance, it certainly seems plausible that WMD-armed ICBMs in the hands of hostile powers will influence Washington’s perceptions and behaviour. Examined carefully, however, this argument is not as potent as many believe. Four considerations undercut its persuasiveness.

First, and most fundamentally, the missile defences presently urged by the Bush administration will be, in its own admirably candid telling, both modest in capability and imperfectly effective. Imperfect defences may reduce, but will not eliminate, the risk that the United States will be struck by an ICBM armed with whatever horrible WMD warhead. If the United States is so sensitive to the deterrent threats of adversaries that even tiny holdings of WMD and missiles are able to paralyse it, then it should still be paralysed even if defences are deployed because it will still be vulnerable to the attacking weapons that are not destroyed by imperfect defences. Indeed, if missile-defence critics are correct that the contemplated defences are readily negated by cheap and feasible decoys, there may be little appreciable reduction in US vulnerability. Moreover, and rather paradoxically, the modest defences envisioned by the Bush administration – able, as Rumsfeld has repeatedly stated, to handle only ‘handfuls’ of attacking warheads – will leave the United States vulnerable to any foe capable of mustering a WMD missile threat that exceeds the quite limited capacity of US defences. The Bush missile-defence scheme will leave the United States imperfectly protected against small threats and unprotected against larger threats. Thus, against deterrent threats large and small, the United States will remain at risk even after deploying missile-defence capabilities. Defences are not the solution if the problem is that the United States is extremely risk-averse and easily deterred.

Second, even if missile defences were capable of confidently defeating any rogue-state missile threat that might emerge, the United States would still be vulnerable to attack by all other means of delivery. No one has suggested that the United States is or will become invulnerable to all other sources of WMD threat. Hence, there is no reason to assume that the United States will be deterred without defences but undeterred with them. The risk of attack and the vulnerability to attack will exist in either circumstance. Again, defences do not solve the problem if the threat of even a small WMD strike is adequate to stymie the United States.

Third, there is no reason for Washington to be deterred from international involvement or intervention if one concludes that the United States can deter us from forming international coalitions to challenge their acts of aggression and force us into a truly isolationist posture.9
the WMD threats it might face in the future. During the Cold War, it was argued that the stability of mutual deterrence made it possible to imagine large-scale conventional war despite the huge nuclear holdings on both sides. The same logic could be applied to the heavily skewed deterrent relationships that might exist between the United States and hostile proliferators. American intervention can take place shielded by Washington’s deterrent threats. There is, of course, the risk that deterrence will fail, but then so might defences.

Fourth, the United States cannot allow itself to be deterred by the modest missile capabilities of lesser states without strongly encouraging the perception that WMD-armed missiles have enormous utility, especially against the world’s otherwise unstoppable lone superpower. Should such a notion take root, this could well fuel proliferation by demonstrating to America’s antagonists what they need to do to neutralise Washington’s military supremacy. If this is understood by American decision-makers, then instead of being deterred by WMD missile threats they may feel compelled to act in the face of such threats in order to signal the disutility of WMD acquisition. The United States has a huge interest in squelching the perception that hostile states can counterbalance US power via proliferation. Thus, a belief in the efficacy of US deterrent threats means that Washington can act; concern about disproving the efficacy of others’ deterrent threats against the United States may cause American decision-makers to believe that they must act. Indeed, some specialists have concluded, on the basis of such calculations, that the United States is more likely to intervene in instances where the opponent possesses WMD than when it does not.

In short, open minds could easily conclude that the United States should not and will not be deterred from intervention by WMD missile threats from regional proliferators. Further, there is no reason to expect that the deployment of modest and imperfect defences will be an effective antidote to highly risk-averse behaviour by the United States.

**Missile defences will discourage proliferation**

The same implacable foes who are regarded as undeterrable, despite massive American capabilities and retaliatory options, are assumed to be readily discouraged from pursuing missiles and other WMD by the deployment of modest US missile defences. In the Bush administration’s view, failure to deploy missile defences invites missile proliferation. As Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld put it, ‘Our lack of defences against ballistic missiles creates incentives for missile proliferation’. Conversely, if the United States deploys defences, potential proliferators will give up their efforts to acquire missiles because of the American ability to defend against missile attacks.

This is a plausible logic. But the opposite logic, which emphasises that the deployment of missile defences is likely to produce offence–defence arms-racing, commands wider support and is more fully supported by the historical evidence. If adversarial states are capable enough to be taken seriously as intercontinental threats, then they will be capable enough to pursue a variety of measures that might negate or defeat US missile defences – especially given
that they will have many years to respond to slowly emerging missile-defence deployments. They would have a variety of options: expanding the size of their WMD missile capabilities (especially relevant in the context of Secretary Rumsfeld’s repeated claim that US missile defences will only be capable of dealing with ‘handfuls’ of attacking warheads); exploitation of decoys, a relatively cheap and highly cost-effective way of complicating the task of the defender; and use of other means of delivery, perhaps even to attack missile defences and thereby open the way for missile strikes. Moreover, the dangerous, irrational, risk-taking foes who provide justification for the Bush administration’s immediate push for missile defence may well be willing to gamble that US defences will not work well enough to neutralise their missile capabilities. In short, perhaps US missile defences will so discourage potential proliferators that they will simply give up their efforts to acquire WMD capabilities. But it seems at least equally likely that missile-defence deployments will provoke arsenals that are larger and more sophisticated. Open minds could easily conclude that the potential arms-race effect is more likely.

**US missile defence will not provoke nuclear build-ups in Russia and China**

In the view of the Bush administration, not only will missile defences have a salutary impact on potential proliferators, but there will be no meaningful adverse reactions from China and Russia. Beijing is apparently regarded by the administration as strategically autistic, bent on its ways and unresponsive to the behaviour of the United States. As Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld put it, ‘China is going to do what it’s going to do. What we do with respect to missile defence … is not going to affect one whit what the People’s Republic of China does’. Presumably, Secretary Rumsfeld was referring to China’s longstanding, slow-motion strategic modernisation programme, which was put in place well before the Bush administration came to office. But this interpretation is contrary to the explicit position of the Chinese government and simply ignores the possibility that US missile-defence efforts will affect the scale, pace and character of China’s nuclear modernisation.

As for Russia, several arguments are offered to explain why Moscow will not react to missile defence with offsetting measures of its own. First, in the post-Cold War era, political relations with Russia are friendly, not hostile, and the planned missile defence is directed at others. While this is undoubtedly true, relations are far from completely harmonious. American and Russian strategic forces are still enormous and largely directed at one another. Moreover, Moscow is openly attracted to an anti-hegemonic policy to counter American supremacy. Second, the modest initial deployments will not, it is said, jeopardise Moscow’s large nuclear force. But, of course, Russia cannot know whether the United States will stop with modest initial missile-defence deployments. And more importantly, in the short run, this interpretation ignores that fact that Russia’s deterrent posture depends entirely on its retaliatory nuclear capabilities. Today, with its warning system seriously degraded, its command-and-control system eroded, its missile submarines
generally tied up harmlessly (and vulnerably) in port, and its strategic readiness undermined by social and financial pressures, Russia's second-strike capability after a US attack may actually be quite small. Accordingly, even relatively modest US missile defences could in fact be relevant to Russia's deterrent calculations. In the context of good political relations, it can be argued that Russia should not be concerned about maintaining a deterrent capability against the United States. But it is not hard to imagine worst-case planners in the Kremlin concluding otherwise – not least because its mutual deterrent relationship with the United States is Russia's only real claim to great power status. Third, it is argued that even if Russia is inclined to respond to US missile-defence deployments, it cannot afford to do so. Hence, there can be no offence–defence arms race. While it is undoubtedly true that financial constraints will inhibit Russia's ability to respond, it is very short-sighted to assume Russia's current financial problems will persist throughout the ten-to-twenty year time-frame of current US missile-defence plans. Moreover, this view probably underestimates Russia's current ability to maintain substantial nuclear forces if given the motivation to do so.

Perhaps the regular and occasionally strident objections to missile defence voiced by Moscow and Beijing are mere political posturing. Perhaps their explicit threats to augment their nuclear-force postures to offset US missile-defence deployments are mere bluff. But perhaps not. In the past, offence–defence arms-race dynamics operated very powerfully. In response to the first hint of Soviet missile defences in the 1960s, for example, the United States began to contemplate the deployment of 50,000 warheads. It was to avoid such expensive and fruitless interactions that both sides came to accept the ABM Treaty. Open minds could easily conclude that Russia and China are not likely to acquiesce passively to missile-defence deployments that further buttress American primacy while potentially undermining their own deterrent postures. Moreover, if relations with the United States sour, Moscow or Beijing could cause great mischief by promoting missile proliferation around the world and thereby multiplying the problems for defences. US missile defences may cause the large real nuclear threats to expand, for the sake of coping with the small hypothetical threats. It is far from clear that this is a desirable trade-off.

**US missile defence policy will be made in consultation with friends, allies and other interested parties**

Chastened by the sceptical international reactions to its missile-defence intentions, the Bush administration has made a great show of its concerted effort to visit foreign capitals and to listen to the views of others. It rapidly came to understand the disadvantages of appearing to proceed unilaterally in a manner that seems indifferent to the views and interests of others.

The reality is, however, that the main lines of US missile-defence policy have been determined and there is no evident willingness to reconsider the basic objectives. Thus, on the eve of his much-heralded trip to Europe, President Bush flatly and uncompromisingly reiterated his commitment to
move forward on missile defences and beyond the ABM Treaty. Even more
tellingly, on his return from Europe, he openly boasted that his positions were
unchanged. In a revealing interview with The Wall Street Journal, for example,
President Bush commented, ‘With all due modesty, I think Ronald Reagan
would have been proud of how I conducted myself. I went to Europe a humble
leader of a great country, and stood my ground. I wasn’t going to yield’.17
Missile-defence enthusiasts echoed this appraisal of the president’s European
trip. Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote approvingly, for
example, that the president had effectively employed the principle of ‘Make
nice, then carry on’, and concluded ‘for all the rhetorical bows to Russian,
European, and liberal sensibilities, look at how Bush returns from Europe …
The ABM Treaty is history. Missile Defense is on’.18

In short, the Bush administration seems to have openly proclaimed that it
will listen to others but it will not change its fundamental approach. This is, in
William Safire’s brilliant phrase, a policy of ‘consultative unilateralism’.19 In the
context of such a policy, open minds could easily conclude that they were
dealing with a closed-minded administration whose only real aim is gaining
acceptance for predetermined policies.

A ‘new strategic framework’

Opponents of its missile-defence policies are, according to the Bush
administration, mired in the Cold War. What is needed instead, many
administration voices have insisted, is a ‘new strategic framework’, one that is
more suitable to post-Cold War realities. They want to develop, as Secretary of
Defense Rumsfeld has stated, ‘a new foundation for world peace and security
in the twenty-first century’.20 So far, so good. But what is the content of this new
strategic framework that is meant to justify the abandonment of the ABM
Treaty? Alas, there is no clear or coherent answer.

One suggestion evident in the many administration statements on missile
defence is that the new framework will involve the deployment of defences to
deter opponents. Paul Wolfowitz has explained, for example, ‘The missile
defenses we deploy will be precisely that – defenses. They will threaten no one.
They will, however, deter those who would threaten us with ballistic missile
attack’.21 This does not conform to any known conception of deterrence. Indeed,
by definition deterrence works via threats of retaliation whereas defences seek
to defeat an attack or to neutralise the deterrent threats of others. Hence, this
puzzling notion does little to clarify the new strategic framework

Another idea suggested by President Bush is that the new security
framework involves moving beyond mutual deterrence. Insofar as this has
meaning in the context of missile defences, it implies that Russia’s nuclear
capability will be neutralised by US missile-defence deployments. How else
would defences permit an escape from mutual deterrence? But the
administration emphatically denies that its missile-defence programme will
undermine Russia’s nuclear capability and Secretary of State Powell has
insisted that mutual deterrence will remain ‘indispensable’ in a world of
defences. Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley has offered a somewhat fuller vision of the new strategic framework. The president, Hadley explained, ‘is talking about a much broader framework, one that says you need nonproliferation strategies, counterproliferation strategies, traditional deterrence, and much less reliance on nuclear weapons’. But these are the familiar terms of debate from the 1990s and the details that would explain how the Bush administration’s approach to these issues is different are lacking. Finally, there has been frequent mention of unilateral cuts in US strategic offensive forces as part of the new approach. This is probably sensible, is certainly feasible, and will be attractive in many quarters, but it hardly constitutes a new strategic framework; it is simply a unilateral American policy choice. Overall, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that a clear conception of the new strategic framework does not exist. Indeed, the administration is occasionally open about the largely content-free nature of the notion. As National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice has said, ‘The idea here is that we should have a new security framework. Now, we are open as to what form that takes’.

In truth, only one thing is clear about the new strategic framework: it requires the elimination of the ABM Treaty. Rice puts the point plainly: the ABM Treaty ‘is an impediment to getting to a new foundation for security in the modern era’. But how can one assess whether the new strategic framework is desirable if its characteristics are not spelled out? How can one judge whether it is worthwhile to abandon the ABM Treaty when the framework to replace it is so vaguely specified? It is hard to avoid the suspicion that the new strategic framework is an idea primarily intended to comfort those who will be reluctant to set aside the ABM Treaty in the absence of some negotiated arrangement to replace it. Perhaps there will be more substantive definition of the notion somewhere down the road. But for the time being, the phrase ‘new strategic framework’ appears to be little more than a euphemism for ‘no more ABM Treaty’.

No Case for Haste
Seeking to smooth the path for its strongly held positions on missile defence and the ABM Treaty, the Bush administration has deployed a set of arguments aimed at winning over doubters, neutralising critics and calming diplomatic concerns. These arguments are intended not simply to urge that missile defence remain an option on the agenda in the event that future missile threats emerge, but to make the case for haste in breaking out of the ABM Treaty and moving immediately and vigorously toward missile-defence deployments. Because there is widespread (though not universal) doubt about the desirability of its approach, the administration is working hard to justify its intention to act now to create an entirely new strategic reality. Its passion for missile defences will impress some, its power to implement its policies despite disagreement will sway others, but its arguments are not likely to persuade the unpersuaded. The administration has made a commendable and concerted effort to build a case for its cause. The problem it faces is that the case it is making is simply not
The case for haste is further undermined by the present status of the US missile-defence programme. Testing even of the most advanced components is still in the early stages and has not been notably successful so far. There is considerable public uncertainty about when US missile-defence tests would be inhibited by the ABM Treaty, but it appears that the tests planned for at least the next several years are compliant with the treaty. If this is true, then the rush to undo the ABM Treaty appears particularly curious; why take on that diplomatic complication now if the programme can progress in any event? And since the testing programme is far from complete and the test results are far from reassuring, it follows inexorably that there is no proven technology available for rapid deployment. Indeed, the former head of Pentagon testing, Stephen Coyle, has testified to Congress that the current missile-defence interceptor programme will not be ready for deployment until 2011. The Bush administration’s hope to introduce initial missile-defence deployment within three or four years collides with the reality that the necessary technology is not now available and will not be ready for deployment on its desired schedule. The administration has dealt with this complication by deciding to proceed anyway with the site in Alaska, declaring it to be a test site rather than an operational deployment – while also stating that, once built, the site can be declared operational if a missile threat should arise. This is a clever finesse of its difficulty, but nevertheless Bush’s determination to drive toward deployment although the technology is not ready and the threat remains speculative has provoked withering criticism. Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, for example, has offered a sarcastic one-sentence summary of the administration’s policy on missile defence: ‘We will deploy weapons that don’t work against an enemy that doesn’t exist’.

Disagreeing with the Bush administration’s case for haste does not imply a disregard for the serious issues it has raised. Missile proliferation is a legitimate concern. Potential missile threats could emerge. Serious policy responses are necessary. But so long as the benefits associated with defences remain so limited and the costs and complications remain so large, it would be preferable to build a policy that rests on three broad pillars: strengthening deterrence and the barriers to proliferation, and continuing research and development on missile defences.

**Strengthen deterrence**

The United States will need to deter any WMD threat that materialises in the future, whether missile-related or not. It should be made clear that the United States will respond ferociously to any use of WMD against its territory, its forces, or its allies. Against the so-called rogue threat, the United States should
declare a deterrent policy of ‘regimicide’: any regime that uses WMD against the United States will not survive. Hostile leaders will not need to be very sane or very rational to understand what that means.29 Because of its enormous military superiority, the United States can credibly make such a threat. Because any large-scale WMD use would be so heinous and so galvanising, the likelihood that this threat would be implemented in response is quite high – overwhelmingly so, in my view. This is the message that American leaders should be broadcasting to potential foes. One of the most unfortunate aspects of the current missile-defence debate is that the advocates routinely call into question the effectiveness of America’s deterrent posture.30

**Strengthen barriers to missile proliferation**

The best scenario is one in which intercontinental missile threats do not materialise. The spread of long-range missiles, in sharp contrast to shorter-range missiles, has been remarkably slow. Development of ICBMs remains difficult and costly, especially in the absence of international help. The United States should undertake to maximise the barriers to the spread of long-range missiles. This would imply efforts to collaborate with those who might promote the spread of such missiles (namely, Russia and China), to induce responsible behaviour on the part of hostile states like North Korea who have fuelled missile proliferation, to encourage export restraint on the part of states who are developing their own missiles for their own reasons (that is, India and Pakistan), and to reinforce restraints on international commerce in missile technology. This approach is unlikely to work perfectly over the long run, but it could defer intercontinental missile threats long enough for the cost-benefit calculus for missile defences to become more favourable to deployment.31 If the sceptics are correct, though, missile defences could make this approach more difficult by giving states an incentive to undermine the American position through missile proliferation.

**Continue research and development on missile defences**

The United States has for many years undertaken a steady and substantial programme of missile-defence research and development. It is sensible and prudent to continue this effort. It contributes to the US ability to assess the likely benefits and limitations of defensive technologies. It provides potential technological options should the day come when the benefits of missile-defence deployments seem to outweigh the costs. If the Bush administration wishes to spend additional funds to promote missile defence R&D, this is a defensible and politically tenable position. If it wishes to alter priorities within the missile defence R&D programme, this is unlikely to provoke wide political backlash. But, at present, it seems much more appropriate to focus on the development of proven technologies than on the deployment of unproven technologies.

This three-pronged approach represents an adequate response to the current realities of missile proliferation. It does not foreclose the missile-defence option for the future. It provides a responsible alternative to the case
for haste. This is, however, not terribly meaningful so long as this alternative approach is regarded as insufficient and unacceptable to the Bush administration.

**Conclusion**

The political reality is that the Bush administration does not need to win the argument. It offers a weak case from a strong position. Its behaviour in its first months in office leaves no doubt that it intends to abandon the ABM Treaty and to pursue missile defences no matter how many sceptics remain unconvinced. Its ability to proceed unilaterally down this path and its unwavering determination to do so will overpower potential resistance. As one NATO official commented (anonymously), ‘When you know they are going to build it no matter what, is it really worth the fight? I don’t think so’. Creating this sense of inevitability about its missile-defence policies is probably more important to the administration’s cause than trying to find more convincing arguments. Momentum rather than reason, power rather than persuasion, will carry the day.

Ultimately at issue in the present missile-defence debate is not whether or not to preserve the ABM Treaty but how best to protect the security of the United States and its friends and allies in a changing strategic environment. In the abstract, there is no reason to quarrel with the simple proposition that it is best to be defended. But the real question to ask about missile defences is: what benefit at what cost? At present, the answer seems to be that missile defences represent a high-cost remedy to a threat that is speculative, distant in time and uncertain in scale and character. Very expensive and very limited missile-defence capabilities will be acquired at the risk of provoking a variety of adverse diplomatic and strategic consequences. It is not at all clear that the net effect will be an improved security order for the United States. But it looks as if we are going to find out.
Notes


11 This is the conclusion, for example, of Victor Utgoff, ‘The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, US Interests, and World Order – A Combined Perspective’, in Utgoff, The Coming Crisis, pp. 290–291.


16 See James R. Schlesinger, ‘Rhetoric and Realities in the Star Wars Debate,’ International Security, vol. 10, no. 1, Summer 1985, p. 3. Schlesinger writes: ‘We were going to expand our offensive capabilities geometrically to deal with Soviet defence’.


See Jonathan Wright, ‘Powell Says MAD is Indispensable’, *Washington Times*, 21 June 2001. Powell’s statement was interpreted as contradicting the president’s declared distaste for mutual assured destruction.


See, for example, James Dao, ‘General Says Missile Shield Needs Money and Prudence’, *New York Times*, 15 June 2001, which reports, ‘A Pentagon official close to the missile defense program said all tests scheduled by the missile defense organization through 2003, and perhaps several years beyond that, complied with the treaty, including ones involving an airborne laser and ship-fired missiles’.


This is close to the position that the US Strategic Command developed in 1996. See Walter Pincus, ‘Military Study Mulled Deterrence of Fear’, *Washington Post*, 5 July 2001.


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