

# Debate

## In the wake of 11 September, where does missile defence fit in security spending priorities?

### High:

*Keith B. Payne is president of the National Institute for Public Policy, chairman of the Deterrence Concepts Advisory Group of the Office of the Secretary of Defense and adjunct professor at Georgetown University.*



### Low:

*Joseph Cirincione is Director of the Non-Proliferation Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*



Dear Joseph,

A bipartisan consensus in Washington supports the proposition that missile defence should be a US defence spending priority, and the American public strongly favours missile-defence deployment, as it has for many years. Indeed, approximately two-thirds of the American people believe they already are protected by missile defence. When the truth is revealed, most are not amused.

The most basic reason for making missile defence a priority is the emerging multifaceted ballistic missile threat. The September 1999 public report from the National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States Through 2015*, projected that: "During the next 15 years the United States most likely will face ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] threats from Russia, China and North Korea, probably from Iran, and possibly Iraq." The report also noted that the proliferation of medium-range ballistic missiles "has created an

immediate, serious and growing threat to US forces, interests and allies, and has significantly altered the strategic balances in the Middle East and Asia". The fact that some of those countries pursuing missile programmes are also building nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) weapons and sponsor/harbour terrorists brings this emerging threat into perspective.

The current proliferation threat generally involves missiles of less-than-ICBM range. This does not suggest, however, that defence against long-range missiles should be a low priority. To the contrary, the bipartisan Rumsfeld Commission concluded in August 1998 that emerging ballistic-missile powers could acquire an ICBM capability within about five years of a decision to do so and, for several of those years, we could be unaware that such a decision had been made. We have been duly warned of the potential for the rapid emergence of additional ICBM threats. In some cases, such as North Korea, the clock already appears to be ticking and a leisurely response would be unwise.

Even if the broader missile threat is between five and 15 years away, we are unlikely to have a mature defence when that threat is clear and immediate, unless we have a robust programme now. To await the blatant emergence of a North Korean, Iranian and/or Iraqi NBC-armed ICBM before making missile defence a high priority would be to risk an extended period of unprecedented vulnerability.

In addition, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has now stated publicly that a "rogue" state has test fired a ballistic missile at less than intercontinental range from a ship at sea. Consequently, it is a mistake to suggest that the missile threat to the United States is limited to ICBMs.

The fact that rogue missiles may be relatively unsophisticated is of no comfort. Accuracy is not required to threaten or to attack cities. Nor can any credibility be ascribed to the frequent, confident assertion that the chances of a rogue NBC missile attack are low. No one knows the probability of such an event. What

we do know is that a missile strike could kill hundreds of thousands, even millions of American and allied citizens in a single stroke. The probability of such a missile attack is unknown, but the consequences would be catastrophic. Addressing this emerging threat in a timely way must be a high priority.

Missile defence is, of course, not the complete answer to this threat. But it is an essential ingredient in any answer. The terrorist attacks of 11 September illustrate the folly of comfortable and convenient assertions that opponents “won’t dare” extraordinarily high-risk acts. History is littered with deterrence failures because leaderships occasionally are willing to dare. Even during the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union survived because “we lucked out”, according to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. The conditions necessary for deterrence to operate reliably are even less likely to pertain in the post-Cold War environment. This is not because “rogue” leaders should be viewed as irrational, but because many of the underlying conditions necessary for the predictable functioning of deterrence that were assumed in the Cold War can no longer be taken for granted.

The missile and weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) threat is real and growing. Deterrence is inadequate and, if missile defence is to be available in the foreseeable future, it must be a priority. Fortunately, the President, Congress and public have made it so.

*Yours,*  
Keith

Dear Keith,

The fierce partisan political warfare that has characterised Washington policy issues since the mid-1990s has now thankfully subsided. We all hope that the new spirit

will last beyond the current crisis. But principled disagreements on key issues remain, particularly on missile defence. There is no bipartisan consensus.

Representative John Spratt, a key moderate Democratic leader in the US House of Representatives, told us at the Carnegie Endowment that the Democrats receded on missile-defence issues after 11 September “because we did not want to be in a position of hammering at the administration at this critical time”. Chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Services Carl Levin writes: “Those of us who have argued that unilaterally deploying a missile-defence system could make the United States less, not more, secure find fresh evidence for our position in the administration’s admirable multilateral response to the recent terrorist attacks.”

There is still a deep divide over the threat, technical feasibility, schedule, cost and strategic consequences of deploying missile defence. As you know, there is considerable agreement on the need to press forward with the deployment of short-range or theatre missile defences. Here, there is a demonstrable threat and a greater chance of eventually getting a system with at least some capability against Scuds, missiles with a range of about 180 km, and their slightly longer-range cousins. The Patriot did not work in the Gulf War — despite initial false perceptions and more persistent false claims — but an improved version will finally be fielded in 2002 and should fare better against simple, short-range threats. The divide over long-range defence, however, continues and not just along party lines. Many officials in the departments of state and defence hold sharply different views on the programme and the utility of remaining in the ABM Treaty. Meanwhile, defence hawks and fiscal hawks in

the Republican-controlled House are split over costs.

One example of this divide — and of the serious technological problems plaguing the programme — is the November decision by the House Appropriations Committee to cancel the satellite system that is vital to long-range missile-defence systems. The Space-Based Infrared System-Low is years behind schedule and programme-cost estimates have grown to \$23 billion from \$10 billion in just the past year, the Committee said. Pentagon officials say that missile defence can’t work without the satellites. The Committee’s Republican leaders say the programme is plagued with technical and design problems and has simply grown too expensive.

This is just one of the dozens of technical problems that committed missile-defence advocates brush aside with bromides about America’s technical abilities. But it will take years before we know if any system will work. As Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld said this July: “We don’t have a system. We don’t have an architecture. We don’t have a proposed architecture. All we have is a couple of handfuls of very interesting research and development and testing programmes.”

While 11 September has not apparently changed the views of either proponents or opponents — and you and I, Keith are two excellent examples — it has changed the diplomatic, political and financial environment profoundly. In this New World, missile-defence programmes are likely to suffer. “Never again will supporters of national missile defence be able to claim, as President Bush did in May, that ballistic missiles in the hands of rogue regimes constitute ‘today’s most urgent threat,’” says Senator Levin. “Ballistic missiles are not the tools of terrorists.... nor are terrorists

Emerging ballistic missile powers could acquire an ICBM capability within about five years of a decision to do so

KEITH B. PAYNE

likely to obtain ballistic missiles for future attacks. When the missile-defence debate resumes, there must be a renewed appreciation that every dollar we spend on the least likely threat of ballistic missiles is a dollar not spent on the most likely threat: terrorism.”

The bills for the new war on terrorism are mounting. The postal service needs billions just to decontaminate its mail facilities; bioterrorism defence will cost tens of billions; airport security billions more; and the military campaign alone will already receive half of the \$40 billion emergency appropriations Congress approved in September. Missile defence will now have to compete with new defence demands, most of which the American people see as addressing more urgent threats. These are not hypothetical “what ifs” but real, already-happened-and-could-happen-again threats.

Homeland defence means increasing security for critical infrastructure including dams, nuclear reactors, chemical plants, bridges, tunnels and stadiums. It means not just stockpiling vaccines, as the president wants, but pouring money into emergency rooms and clinics for more staff, training and detection equipment, as the Congress wants. It has already meant that the United States is fighting a two-front war — in Afghanistan and in the airports and mailrooms of America. Missile defence is irrelevant to both wars. This is a whole new game.

*Yours,*  
Joseph

Dear Joseph,

You dispute my contention that there exists a political consensus for priority spending on missile defence, citing statements from Representative John Spratt and Senator Carl Levin. Selective quotation usually presents a limited picture. But if that is the evidence you appreciate, I should cite the following comments from the same Congressional leaders.

In contrast to your suggestion that there is no “demonstrable” long-range missile threat, Representative Spratt has stated: “I think there is a threat of an accidental, unauthorised, or rogue missile attack, existing and emerging, and I think it would be wise to have a missile-defence system to meet that threat.” And, despite your contention that there is general support only for short-range defences, Representative Spratt speaks in favour of missile defence: “I have long thought that a ground-based defence, deployed at two sites, is our best first step.”

Senator Levin has similarly stated: “I share the goal of providing the American people with effective protection against the emerging long-range missile threat from rogue states.” And, to add weight to my point, note that Senator Joseph Lieberman, the recent Democratic candidate for vice president, has stated: “We need the national missile defence. We face a real and growing threat that cannot be countered by our conventional forces and which will not be deterred by the threat of retaliation.”

Further, you claim that the 11 September terrorist attacks moved the political climate away from support for missile defence. The most recent and definitive proof to the contrary is the actual legislative record. The House Armed Services

Committee report, issued just before 11 September, stated: “The committee endorses the President’s approach to ballistic missile defence, and is encouraged that the proposed missile-defence programme includes plans for a layered defence system and realistic testing, and explores a full range of technologies. As such, the committee endorses the Administration’s missile-defence programme, with modest adjustments, and recommends \$8.2 billion, \$2.9 billion more than the fiscal year 2001 level, for the continued development of ballistic missile defences.” On 25 September 2001 the full House of Representatives ultimately passed, by the overwhelming vote of 398 to 17, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2002. It would provide \$7.9 billion for missile defence, over \$2.5 billion more than the 2001 level, and almost \$1 billion more than the 2002 budget request. The ultimate budget figures for missile defence will obviously depend on the outcome of the ongoing Senate-House conference, and the Senate has proposed lower funding levels. At this point, however, it is clear that the level of spending to be made available for missile defence will be increased significantly over 2001.

The consensus I described has held, and for good reason. 11 September did not fracture the public or political consensus behind missile-defence spending. Instead, it demonstrated just how arrogant and foolish is the “they-wouldn’t-dare-strike-us” attitude and, therefore, how serious is the emerging ballistic-missile threat. The United States need not abandon missile defence to fund other programmes. This is not the either/or choice you would like to pose. As the emerging missile-defence budget and recent \$40 billion emergency anti-terrorism appropriation show, the United States will fund defensive capabilities against a

wide spectrum of threats, including missile attack.

*Yours,*  
Keith

Dear Keith,

I, you, the US Congress, NATO and Russia all support missile defences. But there are wide chasms within that apparent consensus. It all depends on your definition of “missile defence”. Most support research, short-range defences and exploration of national-defence options. There is broad opposition, however, to abrogating the ABM Treaty and pursuing a crash programme to deploy ineffective interceptors.

The budget for missile defence has indeed ballooned this year, but this may be its high-water mark. Political and editorial opinion across the United States and Europe is overwhelmingly in favour of preserving the treaty regime that has helped keep our nations secure for over 50 years and for responsible budgets. For example, the most widely distributed paper in the country, *USA Today*, argued in an editorial on 22 October that: “The missile-defence programme stands as an embarrassing admission that the United States during the past decade has spent considerable time and money attempting to counter the least likely of threats: a rogue nation willing to commit national suicide by launching a nuclear-tipped missile. Neglected was the more urgent threat of low-budget terrorists with rich imaginations.”

For fiscal year 2002, the federal government has budgeted \$1.7 billion to combat WMD terrorism, as part of a \$9.7 billion budget for anti-terrorism efforts overall. Yet we will spend, as you note, \$7.9 billion on missile defence. We must restore some balance.

If Osama bin Laden had a nuclear weapon, few doubt he would use it. But where would he get one? Most likely from the vast, poorly secured stockpiles of materials, weapons and expertise remaining in Russia and other former Soviet states — some within 800 km of Afghanistan. This is why it is so important to secure and eliminate the 20,000 Russian nuclear weapons and 1,100 tons of fissile material, and find jobs for the thousands of unemployed nuclear scientists and biowarfare specialists. We should triple the \$700 million per year the US government spends on cooperative threat-reduction programmes with Russia (and help convince the European Union to start spending some serious money as well). If we did, we could secure and eliminate most of the threat within eight years.

This is the tragedy of the Bush-Putin meeting in Crawford. All the good humour and good food still left the new strategic framework an empty shell. The chance to lock-in binding weapons reductions and to secure Russian arsenals against terrorist thefts was missed because of the positions you and others have championed. Disagreements over a missile-defence system that exists only on paper prevented progress in reducing genuine nuclear threats.

Even after the international coalition smashes *al-Qaida* and uproots its American and European cells, other terrorist threats will remain. There will always be a terrorist demand for weapons of mass destruction. Our best defence is to shrink the supply. This, in the end, is where you and I differ. Missile defence has a role to play in a comprehensive defence. For you, it is the leading role. For me it is a bit player in a larger and more urgent drama.

*Yours,*  
Joseph

Dear Joseph,

I appreciate your endorsement of missile defence and your agreement with my initial point that there is an American political consensus for priority spending on missile defence. No evidence suggests that this political consensus is fracturing. Recent polling data from the Pew Research Center, for example, reveals that since 11 September the already strong public support for defence spending and missile defence has increased.

I agree with you that missile defence is only one of a variety of US and allied security requirements. But, missile defence is essential and there is no necessary choice between it and other security needs, financially or operationally. Congress rightly and obviously will fund missile defence and other requirements. The recent \$40 billion emergency anti-terrorism appropriation, for example, will build on existing civilian and military counter-measures.

We also concur on the need for balance. The existing “imbalance”, however, is in the complete absence of missile defence, the complete vulnerability of the United States and allies to missile attack. No other vulnerability has been accepted with such equanimity. We will seek to rectify this imbalance, so that a future biological or nuclear-armed missile does not find America as unprepared as it was for 11 September. To eschew missile defence now, in the

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KEITH B. PAYNE

face of an obviously emerging missile threat, would be as negligent as not pursuing those non-proliferation and counter-terror measures you rightly endorse.

Your description of the Crawford Summit is curious. In a fully congenial atmosphere, old animosities obviously were demolished. While preserving all START limits and verification measures in effect, President Bush announced unprecedented reductions in US nuclear forces, and Russian President Vladimir Putin followed suit. This breakthrough could take place only by transcending archaic Cold War-style negotiations. Some bemoaned the passing of the Cold War approach, but it had become an obstacle to more amicable political relations and corresponding nuclear reductions. In addition, at Crawford and before, President Bush clearly sought a cooperative resolution of the ABM Treaty question, and President Putin exhibited considerable flexibility. This cooperative resolution appears to be in the making to the chagrin of some missile-defence critics. Crawford reflected a new day in US relations with Russia, and that is for the good.

*Yours,*  
Keith

Dear Keith,

It wasn't the "archaic" arms-control process that blocked nuclear reductions; it was the Republican Congress. Republicans passed legislation prohibiting President Clinton

from doing what President Bush just did. Republicans blocked efforts by President Clinton and President Boris Yeltsin to reduce each side to 2,000-2,500 warheads. The United States and Russia agreed, they just couldn't get Congress to go along.

President Bush essentially embraced the 1997 Clinton-Yeltsin goal, minus the verification that a treaty provides. His figure of 1,700-2,200 is lower only because he will no longer count warheads on submarines and bombers in overhaul as "deployed". With one to two subs in overhaul at any time, each with 192 warheads, this magically lowers the numbers without changing the force. There is less to this "breakthrough" than meets the eye.

Just like missile defence. You insist on trying to wrap this programme in some grand consensus, some overwhelming public desire. But neither exists. Let us move beyond this decades-old debate. Here is where you and I and the rest of the Alliance can agree. Let us pursue an aggressive test programme for missile defence, that will go beyond simplistic demonstration shots to true combat conditions against multiple targets with realistic decoys and realistic re-entry speeds. If such defences work, we can work out cooperative deployment plans that increase US security, not decrease it by starting new conflicts.

All we need are slight modifications to the ABM treaty. The Russians are prepared to agree to permit a new Alaska test range and the testing of radars aboard Aegis ships — the two areas where current tests "bump" the treaty. As Secretary of State Colin Powell just told *The New York Times* magazine: "We can't do this on the basis of personal relations. It has to be on the basis of our national interest over time." Which means, Powell said, "You codify it somehow."

With the ABM-treaty dispute behind us, missile defence becomes just another programme competing for funds and surviving on its own merits. We will preserve the international coalition and the national unity of purpose we now enjoy. It will allow us to work together on reducing the threats we both agree are the most urgent international priority.

*Yours,*  
Joseph

**Synopsis:** Both debaters agreed that the events of 11 September had highlighted the vulnerability of the United States and its allies to a wide range of security threats demanding urgent attention and increased expenditure. They also welcomed the Congress's approval of \$40 billion emergency appropriations in September and the bipartisan approach to addressing the current crisis. They disagreed, however, over whether the \$7.9 billion earmarked for missile defence for 2002 was the best use of these resources. For Keith B. Payne, it was critical to invest today to plug a massive security gap, namely the ICBM threat, which had been identified by 1998 Rumsfeld Commission. Moreover, there was no conflict between spending on missile defence and on other priority areas. For Joseph Cirincione, the cost, technical feasibility, threat and strategic consequences of missile defence were such that it was a lower priority than areas such as bioterrorism defence, airport security, cooperative threat reduction programmes and deterrence, which had to be addressed immediately.

Missile defence is a bit player in a larger drama

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE