The NMD /Arms Control Balance: A Message for the Middle East ?

Emily Landau

Although the details of the US National Missile Defense (NMD) program have yet to be entirely worked out, the Bush administration clarified, in its first weeks in office, the very high priority that it accords to building a national ballistic missile defense capability.[1] The ballistic missile defense program is directed to provide protection for the entire territory of the US, as well as its allies and forces deployed abroad, from accidental missile launches and ballistic missile attacks from states such as Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

The internal US debate on NMD has been ongoing for several years, and has touched upon questions relating to the technical ability of a missile defense program to provide the desired defense; the cost of the system in light of the urgency of the threat; and, perhaps most importantly, the implications of the NMD program for previously agreed upon arms control agreements. The debate on the relative merits and drawbacks of developing and implementing an NMD has included inputs from other states: Russia and China strongly oppose the US plan and emphasize that it undermines the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty signed between the USSR and the US. Moreover, some European states have expressed reservations on the grounds that the program could stimulate a new arms race. In September 2000, then-President Clinton announced that he would leave the final decision on deployment to the next administration.

The debate in the US over NMD has sparked some debate in Israel as well. However, interest in Israel has tended to focus on the narrow question of the implications of the US adopting such a program for the continued development of Israel's own missile defense: the "Arrow" program. The overriding assumption is that the US program would include increased budgeting for Theater (or Tactical) Missile Defense (TMD) as a related aspect of NMD – a category within which Arrow falls – and the hope is that Israel could enhance its cooperation with the US in this realm. The very targeting of Iran and Iraq in the US definition of the threats that make NMD a defense imperative is viewed as something that could have positive implications for Israel as well, as Israel also regards these two states as its major threats in the non-conventional realm.

However, the debate over NMD raises additional issues of broader strategic significance, in that they turn on the basic approach to be adopted when confronting and dealing with ballistic missile threats. The primary question is not whether there is a palpable non-conventional threat that emanates from Iran, Iraq and North Korea - we can maintain with a fair degree of certainty that these states are investing considerable efforts in attaining and/or developing non-conventional capabilities, and have attained various degrees of achievement in this regard. However, even in this regard, the threat does not seem to be either immediate or highly urgent. The issues to be examined more closely regard the implications of adopting an approach that emphasizes unilateral strengthening of defenses as the most effective means for dealing with this threat. This tendency to place the primary emphasis on developing anti-ballistic capabilities may be problematic, especially as the US finds itself in a situation where it has to contend with a more varied and differentiated ballistic missile threat, and a more complex deterrence equation than the one it faced in the Cold War period.

Moreover, taken against the backdrop of established deterrence relationships, what seems to be emerging as a US preference for unilateral responses focused on a potential enemy's *capabilities* over cooperative bilateral and multilateral arms control dialogues and agreements where *intentions* can be clarified is something that is likely to strengthen the norm of self-help in

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[1] "Speaking at the January 26 swearing-in ceremony of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Bush listed defending the United States from missile threats, among other growing threats, as one of his top three defense policy goals." Wade Boese, "Bush Administration Stresses Commitment to Missile Defense" *Arms Control Today*, March 2001.

international security, at the expense of the concept of cooperative security. This shift in emphasis is likely to have significant (albeit indirect) implications for the means adopted for dealing with the ballistic missile threat in the Middle East as well, especially as the US has targeted Iran and Iraq, and also in light of past efforts to advance the concept of cooperative regional security in the Middle East in the framework of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group that has been dormant since 1995.

Defensive Deployment – A Source of Threat?

Dealing with missile threats by focusing on the weapons systems themselves can easily lead states into endless spirals of arms races. National missile defenses, regardless of their purported intent to defend, can be perceived as offsetting other states' nuclear or non-conventional capabilities, thus effectively upsetting an existing balance of deterrence. While not offensive as such, the fact that a given state's sense of security may be grounded in the perceived effectiveness of its nuclear capability to deter attack means that NMDs are liable to be viewed as threatening, and as warranting additional military buildups to restore the balance. The need to contain the potential for such a dangerous missile race was the logic behind the ABM treaty signed between the two superpowers in 1972.

It is very difficult to base a claim that a certain weapons system is *inherently* defensive; even the proponents of offensive-defensive theory do not base their claim on the viability of a classification of weapons systems according to whether they are intrinsically offensive or defensive.[2] The inescapable predicament states enter when they focus on armaments as such is aptly illustrated by the NMD debate itself, where the employment of the capabilities argument serves both sides in advancing their positions. Supporters of NMD emphasize the relative importance of capabilities when they discuss the threat that the US faces in the missile realm. At the same time, opponents of NMD employ the same argument in their attempt to complete the arms race equation: i.e., to argue that these missile defenses will most likely be viewed with suspicion by those they are intended to defend against, spurring them to increase their non-conventional capabilities.[3] Focusing exclusively on capabilities, therefore, will not go far in advancing the security of any state.

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It is more useful to match up the question of the *capabilities* of states with that of their *intentions* as a means for assessing the actual threat that emanates from a particular weapons system. According to this approach, the threat associated with a given weapons system is a function of the intentions of those that possess and activate them. Here, the focus is often directed to the nature of the state – whether it is basically status-quo or revisionist/expansionist. However, when favoring a focus on intentions over capabilities, it should be made clear that intentions are inherently dynamic, both politically and temporally. That is, the intentions of a given state vis-à-vis its allies and rivals are not stable and unchanging, but rather something that is likely to vary from one inter-state relationship to the next. Moreover, they are given to change over time, within a certain relationship, even when the overall balance of power remains unchanged.

Different Messages for Different States, But One NMD

The dilemma inherent in focusing on capabilities is compounded when a deterrent relationship involves more than two states, and when the deploying of a particular weapons system is intended to affect different

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[2] See Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics", *Security Studies* (4:4, Summer 1995) pp. 674-676.

[3] A top–secret US Intelligence report quoted in the press in August 2000 (Steven Lee Meyers, "US Missile Plan Could Reportedly Provoke China", *New York Times*, 10 August 2000, as reprinted in *Ha'aretz*, 11 August 2000) warned that China might increase its nuclear arsenal from 20 long range nuclear missiles to near 200 by 2015 in order to counter the limited program being considered by the Clinton administration.

inter-state relationships differentially, i.e. to deliver different messages to different parties. Without due attention to each relationship, the capabilities that the US hopes to develop may elicit the same reaction from different states, although the US is attempting to deliver a more complex and differentiated message. Russia and China in fact view with suspicion ballistic missile defenses that the US means to direct toward Iran, Iraq and North Korea. In the case of China, its limited number of nuclear warheads means that its arsenal might actually be countered by the NMD program. In the case of Russia, the situation is different, as NMD systems could not deal with the thousands of missiles that could theoretically be launched simultaneously against the US. The "threat" which emanates from a weapons system is a function of each relationship – the context within which state intentions are expressed and clarified. Over-reliance on NMD runs the risk of redirecting focus to armaments (capabilities) at the expense of investing energy in discussing and clarifying mutual intentions and the nature of each interstate relationship.

An important means for states to clarify their military intentions over the long term is the arms control dialogue itself. At the present time, Iran and Iraq are not engaged in bilateral arms control dialogues with the US, although they are parties to international arms control agreements, and the dialogue with North Korea is facing problems under the current Bush administration. Thus, it could be that there are currently no routes for pursuing such dialogue. But it is the *normative* value of arms control as a *concept* that could be undermined by the approach being adopted by the US. The decision on NMD, taken together with the failure of the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in late 1999 (during the Clinton administration), would seem to point to an increasingly dismissive attitude toward, or at least a large measure of skepticism regarding arms control in general as a means of dealing with non-conventional threats. In this context, one should also note recent official statements by American policymakers, according to which the 1972 ABM Treaty is a "relic" and "ancient history."[4] True, the US also has real and legitimate concerns with continued Russian technological assistance to Iran in the ballistic missile, chemical and biological realms, which has raised questions regarding the strength of Russia's commitment to the goal of arms control. But this is all the more reason to pursue cooperative dialogue frameworks.

While missile defense systems can well be considered, and perhaps deployed in some form, caution should be exercised in viewing this as an alternative route to arms control or to rigorous diplomatic activity. The advantage of the arms control process over physical defenses is that it creates a framework for clarifying whether cooperative efforts and jointly negotiated agreements are possible, rather than relying on unilateral action. This framework allows for joint discussion of security issues in order to build a basis for better assessing state intentions in the future. It thus focuses attention on the inter-state relationship, rather than on the weapons as the source of threat.

Dealing with Non-Conventional Threats in the Middle East

As far as ballistic missile defenses themselves are concerned, Israel's situation is not parallel to that of the US because the mutual deterrence equation has not yet been fully established in the Middle East. Having actually been attacked by SCUD missiles in the context of the Second Gulf War, missile defenses in Israel are a logical defense imperative – Israel's nuclear deterrence, while effective for deterring a non-conventional attack (missiles with chemical or biological warheads), was not relevant to the scenario of conventional missile attack. Moreover, as long as a declared mutual nuclear deterrence equation does not prevail in the region, missile defenses in themselves are not likely to be perceived as necessarily upsetting a regional balance, and providing the pretext, at this stage, for an increased arms race. To this must be added that the threat Iran and Iraq pose to Israel is more concrete than the one faced by the US. Thus, pursuing missile defense systems does not seem controversial in this regard, although it has met with some internal opposition on the part of those who are skeptical of the ability of the "Arrow" system to provide the kind

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[4] National security advisor Condoleezza Rice and secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, respectively. (Quoted in Wade Boese, "Bush Assembles Pro-Missile Defense National Security Team" *Arms Control Today* (January/February 2001); and Wade Boese, "Bush Administration Stresses Commitment to Missile Defense" *Arms Control Today* (March 2001)).

of defense that is necessary (against potential nuclear attack).

But regional arms control dialogue is essential for other facets of the non-conventional situation in the Middle East. The fate of the global norm of arms control (as influenced by the decision to pursue NMD) has important ramifications for the Middle East in the sense of the relative importance attributed to this mode of dealing with non-conventional weapons and threats. As far as its nuclear deterrence is concerned, Israel faces a dilemma similar to that of the United States in the sense that it means to deliver different messages to different parties. While it seeks to deter only certain states (today, mainly Iran and Iraq), other regional states with which Israel has less than tension-free relations, (most significantly, Egypt) have concerns that the capability which they attribute to Israel could potentially be turned against them as well, although this is not Israel's intention. Moreover, in the event that Iran and/or Iraq actually attain nuclear capability, Israel's ballistic missile defenses would have only limited effect, and the importance of a regional arms control framework that could conceivably be expanded to include these states as well will be underscored. In this case, the implicit US message that Iran and Iraq are somehow "non-deterrable" or irrational states, could have a more direct negative impact on the arms control approach – it will make dialogue all the more difficult to pursue.

Generally speaking, arms control in the Middle East should be envisioned as a long-term process that involves the establishment of frameworks of dialogue for discussing arms control and cooperative regional security issues and clarifying intentions. Agreements relating to actual weapons reductions will be preceded by measures that are directed specifically toward clarifying intentions and concerns, and building up confidence in states' abilities to differentiate between aggressive and non-aggressive deployments and military activities. For these reasons, the fate of the wider message regarding the importance of focusing on intentions, and the need to clarify them, as well as encouraging the creation of regional frameworks within which they can be discussed over the long term, should be given due attention by those in Israel who are closely following the US NMD debate.

While missile defense systems can well be considered, and perhaps deployed, caution should be exercised in viewing this as an alternative route to arms control or to rigorous diplomatic activity.

The direct relevance of these issues to what is happening in the Middle East today is not readily apparent. It is no doubt difficult to base a claim that there is much interest in pursuing arms control and regional security dialogue frameworks among the regional states themselves. However, the relevant weight attached to the cooperative security option *today* is likely to prove extremely important down the road. When there are several nuclear states in the Middle East, there will be no escaping these issues, and it will be in Israel's interest to have the arms control option a well-established and legitimate international norm.