

Western States Legal Foundation

Issue Brief

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Banning Ballistic Missiles: In the Long Run, It may be Easier than Shooting Them Down

Today, the U.S. is putting billions into “missile defense” programs that threaten to erode existing mechanisms for controlling nuclear arms. Together with other U.S. weapons programs, they also may spark an arms race in space. At the same time, ballistic missiles play a central role in regional confrontations among nations armed with nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. We can’t ignore the threats posed to humanity by missiles, but missile defenses are more likely to intensify arms races than to end them. Instead of “missile defense,” we need a truly comprehensive plan for missile control that can stem burgeoning arms races and place real limits on countries that already deploy long-range missiles.

A logical first step would be a ban on the flight testing of ballistic missiles, applying to all nations, including those that already have long-range missile systems. A flight test ban would contribute to arms control in several ways. It would effectively halt the development of long-range missiles by those nations which do not already have them, including those whose missile potential is cited as the rationale for U.S. missile defense programs. At the same time, it would stop the testing of missile defenses that employ ballistic missiles as interceptors, including those now under development by the United States. A flight test ban would also help rein in emerging regional arms races, for example in South Asia, where missile tests are part of the intensifying nuclear arms competition between India and Pakistan.

A flight test ban, forming part of an agreed

negotiating framework for the elimination of ballistic missiles, would help to reduce other threats. If successful, it would provide both the breathing space and the confidence for reducing the number of missiles, including those possessed by the major powers. Over the long run, it would also be likely to limit the ability of the original five nuclear weapons states to maintain arsenals of long-range, highly accurate missiles. These weapons, still on hair-trigger alert, continue to pose one of the greatest threats to human survival. Substantial steps towards their elimination--something the U.S. committed to in principle three decades ago in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty-- are long overdue.

A ban on missile flight tests would be relatively easy to verify. It should include a system of inspections to assure that civilian rocket launches do not conceal efforts to develop weapons delivery systems. These inspections could make it more difficult to develop and deploy weapons systems that operate through or from space. If the type of inspections appropriate for controlling ballistic missiles worked well, it could provide the technical and political basis for more comprehensive agreements aimed at preventing the further militarization of space.

Missile controls are likely to be dismissed in the current U.S. political context as “unrealistic.” And indeed, building the international negotiating framework, the confidence, and the political consensus would require a long-term effort and involve much uncertainty. But there is tendency in the U.S. to compare proposals which seek negotiated, political solutions to international

conflict with a perfect world -- rather than with the world we actually are likely to inhabit if such efforts are not pursued. Yes, there are risks. However, the appropriate comparison is not to a world without risk, but to an open-ended commitment to "missile defenses" and other high-tech weapons. These systems will take decades to develop, cost hundreds of billions of dollars, may not work as advertised, and will certainly stoke determined efforts by other countries aimed at either overwhelming missile defenses or making them irrelevant.

Missile defenses are being sold to the public as a way to move beyond nuclear deterrence, but they really are more like "deterrence plus." U.S. military planners see missile defense as part of an effective "deterrent" only in combination with nuclear weapons. The "reduced" nuclear arsenal the military wants to keep will seem small only in comparison to the rubble-bouncing megatonnage of the Cold War, and still will be large enough to annihilate any nation on earth.

Furthermore, this vision of "deterrence" extends far beyond prevention of unprovoked missile attacks on the United States. It aims as well to assure the ability of U.S. forces to intervene around the globe by making it both difficult and dangerous for countries to retaliate with missiles, either against U.S. forces in the field or against the U.S. itself.

Currently, the options presented to us by the politicians and the military are limited to the old "balance of terror" centered on nuclear weapons, or an unpredictable new arms race which, it is implied, will be better because we are likely to be able to "win." It is time to expand the debate beyond these grim choices, centered exclusively on technology and force, and consider whether we are better served spending the next several decades building more weapons, or building trust by seeking effective arms control measures and an end to the inequities at the root of global conflict.

Issue Brief for Western States Legal Foundation by
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World Wide Web Resources on Ballistic Missile Defense, Efforts to Control Ballistic Missiles, and Related Issues

The International Network of Engineers and Scientists Against Proliferation (INESAP) and the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation are sponsoring a "Moving Beyond Missile Defense" initiative, which brings together experts and activists from across the globe to consider alternatives to missile defenses, including measures to control ballistic missiles. More information on this initiative can be found at <http://www.mbrmd.org/>, and the Fall 2000 edition of the INESAP Bulletin at <http://www.inesap.org/bulletin18/bulletin18.htm>.

For an overview of efforts to control ballistic missiles, see J. Jerome Holton, Lora Lumpe, and Jeremy J. Stone, "Proposal For a Zero Ballistic Missile Regime," 1993 Science and International Security Anthology, AAAS: Washington, 1993 pp. 379-396; Lora Lumpe, "Zero Ballistic Missiles and the Third World," Arms Control, Volume 14, number 1, April 1994, and other relevant Federation of American Scientists articles available at <http://www.fas.org/asmp/campaigns/missile.html>

For more information on U.S. programs to further militarize space, see the Western States Legal Foundation page on ballistic missile defense and space at <http://www.wslfweb.org/space.htm>, and our library of U.S. government planning documents and links at <http://www.wslfweb.org/space/spacedocs.htm>. The Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space provides both information and comprehensive organizing resources at <http://www.globenet.free-online.co.uk/>