Reviewing BMD Options and Implications for Canada

Ernie Regehr
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This briefing clarifies the BMD options that Canada faces, explores the implications of Canada’s taking political ownership of this US-controlled system, and suggests a way out of the BMD conundrum.

“Joining” is not an option

Public discussion of the proposed North American strategic missile defence system (BMD) has been framed largely as a question of whether Canada will join it, so most Canadians would probably be surprised to learn that “joining” is one option that is not available. That issue has been settled, not by Canada, but by Washington. Operationally, BMD will be a US-only system in North America. The ground-based, mid-course missile interceptors based in Alaska and California will be operated by the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM), without decision-making involvement from Canada, either directly or through the bi-national North American Aerospace Defence Agreement (NORAD).

As confirmed last August when the NORAD agreement was amended, NORAD will link to BMD, but only and essentially in the same way that it links to other US-only military commands.

Furthermore, no forthcoming Canadian BMD decision will alter this basic arrangement.

So, while Canada can't join BMD, it has already made the decision to cooperate with the US on BMD – which makes it “hard to see what more Bush wants,” as the American Brookings Institute analyst Michael O'Hanlon recently put it to a Canadian audience (Ward 2005). In truth, however, what Bush wants is not really such a mystery – he wants political support and solidarity. He certainly doesn't need Canada's technical, territorial, or financial help, and he can easily do without Canadian political endorsement (a president with the temerity to invade countries without UN endorsement is not going to worry too much about Canadian endorsement of an experimental weapons system), but would obviously welcome all of the above.

So more relevant than the question of “what more could Bush want,” may be the question, “what more could Ottawa want?” If joining in the sense of becoming a command and control partner is not available, what are Canadian BMD advocates actually looking for?

Some Canadian BMD advocates might argue that a simple political “yes” to BMD is all that is required, but it's not clear what the point would be. Presumably the point of endorsing BMD would be to serve some perceived Canadian interests by getting something in return, with three things ostensibly on offer: ensuring BMD coverage of Canadian territory, access to industrial contracts, and the hoped-for spin-off of more amiable relations with the Bush Administration in Washington.
Theoretic protection from a theoretic threat

Just as joining is not an option, actual protection from actual threats is also not available. The Pentagon’s own test and evaluation director reports that the BMD system has no confirmed capacity to intercept any missiles. Of the system broadly, the FY2004 report of the Director of Operational Test and Evaluation says that “the components of the BMDS [Ballistic Missile Defense System] remain immature. It is not possible to estimate the current mission capability of the BMDS with high confidence” (p. 319). Of the ground-based, mid-course interception system in particular, the one that is supposed to protect North America and provide BMD coverage for Canada, the report says: “Limited availability of end-to-end system-level test data precludes characterizing GMD [ground-based mid-course interception system] capabilities with confidence” (p. 330).

So the Pentagon’s own test evaluator insists there is to date no convincing evidence that BMD would offer protection from the declared threat of “rogue” arsenals. Prominent Canadian proponents of BMD avoid the troubling reality that, outside the Missile Defence Agency itself, there is very little confidence that investment in the mid-course interception system will actually yield credible results. Some Canadian BMD advocates themselves raise doubts about the system’s feasibility (their interest being the hoped-for spin-offs in Canada-US relations and decision-making access). The former Ambassador to Washington, Raymond Chrétien, et al (2004) argue that while “some of Canada’s defence policy objectives … are directly contradicted by missile defence,” and while “the US General Accounting Office found serious problems in the system’s effectiveness,” and while noting that Russia and China “fear a new arms race,” and agreeing that US policies have “negatively affected the international non-proliferation regimes for WMD,” because the US is determined to go ahead with it, “Canada should accept participation in” BMD.

And while BMD’s effectiveness as a response to a “rogue” threat is seriously doubted, the threat itself is routinely overstated. Canada has consistently acknowledged the importance of dealing with the emerging threats from North Korea and Iran, but the position always has been that it must and can be most effectively dealt with through arms control. With cooperation and a serious negotiating posture from the Bush Administration, both North Korea and Iran can be prevented from further pursuing a nuclear weapons capability and from developing intercontinental range ballistic missiles.5

The real threat, of course, is the thousands of nuclear warheads on Russian and Chinese missiles ready for launch against North American targets, but would BMD, even if it worked perfectly, offer protection from these existing nuclear arsenals? The answer is “No.” US BMD architects admit and even insist that it is not designed or intended to have a capacity to intercept any Russian or Chinese missiles deliberately launched at North America. The system is limited and is intended to intercept only isolated attacks. So there is no protection from deliberate nuclear attack by any existing nuclear power.

Assuming the system could be made to work, there could be theoretical protection from an accidental launch of a Russian missile. There is no danger of an accidental Chinese launch because current Chinese missiles capable of hitting North American targets, about 20 of them, are liquid fueled and so have a launch preparation time measured in days rather than minutes, and it is believed that nuclear warheads are stored separately from the missiles. Chinese accidental launch is not an issue (Norris & Kristensen 2003, pp. 77-80). The possibility of a Russian accidental launch, on the other hand, is real. Most observers do not regard it is a major risk, but there is a very simple way of eliminating whatever danger there is of an accidental launch. In fact in 2000 the Russians and Americans agreed to take the steps necessary to eliminate the danger of accidental launch – namely by de-alerting their strategic arsenals. In the final document for 2000 NPT Review Conference the Nuclear Weapon States joined all other parties to the NPT in agreeing to 13 “practical steps” for disarmament, and in step 9(d) they agreed to “concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems.” In other words, it is genuinely possible to
eliminate the danger of accidental launch in the first place. Deliberate launch in response to a false warning, a much more pressing risk, would of course be of a scale far beyond even the theoretic capacity of BMD interceptors to stop – so BMD offers no protection from a launch-on-warning scenario.

**Involvement without influence**

If Canada really were to negotiate with the US for BMD involvement beyond that already in place through NORAD, it would presumably be in pursuit of protection from a missile defence system that is specifically not designed to provide protection from the threat that exists and that has no demonstrated capacity against a threat that does not yet exist.

And the central irony is that such further involvement would produce no Canadian decision-making access to, or influence over, the operation of the system. The conditions and circumstances under which the US-run BMD system would be engaged on Canada's behalf would have to be specifically negotiated, and about the only say Canada would have would be whether to request “protection” for all Canadian territory, for part of it, or for selected population centres.

All of this would have to be negotiated in advance because there would little time for any human intervention, and most certainly no time for consultation with political authorities, in the event of an attack. The negotiations for a place under this putative shield would soon make it clear that our place would not be at a BMD table where operational decisions are made. Instead, we'd be negotiating with the Americans on response protocols according to various hypothetical situations, for which computer programs would then be written to determine the response to a warning from NORAD’s Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment (ITWAA) facility that a missile is headed for Canada. In the event of an actual attack, the system would be on automatic pilot, with all decision-making given over to machines and their American operators.

So, a “Yes” to BMD would not earn Canada a role in BMD operations or day-to-day decision-making.6

**Buying in means “buying” in**

The request for “protection” would clearly require Canada to bring something to the effort – unless, of course, we were happy with the sovereignty implications of overt protectorate status. The US operators of the system could be expected to look for funding, for example, for the additional US interceptors held on station to use against missiles headed for Canada. In a scenario in which US intelligence estimates were uncertain of how many additional missiles an attacking state might have available, BMD command and control would be unlikely to use up its interceptors to take out missiles headed for the Canadian tundra. To ensure coverage of all or part of Canada, Ottawa would realistically have to finance extra missiles and, as already noted, reach prior agreement on conditions for their use.

The US might also suggest, not necessarily immediately, placing some of those interceptors on Canadian soil, or if not interceptors then perhaps radars or, more likely, communications links.

Canada would also have to fund any contracts for Canadian firms beyond current levels of industrial participation in BMD. As in other shared research and development projects, Canada would have to put up funding for research and development roughly equivalent to the cost of contracts given to Canadian firms (Regehr 2004b).

And if Canada decided to spend scarce security dollars on a BMD “protection” scheme, it would not only have to persuade Canadians that the North Korean missile threat is imminent and that the BMD system will actually deliver protection from it, but that BMD and the continentalist preoccupation it reflects should be given higher priority than any number of items on a very long list of other security priorities.7 For example, if the international policy review reflects the best traditions of Canadian security policy it will emphasize enhanced peacekeeping capacity, including the promised Canadian brigade for international crisis response.
and civilian protection operations, along with increased funding for development assistance and other war prevention measures – funding which could not credibly be diverted to supporting BMD.

Making BMD a Canadian problem

As a BMD endorser, Canada would gain no decision-making involvement in this American-conceived, -built, -financed, and -controlled weapon system, but it would acquire an unmistakable political stake in it. Every time another test failed, or a program was overspent, or a Pentagon official enthused about space-based interceptors, the Canadian politicians who bought into the enterprise would quite appropriately be called on to explain and defend the system, at home and in multilateral forums.

Notably Canada would be called on to explain its position at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva in the context of discussions on preventing an arms race in outer space. The Canadian response, of course, would simply be to claim that the system Canada is supporting does not now involve weapons in space. But it would be our BMD partners who would be the first to discredit that claim, pointing out that they view the pursuit of space-based interceptors, and the money they are already spending on it, as central to the viability of missile defence (Regehr 2004a).

Furthermore, Canada would have to explain how its opposition to Anti-Satellite Weapons (ASAT), whether space-, ground-, or air-based, is advanced by endorsement of a weapons system that is inherently an ASAT-capable system (Wright & Grego 2002-2003). The Russians and Chinese most certainly see its ASAT potential and are accordingly encouraged to accelerate their own pursuit of enhanced ASAT capabilities.

Similarly, Canada would be called upon to explain its support of BMD every time the Russians or Chinese announced another strategic weapons design or test aimed at countering US BMD efforts. Canada would also have to explain how its disarmament objectives square with support of BMD in the face of Russian and Chinese refusal to allow their strategic arsenals to go below certain minimum levels as long as the US persists (with Canada) in BMD development.

Canadian politicians would be called on to declare their unshaken faith in the system, as the White House does now, following each test delay or failure. And Canada could also be drawn into the inevitable scandals as the United States spends more and more on, and becomes increasingly secretive (some would say deceptive) about, a program that shows prominent signs of ongoing failure.

Endorsement of ballistic missile defence would also be a hitherto unexplained major change in Canadian policy. Canada has to date never argued in formal policy documents that ballistic missile defence is a practical response to the missile threat. The closest the current Foreign Affairs backgrounder on “Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence” comes to a positive statement on the merits of missile defence is to include it in a list of the elements of its “comprehensive approach to addressing ballistic missile proliferation” – saying that Canadian policy includes an “examination of potential defensive capabilities” in response to missile proliferation. All the rest of the discussion on Canadian policy and priorities is, appropriately, focused on arms control responses.

A way out of the BMD conundrum

By following a three-fold approach Canada could settle the BMD issue in this way:

- In declining further participation, Canada would assure the United States that, even though BMD is not a Canadian priority, in accordance with traditional security cooperation arrangements, Canada will ensure that it does not impede the US in its pursuit of what it has defined as a security priority;
- Canada could further reaffirm security cooperation with the United States on other issues that are mutual priorities; and
Canada would recommit to pursuing multilateral arms control measures, including measures to mitigate the destabilizing aspects of strategic missile defence.

The basic conditions for the first element of this approach are already in place. In November Prime Minister Martin said that the “crucial decision” on BMD had already been made (O’Neil, 2004) when the NORAD agreement was modified to ensure that the BMD system would have access to NORAD’s Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment (ITWAA) information. This agreement to amend NORAD has three important implications:

- It makes it clear that Canada is not impeding US BMD ambitions, as it would have been perceived as doing if it had denied BMD operators access to the essential NORAD data (without NORAD involvement BMD would not have been halted, but the US would have had to re-route the ITWAA mechanism outside NORAD);
- NORAD will not be marginalized as a cooperative North American defence command and Canada will not be marginalized within NORAD; and, as a result,
- The US does not need, and isn't overly anxious about, any further explicit Canadian commitment to BMD, so Canada can decline to specifically endorse or further participate in BMD without undermining NORAD or the Canada-US security relations.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister’s clear statement that he does not want to provide either funding or territory for BMD suggests that Canada’s role is not going to go much beyond what is already in place.9

The second element of this approach was also strongly hinted at when the Prime Minister shifted attention to other aspects of North American security: “My focus now is on the defence of North America, and that’s our coasts, it’s our Arctic sovereignty, and that's where we're going to put the concentration” (O’Neil 2004). This focus on broader security interests allows Canada to communicate a positive and cooperative security agenda to the United States. In effect, Canada can now say to the United States:

- While BMD is not a Canadian priority, Canada respects the fact that it may be so for the US and has taken measures through NORAD to ensure that Canada is not an obstacle to US pursuit of objectives that it has adopted;
- In the meantime, Canada has important security priorities that are also priorities for the US – border security, air and maritime security, countering terrorism, and so on – and Canada makes it clear it is focusing attention on those shared objectives, working nationally in some cases, bilaterally in other cases, and multilaterally on issues such as terrorism.

The final element that completes this three-fold approach is the reaffirmation that Canada continues to pursue serious international security and arms control priorities that address the missile threat. Long-term agenda items include efforts to:

- Prevent the further spread of missiles (through work with the Missile Technology Control Regime),
- Prevent the weaponization of space (through work at the UN’s Geneva Conference on Disarmament),
- Prevent nuclear proliferation (through support of the IAEA and the NPT Review Conferences).

**Mitigating the negative strategic effects of BMD**

The advent of strategic BMD (American pursuit of it will obviously not be affected by a Canadian decision for or against further participation) brings another group of arms control imperatives to the fore. A primary concern of Russia and China is that while the “limited” missile defence system that the US is now developing is not an immediate threat to their nuclear deterrent forces, the limited BMD...
system could become the basis for rapid expansion of missile defences that could be understood as a threat to deterrence.

Without a firm international agreement to ensure that the “limited” system will always remain so, the Russians and the Chinese will continue to hedge their bets by maintaining larger nuclear arsenals than they otherwise would, by developing new generations of missiles capable of evading defences, and by increased attention to developing an active anti-satellite capability. As a result, Canada should join other states in multilateral forums to pursue efforts to reach:

- Agreed international limits (consistent with stated “limited defence” objectives) on the number of ballistic missile interceptors that may be deployed (Regehr 2004c);
- A ban on anti-satellite weapons testing and deployment; and
- A ban on testing and deployment of weapons in space.

Canada has been clear on its opposition to the weaponization of space; it needs to adopt the same clear stance, along with an action strategy to advance it, on preventing a new race to deploy anti-satellite weapons and on limiting the number of strategic ballistic missile interceptors.

Exercising the “No” option through this three-fold approach would allow Canada to emerge from the current BMD debate with a clear set of cooperative security and international disarmament objectives and priorities clearly articulated and put on the table. It would also recognize that BMD has never been a national priority for Canada, that we would certainly not be promoting it or even thinking about it if the US had not put it on our agenda, and that most Canadians do not believe that BMD offers a credible solution to existing or future missile threats.

Notes

1 “The Pentagon is struggling to determine how command and control (C2) of missile defense will be played out. U.S. Strategic Command is in charge of the overall system’s operations, but it currently straddles the Army (with interceptors in Ft. Greely, Alaska) and the Air Force (with interceptors in Vandenberg, Calif.). Once the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system comes on-line in 2006, the Navy will be involved as well. And that’s just the services: commands that will want control over C2 in certain circumstances are Northern Command, Pacific Command, and NORAD. According to a military officer familiar with the system, STRATCOM’s attempts to bring all of missile defense command and control under its umbrella ‘will break a lot of china’” (CDI Missile Defense Updates #14, 2004–Dec. 2, 2004).

2 “In consideration of the foregoing circumstances, our two governments agree that NORAD’s aerospace warning mission for North America also shall include aerospace warning, as defined in NORAD’s Terms of Reference, in support of the designated commands responsible for missile defence of North America” (August 5, 2004 letter from Canada’s Ambassador to the United States, Michael Kergin, to US Secretary of State Colin Powell).

3 The NORAD Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment (ITWAA) function has all along been linked, for example, to US Strategic Command. STRATCOM relies on ITWAA information to determine whether a nuclear attack has been launched on North America, and against which targets – and based on that information the US decides whether to launch a retaliatory attack. But, of course, the decision on retaliation, or the retaliation operation itself, would not involve either NORAD or Canada. Similarly, while the US Northern Command will rely, in its operation of BMD, on the same ITWAA information coming from NORAD to alert it to an attack and to provide targeting data for the interceptors, the decision of whether and at what point to attempt an interception, or the interception attempt itself, would not involve either NORAD or Canada.

4 It’s worth noting that whenever Government ministers have tried to defend Canadian support for BMD, the primary rationale has been the protection of Canadians.

5 For example, a study by the Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy (2004) sets forth a four-step program
to end the North Korean nuclear crisis. An example of proposals relevant to developing permanent and verifiable commitments to end Iran’s nuclear ambitions is by George Perkovich (2005). Incidentally, if Canada chooses not to negotiate for guaranteed US use of its BMD system on our behalf, it would not follow that the US therefore had no obligation to come to Canada’s aid if we were attacked by ballistic missiles. Under mutual security commitments in place since Ogdensburg and under NATO Article V, the US (along with other allies) has an ongoing obligation to come to Canada’s assistance if we are under attack. How the US does that and what assets it uses is its own sovereign prerogative – just as all NATO allies decide on their own how they will come to the aid of an ally in the event of attack (we don’t ask the US to use any particular system any more than we ask Germany to use a particular system to come to our aid – it’s up to them, and if the Americans decide to acquire a BMD system it is their own decision whether or not to use it when the time comes to assist their ally).

In the US, critics like Sen. Barbara Boxer regularly question the priority accorded strategic BMD. Sen. Boxer recently argued that instead of spending so much on BMD with few discernable results, the US should be using those funds to equip civilian aircraft with countermeasures against MANPADS, the “man-portable air defence systems” that can be used by individuals to attack aircraft, and to step up international efforts to prevent their proliferation to non-state groups (US Fed News, 2005).

Note this report from the Center for Defense Information Updates #14-2004: The Nov. 8, 2004 issue of Space News included an editorial, “Secrecy Run Amok,” about a disturbing trend by the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) to classify troubled programs and, in doing so, harshly restrict open-source discussion and analysis of them. The case in point is the Space Tracking and Surveillance System (STSS). According to Space News, “The MDA recently acknowledged ordering a third experimental STSS satellite early this year from prime contractor Northrop Grumman Space Technology, but has refused to provide additional information, such as the price tag and launch date. That information is classified,” The editorial points out that the original 2002 STSS contract was worth $868-million, was open-ended, and this past spring received a $750 million modification. It argues, “The bottom line is that if there ever was a program in need of more rather than less scrutiny, the STSS is it,” and pushes the MDA to “show more respect for the public it exists to protect.”

The Prime Minister told reporters, “I’m not going to put money into” BMD; “having missiles on our territory is not one of [my] priorities”; and that participation in BMD would depend on a key decision-making role in the command and control structure that operates BMD (Fife & Dawson 2004).

References


Ernie Regehr, O.C., is Executive Director of Project Ploughshares.