

Canada sidelined in missile-defence debate

Luncheon talk by Peggy Mason, November 1999.

Peggy Mason, who was Canada's ambassador for disarmament from 1989 to 1994, said at the November lunch that Canada could wield little influence on the United States' decision, due in mid-2000, on whether to deploy a national missile defence (NMD) system.

"Our territory is not required and our assets are not required," she said. "We have absolutely no leverage. If they go forward without us, it means a chunk of the defence of North America goes forward without us."

It would be a nightmare situation for Canada, she said, if the U.S. went forward with deployment and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty of 1972 were compromised.. (The U.S. would either have to get Russia's agreement to modifying the ABM Treaty or go ahead without it.) She noted that the debate over ABMs - using a missile to shoot down a missile, often compared to firing a bullet against a bullet - is an old one, flaring up in the U.S. about every 10 years.

One line of argument held that since today the only response to nuclear attack is nuclear retaliation, would it not be better to have an anti-missile defence? That is, an engagement between defensive and offensive missiles would be better than mutually assured destruction.

Opinion is deeply divided, including among arms controllers, Ms. Mason said. One side says that really deep cuts in nuclear weapons will only be possible if the United States deploys a nuclear defence system. The other side says such a deployment will, on the contrary, doom deep cuts and set off an offensive arms race. A third concern among detractors is that deployment of even a limited NMD by the United States would fuel a "Fortress America" mentality, which in turn would spur both further insularity and unilateralism in the world's only superpower.

Ms. Mason, who was one of 23 international experts on the Tokyo Forum on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, noted the division between national missile defence (NMD) systems and theatre missile defence (TMD) systems, such as the Patriot, which

was used against Iraq's Scud missiles in the 1991 Gulf War. But today, she added, the higher ranges of TMDs, represented by the theatre high-altitude area defence (THAAD) system and the navy theatre wide (NTW) system, were starting to overlap the lower ranges of NMD systems.

Japan has entered into a research program with the United States on theatre systems, but the higher end of these systems may contravene the ABM Treaty. "If Japan is seen to be moving outside that treaty, it would be tremendously destabilizing," Ms. Mason said.

Another major consideration in the missile-defence debate is China and whether Taiwan would be given missile-defence capacity. A basis is needed for discussion of these issues between the U.S. and China.

The biggest concern about going forward with NMD is that it will stimulate an offensive arms race, particularly in long-range missiles, Ms. Mason said. In connection with the threat from terrorists and rogue states, many experts believe they would be unlikely to use intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs); bombs in suitcases would be more likely. NMD together with the unparalleled U.S.A capacity in advanced conventional weapons - and in the absence of any meaningful multilateral restraint measures - could stimulate further terrorism.

NMD development would also be a blow to Russia, which knows it could not participate in such a program. Canada's NATO allies - Britain, France and Germany - are very concerned, but Congress writes off foreign objections as coming from buddies of Clinton.

For those opposed to deploying a national missile defence system, the hardest argument to counter, said Ms. Mason, is the one based on intercepting and destroying an accidentally launched missile, especially because of the deterioration of the Russian arsenal.