

Just say no, Canada, to ballistic missiles

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Barely weeks ago, Prime Minister Paul Martin used the national leaders' debate to pledge unalterable opposition to weapons in space. But - if Ottawa rumours are to be believed - while the rest of Canada was preoccupied with choosing a new government, Canadian officials may have been fast-tracking a "stealth launch" of our participation in the U.S. ballistic missile defence.

With Mr. Martin depending on two anti-BMD parties for his "stable minority," and with continuing American insistence that weapons in space will be key to BMD's future, you might imagine that the question would be moved to the back burner. Instead, we now face the possibility that thorough public debate on this key election issue has succumbed to a Canadian version of the Bush doctrine of pre-emption.

An early Canadian signup to BMD would not be about security but politics - U.S. election politics and a Canadian politics of accommodation. Policy, sad to say, is nowhere in sight.

A deployed BMD system by the end of 2004 is a core election pledge of President George W. Bush. The push to get it done has led to cut corners and expanding budgets, with predeployment costs running at \$10-billion-plus (U.S.) per year.

It makes no claim to protect us from the almost 1,000 Russian and Chinese missiles that stand ready to deliver more than 4,000 warheads to North America, but offers to protect us from North Korea, which does not now - and won't in the foreseeable future - have a missile capable of delivering anything to North America.

The promise of a "working system" is challenged by the U.S. General Accounting Office (similar to Canada's Auditor-General), which says the missile shield is, for all practical purposes, still on the drawing board. It has yet to be tested as a system. Even the Pentagon is now calling it a "test bed" rather than a deployed system.

If the clock is ticking on missile defence, as Paul Cellucci, the U.S. Ambassador to Canada, told Canadians recently, it has nothing to do with policy, existing technology, actual threats, or continental security needs, and everything to do with the needs of the committee to re-elect George W. Bush. It is not clear why Canada should cater to the Bush timeline, when his Democratic challenger John Kerry says the system is "not ready and is the wrong priority for a war on terror."

Yet, proponents of Canada's involvement are happy to fan the sense of haste and claim this sign-on will put Canadians in a chain of command through which we would provide or, presumably, withhold, "consent" when circumstances call on the interceptors to "enter Canadian air space and shoot down other missiles in Canadian air space."

In fact, a Canadian sign-on to the system will bring no say or influence over its operation. Discretion over the point at which interceptions take place is not available, even to the Americans. The location of interception is determined entirely by the attacking missile's flight path and the launch location of the interceptor missile.

Nor will participation yield influence over the development of the system. The BMD system, which is aimed at exploring every conceivable avenue of technology, including space weapons technology, is fuelled by a project budget roughly equal to the whole of Canada's defence budget. As BMD planners are fond of saying, they will go wherever technology takes them, and Canada's political endorsement or preference won't alter that.

Canadians like to worry about sovereignty, but the idea that we have to buy into BMD because otherwise our sovereignty will be threatened by the system's likely use of Canadian air space is without foundation, primarily because Canadian airspace is not in play. Mid-course BMD kinetic kill vehicles can function only in the vacuum of space. They are, in fact, designed to fight in space, not in the atmosphere.

The kill vehicle is intended to collide with and demolish incoming nuclear warheads. BMD interceptors will violate the peaceful use of the global commons of space long before they have any impact on Canadian sovereignty.

The development of the U.S. missile shield undermines our security as it re-energizes the development of weapons systems around the world. China is already expanding its strategic missile force, and will certainly not reduce it as long as the United States deploys a BMD system. China is also exploring anti-satellite weapons and other countermeasures to confound missile interceptors.

With an American BMD system in place, Russia will not allow its nuclear arsenals to go below a minimum threshold, and it will keep its land-based forces on high alert (not a benign act considering the state of its early-warning system).

Canada's diplomatic effectiveness in pursuit of a space-weapons ban will be heavily compromised if Canada becomes an official backer of a BMD system that explicitly pursues the placement of weapons in space. Canada's role in the world is to be the subject

of a special international policy review this fall. The government has signalled, as have Canadians, that we seek an independent foreign policy rooted in values of peace, disarmament and thoughtful multilateralism. All this is put in question as we forge ahead on missile defence.

Canadian political leaders owe it to their constituents to guarantee that momentous decisions like this are not made by executive order according to external political timetables. Ottawa should leave presidential election politics to the Americans and suspend BMD negotiations. Our own decision on missile defence should come after our international policy review.

Decisions that affect us all should take account of all our views.

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