

The missile defence debate

are within the realm of technical feasibility, take the concept of ballistic missile defence much further along the road to operational effectiveness than was the case with any of the systems proposed in the 1960s. Among the possible technologies are non-nuclear "exoatmospheric" interceptors that would intercept incoming warheads in the middle phase of their ballistic trajectory; interceptors that would operate in conjunction with sensor probes launched into space and which would enable the interceptor to home onto its target. Even more futuristic still, is the possibility of a whole range of "Star Wars" satellite and other technology being developed to provide for the interception of incoming ballistic missiles over the whole of their trajectory, from the moment of launch to the terminal phase of their attack on specific targets. A "layered" defence involving the use of both short-range interceptors to attack incoming warheads in the final stage of their flight and longer-range exoatmospheric interceptors offers the prospect not only of a more effective defence of hard-point targets such as ICBM silos and launch control centres, but also would lend itself to some area defence of population and property.

However, current American research and development on ballistic missile defence is directed to the defence of hard-point targets, and much of the technology required for an effective, comprehensive defence is beyond the present state of the art. A low-altitude defence system (LoADS) has now been designated *Sentry* and could, according to its advocates, considerably improve the survivability of US land-based missiles at a cost-exchange ratio favorable to the defence. In other words, the costs to an attacker in overcoming the defence would be greater than those to the defenders.

Getting there first

One final factor should also be taken into account in explaining the resurgence of interest in BMD: this is the fear that the active Russian program of research and development might lead to a situation in which the Soviet Union would catch the United States by surprise and "breakout" with a ballistic missile defence that would drastically alter the strategic balance. One might be skeptical as to the ability and likelihood of the Russians doing such a thing, but the concern that the Soviet Union might secure a technological advantage in this field is a real one in Washington. (And elsewhere too: the British development of the maneuvering *Chevaline* warhead for their existing force of *Polaris* submarine-launched ballistic missiles was undertaken, in part, to ensure that the British deterrent would be able to penetrate any improved Soviet area ballistic missile defence.)

It is widely accepted that no effective hard-point, or, for that matter, area, defence could be deployed within the confines of the present ABM Treaty. Thus an essential requirement for effective ballistic missile defence is the opening-up of the Treaty. Any attempt to do so at the present time would involve considerable political costs for the United States in terms of its relations with its allies and with the Soviet Union. But if the United States cannot deal with what it currently sees as a significant threat to its land-based strategic missile force through the next round of strategic arms control negotiations, then serious attention will be given to the possibility of seeking revisions in the Treaty before the 1987 quinquennial review. Whatever hap-

pens as a result of further strategic arms control efforts, the United States will take unilateral action anyway to ensure a strategic balance satisfactory to itself, and among the options available will be ballistic missile defence. Of course, this is by no means the only possible option. One not implausible solution would be for the United States to put up with a continuing theoretical threat to its land-based missiles and either revise its strategic objectives or attempt to secure them by other means, for example, by increasing the counterforce capabilities of its submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Nevertheless, it can be expected that over the next several years continuing attempts will be made to restore US confidence in its land-based ICBMs.

Ten years of changes since SALT

American concern with ICBM vulnerability is but one of the consequences of the shift that has occurred in the overall strategic balance in the years since the first round of SALT agreements was concluded in 1972. Other effects have been felt in alliance politics, and both global military developments and the changing balance in Europe have revived the debate in NATO about the nature and extent of the American guarantee to its allies. The fact that nuclear "parity" has been the essential condition for strategic arms control has had the effect of underlining the difference in the geo-strategic circumstances of the allies on each side of the Atlantic, which, in turn, has been linked to growing political differences over the East-West relationship. Thus the current interest in the United States in ballistic missile defence has implications for both the political and strategic interests of the allies, and any American move in the direction of such a defence would immediately become a salient item on the alliance agenda.

Should ballistic missile defence again become an issue of alliance politics (it was, briefly, in the late sixties), then the political response of the European allies can be expected to occur at two levels. First, the issue will be linked with détente and East-West arms control, and the European response, by and large, will be based on the potentially negative consequences of BMD deployments on both those objectives. Secondly, the implications of ballistic missile defence will be assessed at the strategic level in terms of the impact on the nuclear balance in Europe. Although it is not at all clear what the effects of ballistic missile defence deployments would be on the European balance, ultimately it can be seen as depending on the place of BMD in the overall US strategic posture. More particularly, it will depend on the assessment of the contribution that BMD might make to maintaining the credibility of the American extended deterrent commitment to Western Europe.

Whatever the impact, it is doubtful whether ballistic missile defence, by itself, could do much to remove present European concerns over adverse trends in the military balance in Europe and, in particular, over the buildup of Soviet theatre nuclear forces, those non-strategic nuclear weapons targetted against Western Europe. One response to this concern with what is sometimes ambiguously termed the "Eurostrategic" balance has been the support given to the modernization of the alliance's long-range theatre nuclear forces. However, the political controversy generated by the decision to deploy *Pershing II* and ground-launched *Cruise* missiles has indicated just how difficult it is for European governments to accept major changes in the alliance's nuclear posture. There is a tension