

The counter is a relatively straightforward one; weapons don't cause war. War, or the drift towards political instability is a product of political factors, and weapons are a response. In other words, missile defence has no causal relationship with political instability, because instability would result regardless.

There is a third argument, which is largely ignored in this debate. Rather than causing instability, missile defences may contribute to it. In this sense, missile defence is part of a much bigger picture; a component of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) driven by the US. Its purpose is to maintain, if not increase, American military superiority. In so doing, potential world powers will be reluctant to challenge the US, thus creating political stability. As long as the US cannot be challenged realistically, the system is likely to remain relatively stable, and if missile defence contributes to its lead, and further reduces incentives to challenge the US, potential crises may be managed before they begin.

The stabilizing argument also implicitly underpins the case for missile defence as a response to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range ballistic missiles among so-called rogue states. Proliferation may be conceptualized as the answer to US military superiority when combined with the absence of an offsetting strategic political competitor to the US (i.e. the SU in the Cold War). Nuclear weapons, married to ballistic missiles, are the great equalizer. In so doing, it provides these states with a capability to deter US intervention. As a result, these states also acquire the capability to use their strategic forces for a range of regional political purposes. In other words, unless these weapons are checked, one regional outcome is increased instability, as a function of the US and others being unwilling to risk the costs of intervention; a condition likely if western elites truly believe that these states are undeterrable.

In other words, missile defence undermines the payoff of acquiring nuclear weapons by negating their delivery systems. In so doing, these weapons no longer are equalizers. The gap between the US and these states remains in place, and this gap spills over to promote local and regional stability. No one is likely to entertain or engage in war, *ceteris paribus*, because the US possesses no fundamental obstacle to its intervention. Incentives to acquire nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles significantly decline, because there is little payoff. The status quo regionally is frozen. In addition, missile defences emerge not as a factor driving nuclear proliferation horizontally (even though it may or may not vertically), but rather as a factor supporting non-proliferation, and thus ironically the cause of nuclear disarmament.

If one accepts this view, it can also be extended to some degree into the larger disarmament context. Even though most believe that missile defence leads to vertical proliferation, it is also possible to argue that missile defence may also support the process towards nuclear disarmament. If strategic stability is defined relative to the prospects for disarmament, missile defence may be key. Defence, in this context, is conceived as an alternative strategy to deterrence. Effective defences, especially if they disseminate among all the nuclear powers, can support deeper and deeper reductions. The logic of defence as a means to escape from nuclear deterrence is relatively straightforward.

Recognizing that nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented, the existing knowledge is problematic for reductions as they move closer to zero. In a world of thousands of nuclear weapons, adding ten or so more that violate the limits set out in a Treaty has little actual impact. However, in a world of few or none, based upon an agreement, acquiring ten or one has great significance. Cheating has potentially great payoffs. Missile defences act as a hedge, by eliminating the payoffs. Of course, this perspective on the relationship between missile defence and nuclear disarmament is much more complicated than space