only a handful of missiles — missiles which could be destroyed in an initial attack — there is, during a time of crisis, a strong incentive to use them quickly or lose them. Faced with such a choice, a state may opt for a strategy of launch-on-warning; i.e. striking at the first warning of an impending attack. Considering that ballistic missiles cannot be recalled, this strategy dramatically increases the risk of accidental war, particularly since most smaller states do not possess elaborate systems to detect false warnings.

Pre-emptive strikes against rival ballistic missiles, particularly if these missiles are few and vulnerable, may also become a compelling option in time of crisis. This too carries the potential for catastrophe. All nuclear weapons acquisition programmes, and most chemical programmes in the Third World are pursued clandestinely. In the absence of open doctrine and strategy relating to the use of these weapons, a pre-emptive strike might be interpreted as the beginning of a full-fledged attack, demanding an appropriate response.

The presence of advanced, technological weapons in volatile regions can also contribute to the initiation of preventive strikes. In 1981, when the Osiraq nuclear reactor was close to completion, Israel chose to bomb the Iraqi facility, contending that the aim of Baghdad's nuclear programme was to produce nuclear weapons. The possibility such action might take place again, this time against a missile factory, cannot easily be discarded.

CONTROLLING THE SPREAD

The first multilateral effort to curb the spread of ballistic missiles in the Third World came in 1987. After four years of secret negotiations, Canada, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States agreed on guidelines to control the export of missile equipment and technology which could contribute to a missile system capable of delivering nuclear weapons. The resulting 'Missile Technology Control Regime' (MTCR) is not a treaty, but is an agreement that the member countries will apply the guidelines nationally, through national export controls.[14]

The MTCR consists of guidelines and a technical annex, which divides missile-related equipment and technology into two categories. Category 1 lists the items of greatest sensitivity. These include: complete rocket systems — including ballistic missile systems, space launch vehicles and sounding rockets — capable of delivering at least a 500 kg payload to a range of at least 300 km; specially designed production facilities for such missile systems; individual rocket stages; re-entry vehicles; and rocket engines. The MTCR Document calls for "particular restraint" and a "strong presumption" to deny such transfer. The transfer of production facilities for the above items is not to be authorized, at least until further notice. Of Category 1 items, only this transfer of production facilities is explicitly banned.

Category 2 items, which include other subsystems and components, are to be dealt with "restraint" and, as for Category 1 items, should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The parameters for the systems to be controlled have been chosen, according to a Canadian government brief, for a number of reasons.[15] The 300 km range threshold, for example, "corresponds to strategic distances in the most compact theatres of potential conflict where nuclear missiles might become a threat."[16] In addition, with the possible exception of the Soviet Scud-B missile, there are no large missile systems widely available in the market with a range exceeding this parameter. Many observers have suggested that the theatre of consideration for the range parameter is the Middle East.

The payload parameter is said to have been chosen because, due to a lack of technical sophistication, the nuclear weapons which might be carried by Third World missiles would exceed the 500 kg threshold; hence, the transfer of such delivery systems should not be authorized.

Apart from the Document itself, very little has been made public about the MTCR regime, except that its parties have met regularly since 1987, including Rome in 1988, London in 1989, and Ottawa in 1990. In a press release issued by the Secretary of State for External Affairs in 1987, Canada invited all countries to adhere to the MTCR guidelines. Although not highly publicized, Australia, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands have now declared their intention to do so.

Some positive results of the MTCR initiative have been reported. For instance, pressure from MTCR signatory states contributed to the collapse of the Condor project involving Argentina, Iraq and Egypt. India is another country that is believed to have been slowed in its missile quest, mainly because of its reliance on foreign components. In this regard, it should be noted that of the 17 or so Third World nations with deployed systems, only three are believed to be relatively independent of foreign imports (Israel, North Korea and Taiwan). This suggests that restrictions on sales and transfers might make a considerable difference. Despite this, critics argue that weaknesses in the regime are too serious to make it an effective tool to address the problem.

For some observers, the most significant weakness of the MTCR is that its adherents are only Western industrialized nations and two important suppliers to the Third World, the Soviet Union and China, are not