

b. The Experience With Active Air Defence 1957-1963

At the time of the establishment of NORAD, first informally in 1957 and then by formal agreement in 1958, large numbers of US and Canadian interceptor aircraft were deployed for active defence. Although the imminent deployment of Soviet ballistic missiles was recognized, American defence planners continued to believe that the bomber would be the main threat, at least until 1963. Strenuous efforts were made, therefore, to create an active air defence system that would be capable of coping with a force of several hundred attacking bombers.

Although the number of heavy bombers deployed by the Soviet Union was seriously overestimated, the bomber threat was nevertheless a considerable one since active air defence could not in itself ensure an adequate level of protection for civilian populations. In the United States this led to a period of interest in civil defence, which was largely abandoned when it became clear that the emergency evacuation of cities was impractical.

The limitations of a purely defensive strategy were further exposed in studies conducted in 1964 for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at the request of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. These studies suggested that a determined Soviet bomber and missile attack would result in between 90 and 120 million American casualties. Calculations indicated that the existing air defence (still heavily deployed) would reduce those casualties by only 1.5 million or less, and even this figure was questionable since there was considerable uncertainty that they could identify the figure at all. In these circumstances, McNamara argued that a phase-down of the interceptor force could be achieved without any significant loss of damage-limiting capability, and that a smaller force more skillfully deployed would still inhibit any Soviet disposition to take advantage of the diminished air defence.⁶ There is no reason to suppose that this situation has changed and that an active air defence programme would protect a greater number of civilians at the present time, or in any foreseeable future scenario short of the development of a high confidence ballistic missile defence (BMD) of populations.

In response to this situation, McNamara propounded the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD) which, until recently, has been the articulated basis for most US strategic posture statements, and which has been accepted as such by successive Canadian governments. McNamara's concept of assured destruction was based on the calculation that American strategic forces could absorb a Soviet first strike and still impose such levels of destruction on the Soviet Union as to constitute unacceptable damage, thus deterring the attacker from initiating the exchange.

⁶ McNamara's analysis can be found in "Recommended FY 1966-70 Programs for Strategic Offensive Forces, Continental Air and Missile Defense Forces, and Civil Defense", Memorandum to the President, 3 December 1964. Conceptually, it remains relevant to the current situation.