

1-21-2000

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2000) "The Offenses of Missile Defense System Failure," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol8/iss3/4>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Offenses of Missile Defense System Failure

Author: Editor

Volume: 8

Issue: 3

Date: 2000-01-21

Keywords: Ballistic Missile Defense, Nonproliferation

Abstract. This article describes the political psychology of analyses of a recent United States testing failure of components of a limited ballistic missile defense system.

Public affairs representatives of the United States (US) Department of Defense have announced that the first test of a fully integrated system of radars, sensors, and an interceptor rocket failed to hit a target missile carrying a dummy warhead. Analyses of the announcement focus on two main subjects.

The first subject embraces the "hard" topics of technology, cost, and time. Is even a limited ballistic missile defense system to ward off attack from limited ballistic missile offenses technologically possible? If so, is it feasible within constraints of cost and time? One might posit that if the past is the best predictor of the future, technological possibility and cost and time feasibility are remote. Yet, there are many pasts. Often enough, innovation and discovery break free of one past to create a future that becomes a new past. How much cost and time should be allowed to hedge bets or bet on the creation of a new past? This question falls within the realm of "soft" topics.

"Soft" topics include the psychopolitical consequences of developing and fielding a limited ballistic missile defense system with intent to employ it for various contingencies. Would "usual suspects" such as North Korea be deterred from attacking the US? From developing what could be employed to attack the US? Would the "usual suspects" be incited to strike before the system was operational or to strike an operational system? Would the "usual suspects" already have won by inducing significant US expenditures for developing, fielding, and maintaining a system that--depending on future threat--might be no more than a "white elephant"? Would "unusual suspects" appear on the scene?

Another set of possible consequences revolves around the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty. First, would the concurrent breaking or modifying of the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty support, detract from, or have no effect on the "word" of the US for other treaties it has entered into and for other treaties it seeks to effect? Second, some US supporters of the system argue that the 1972 Treaty was meant to proscribe building defensive weapons--otherwise an adversary might feel compelled to build an offensive capability to overwhelm them. But since the current missile defense system in question is intended to thwart limited missile offenses, one might posit that the 1972 Treaty is moot. Yet there are counters to this functional analysis--leading to diverse causal attributions from the developing and fielding of a limited missile defense system. The counters include putative effects all previous, present, and future arms limitation, reduction, and nonproliferation efforts. Third, President Jacques Chirac of France argues that questioning the worth of the Treaty--let alone leaving it--could lead to a disruption of strategic equilibrium and a new arms race. Yet, he does not mention that staying in place also could lead to the same consequences.

Thus, it is quite difficult to delineate the offense of ballistic missile defense system failure. There's the offense to expected or desired technical capabilities. There's the offense to expected or desired deterrent consequences of system success or failure. There's even the offense as opposed to defense perceived by an ally, neutral, or adversary inherent to a defensive system. And there's the offense that

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as there are many psychopolitical imponderables of a successful system, there are as many after failure. This last offense may be the most grievous of all. (See Becker, E., & Schmitt, E. (January 20, 2000). Delay sought in decision on missile defense. *The New York Times*, p. A 13; Becker, E. (January 19, 2000). Missile is unable to hit target in Pentagon test. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Hamilton, S.B., Keilin, W.G., & Knox, T.A. (1987-1988). Thinking about the unthinkable: The relationship between death anxiety and cognitive/emotional responses to the threat of nuclear war. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 18, 53-61; Mayton, D.M. (1986). Personality correlates of nuclear war threat perception. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 126, 791-800; Stein, J. (1991). Deterrence and reassurance. In P.E. Tetlock & J.L. Husbands (Eds.). *Behavior, society, and nuclear war* Vol. 2. (pp. 8-72). Oxford University Press; Temperley, J. (1989). *Psychoanalysis and the threat of nuclear war*. In B. Richards (Ed.). *Crises of the self: Further essays on psychoanalysis and politics*. London, UK: Free Association Books.) (Keywords: Ballistic Missile Defense, Nonproliferation.)