

Canadian Interests and Ballistic Missile Defence

The United States' contributions to world culture are bourbon and the twelve-bar blues; ours' is anti-Americanism. We invented it. We honour it whenever we can. Thus, knee-jerk reflexes dominate our public debates on any issue of security related to the United States. Many Canadians cannot stand being on the same side as the United States, and those who are willing to do so try to camouflage the fact. Whenever Canadian interests are best furthered by working with Washington, our policy makers try to stand beside the United States while looking like they are somewhere else. The easiest way to do so is to talk about Canadian independence and denounce American proposals in detail while quietly accepting the whole.

So, the Prime Minister has just defined what he describes as tough conditions for Canadian participation in ballistic missile defence (BMD)—that we will make not pay for the programme nor base any weapons for it on our soil and must be involved in its command system, and will withdraw from involvement if ever weapons are based in space. Paul Martin's rhetoric is hard but the substance is soft— everything he demands, the Americans already have given. The United States' government does not want to base weapons for BMD on foreign soil. It does want to run BMD through a command in which we control American forces. Washington has signaled it might not ask Canada for financial contributions to the programme; and we always are free to leave any treaty for whatever reasons we like. What sounds like opposition to BMD is camouflage for joining it.

Why this need for camouflage? BMD is unpopular among two core Liberal constituencies, Quebecois and the nationalist left, because it raises issues on which they have strong feelings, American power in the world, Canadian cooperation with the United States and nuclear disarmament. Yet much of their opposition to BMD is overblown.

BMD is not Star Wars. Ronald Reagan advocated a programme to prevent every one of thousands of Soviet ICBMS from striking the United States or its allies. Recent American governments have more modest aims. Their BMD programme is intended to block the handful of nuclear missiles possessed by so-called 'rogue states'. North Korea hints it has nuclear weapons—the International Atomic Energy Agency estimates that it may have 4—6 bombs--and a few years ago fired a ballistic missile across Japan. Iranian leaders boast that they have a missile able to strike southern Europe, and may be developing the bomb. BMD also clearly is aimed to make it harder for China to threaten the US with a nuclear strike in coming years.

These aims are reasonable—shouldn't any government wish to protect its citizens from nuclear attack? Would anyone think Japan was wrong to look for a defence against North Korean nuclear weapons? The problem is that BMD will

be expensive to pursue, hard to achieve, and cannot succeed for many decades. Unlike Star Wars, BMD may work in our lifetimes, but if it succeeded, that simply would drive enemies to find ways to deliver nuclear weapons which it cannot stop, like bombs in suitcases or on container ships, which rarely undergo a security check as they enter North American ports. These dangers are real. BMD is impotent against them.

This fact answers the gut-level objection that BMD will make the United States too powerful: secure from nuclear attacks while able to deliver them, so bolstering arrogance in Washington and fear elsewhere. That will not happen because BMD cannot provide absolute security, which is yet another reason why Americans should oppose BMD—it will be expensive, probably will fail, and even if it works cannot achieve the objectives for which it is being pursued. There are better ways to spend money on defence.

Many other arguments against BMD, however, are nonsensical. Some people say that to develop it is to start a nuclear arms race. The Russian ambassador often makes this argument to the Canadian media, as he tries to manipulate us into furthering the interests of his country, which is too broke to conduct such a race, because it went bankrupt the last time it tried. Yet the Russians do not need an arms race to match BMD--their existing nuclear forces would overwhelm it, and would do so even if they fell to 5% of their existing strength; China could do the same simply by upgrading the quality of its existing forces, without increasing their size. Meanwhile, India and Pakistan are in an arms race against each other, North Korea and Iran already seem to be in one with somebody, and China appears satisfied with a nuclear force which cannot hit the lower forty-eight; so exactly who will BMD goad into the charge? In any case, during the 1980s, opponents of Star Wars used to claim it would start an arms race; instead, it helped to end one. Star Wars caused more disarmament than the peace movement ever has.

Others say BMD is bad because it will weaponise space. In fact, space has been militarised since people first got there, which is when the Germans fired V-2 missiles at Britain in 1944. The aim behind Sputnik was to develop nuclear missiles; space is what ICBMs fly through; satellites based there acquire intelligence to guide nuclear missiles, and transfer messages to command them, along with armies and navies below. Space is not weaponised, but weapons use it every day. Of course, there is a distinction between the military use of space and the stationing of weapons there—a small one. Any case against BMD that rests on this issue is a weak one.

Space is an important place for humans, therefore it matters to power politics. The United States has a security agenda for space, and it is pursuing policies which are intended to base weapons there. If Washington spends enough money on the project, that may happen by 2020, or not—and we will not affect its decisions on that issue.

Space already is militarised. The possibility that it may be weaponised fifteen—or fifty-- years from now should not dictate our policy toward BMD today.

The only thing that should decide that policy are Canadian interests. If we were Americans, we would oppose BMD; as Canadians, we believe that if the United States pursues it, we must participate.

The reasons are simple. BMD is not a bad thing--at worst, it is a waste of money. The United States will pursue it no matter what Canada does. Both American political parties and the Executive Branch are wedded to security in space. BMD is primarily a Republican issue (but guess who is the majority American party?) and the Democrats accept it. The only questions are how fast to pursue BMD, and whether it actually can work. If it does not, incidentally, so much the better: to pursue BMD will do little harm.

Meanwhile, BMD involves vital Canadian interests. Under it, Washington will treat our territory as part of its defences, and a potential avenue of threats, which it will prepare to stop over top of us. Whether it works or not, BMD will affect our sovereignty and if it is successful, BMD will do so in ways which are not even immoral, unreasonable, or illegal. Suppose the United States shoots down an ICBM directed toward Detroit in outer space, 100 miles above our territory. If they miss, it accidentally may nuke Windsor. If they hit it, who can blame the Americans for exercising self-defence? and since we do not own the outer space above our sovereign airspace, how can we claim they are violating international law for opening fire or destroying that target? And if radioactive fragments land on Montreal, who do we blame?

We must be involved in North American defence; that is where we live. Since 1940, we have joined every American effort at continental defence, because that lets us keep them from compromising our interests, whereas to stand aloof is to lose any influence over actions they will take anyway. In helping the Americans protect us and themselves, we also guard ourselves against them.

The United States is our protector against threats, and the greatest potential menace to us. It can be a danger even by being a friend, by trying to help us. Among our vital interests is the need never ever ever to be an avenue for someone to attack the Americans, or to let them think that might happen. But that is simply to be a good neighbour do—here, the right thing to do is the right thing. The Americans have returned that favour. On issues of our security and sovereignty, they have been fair. If you doubt that comment, consider where we would be if the Americans applied to those issues the kind of bullying they use on economic ones, like BSE or lumber.

The choice is not between joining BMD, or standing still: the status quo is not an option. For years, we have been part of a joint American-Canadian system

for continental defence, NORAD. Under BMD, it will have no purpose. If we join BMD, we will retain our leading part in the command of continental defence; if we do not join, NORAD will vanish, taking with it our means to influence any form of American military action regarding our territory. That influence is large. It is exercised every day. We will not miss it until it is gone.

To join BMD, if the United States pursues it, will do the world no harm, and us some good, especially since we can do so virtually for free. It is to maintain the policy of every Canadian government since 1940 and the traditions of Liberal statesmanship. It is to stand for Canadian nationalism, beside Pierre Eliot Trudeau; he who let Ronald Reagan test cruise missiles over Canada in 1984, despite protests from the peace movement, because that suited Canadian interests. It will be to defend Canadian interests.

The case for Canadian participation in BMD is strong—so much so that despite no lead from Ottawa, and constant attacks from the Bloc and the NDP, as many Canadians favour joining BMD as oppose it. By refusing to address the issue openly and honestly, the Martin government has made it look as if it has something to hide. It does not. All the government needs to do is take a stand on the issue and it will win. So will we.

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