

BOOK REVIEWS

Contemporary Nuclear Debates – Missile Defense, Arms Control, and Arms Races in the Twenty-First Century.

Alexander T. J. Lennon (ed.). MIT Press, 5 Cambridge Centre, Cambridge MA 02142, USA. 2002. 332 pp. Price not mentioned.

On the international stage, across all continents, there is one question being asked today – are we going to see an increasingly belligerent and intrusive America?

Well before the terrorist attacks of 11 September and the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns, the US President George W. Bush had already ruffled quite a few feathers among world governments and created a major debate amongst the strategic relations community – both policy makers and academics alike – with his decision to revoke the US–Soviet anti-ballistic missile treaty and promote and deploy a national missile defence (NMD) system for the US. The stated objective of the US NMD is to protect the US mainland from ballistic missile attacks, especially from those it chose to identify as ‘rogue states,’ – Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

Russia and China were among those who became vocal opponents of the move. While Russia now seems resigned to it, China continues to strongly oppose it, seeing it as undermining its ability to deter the US from hostile actions. Indeed, many people feel that by reducing its own vulnerability, the US, by adopting NMD, will destabilize the international system and set off an arms race. Of course, there are also many technological challenges that the US will have to grapple with before actually being able to put such a system in place. Even then, it can perhaps never be completely foolproof.

It is these and related questions that are addressed in the book under review. It is a collection of articles by eminent writers, which appeared in the *Washington Quarterly* during 2000 and 2001.

The book is particularly strong and interesting on US missile defence, covers not only technological issues, but also international relations ramifications in the European Union, Japan, India, Israel, North Korea, Iran, China and Russia. Even the section on arms control in the book largely continues the debate on missile defence and its linkage to a revival of an arms race, though not of the Cold War-type.

Many of the contributors, like Richard Garwin, a top weapons-scientist, do not

believe that NMD will enhance US security, because of the negative reaction it may set off in other major powers. Many also have doubts about its technological feasibility – with Garwin, for example, recommending that a boost-phase intercept (i.e. destroy the enemy missile immediately or soon after launch, when it is still over the launching party’s territory), may be more workable and desirable than one that seeks to intercept an incoming missile in its mid-course or terminal phase. A boost-phase intercept system could take care of the ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) threat from the rogue states.

How would India react? When George Bush announced his new ‘doctrine’ first, the Indian government, while not explicitly supporting NMD, did support the idea of the US making unilateral cuts in its arsenals (which the US felt could be done under NMD as less would suffice under such a scenario). Indian strategist Brahma Chellany covers this aspect in his piece titled ‘New Delhi’s Dilemma’. He recommends that India ‘take an unruffled, non-judgemental view’ of the US NMD decision, as it is the ‘sovereign right of a nation to defend itself by appropriate means’. He recognizes however, that upgradations of Chinese capabilities in response to a US deployment may cause problems for India. He however, foresees that ‘the action–reaction cycle triggered by missile defences could drive India closer to the United States’. While this is a possibility, there are too many other factors impinging on US–India relations, and the action–reaction cycle concept itself, which refers primarily to an arms race, is referred to by other analysts in the same volume as speculative and dubious.

A paper by James Lindsay and Michael O’Hanlon, while generally supporting NMD, advocates a cautious approach for the US. The authors also recommend that the US should not just walk away from the ABM treaty and leave nothing in its place, but should ‘consider accepting limitations on its future long-range missile defence capabilities.’ The specific suggestion is that for the next 15 years, the US pledge to limit any long-range missile defences for itself and its allies within the bounds of the ABM Treaty – 200 interceptor missiles (Article III of ABM Treaty restricts interceptor missiles to 100). Moreover, they also suggest that the US should forgo testing and deploy-

ing missile defence weapons in space. Their main concern is to avoid more problems with both Russia and China.

The final section explores the topic ‘Is arms control dead’. Many views are expressed in this section – almost all authors believe that arms control is an important instrument of security policy. It is interesting to note that the justification for arms control is primarily security, and does not cover other economic, political or moral dimensions. One author specifically declares that arms control is not dead, and all others recommend various ways it could be useful for specifically achieving the security objectives of the US.

The general impression that one gets is that nobody seems very confident about the role of missile defence, either in its technological workability, its costs, or its political ramifications, but the analysts seem resigned to various developments taking place in their own course. Most stress the need for the international system to adopt a co-operative approach in tackling international security issues, as a blind unilateral approach, especially by the most powerful state in the international system, could cause more instability problems than it solves. They seem to concur that ‘strategic stability cannot be imposed but set in place by mutual consent’.

In the final reckoning, it is this question of strategic stability on the international stage that is at stake. Mutual vulnerability, with no unilateral advantage to a State, seems to have better chances of ensuring stability. Given the nature of the international system however, states will always reserve the right to use all the power at their disposal in the pursuit of national interests. Is the US unilateralism as witnessed in the Iraqi campaign, which went ahead in total disregard to the UN, an indication of things to come in the future? This book is useful to anyone wanting inputs in thinking about whether the most powerful state in the system will use its power wisely and responsibly.

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