

The defence that doesn't work

In 2002, the governing council of the American Physical Society called on the US government to delay deployment of a missile defence system until it was demonstrated to work against realistic threats. Thirty years earlier, the physics community in the US had been instrumental in arguing for the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, pointing out that existing and proposed missile defence systems were in fact not effective against realistic offensive countermeasures.

Nevertheless, in 2001 President Bush announced the US withdrawal from the ABM treaty and, in 2004, his intention to deploy a limited missile defence system to protect against 'rogue states'. The problem is that this system — which has so far cost about US\$55 billion, and

now runs at about US\$10 billion per year — doesn't work, and never has. Pre-deployment, there was a 40% failure rate in all tests, none of which was conducted against realistic incoming weapons. To avoid embarrassment, all further tests were scrapped until the system was deployed. Since deployment, it has failed both tests in 2004 and 2005: the interceptor did not even leave its silo.

Not content with providing illusory protection against a threat that does not yet exist (even 'axis of evil' states have yet to develop ballistic missile systems capable of delivering nuclear missiles to US targets), Bush has now announced his intention to provide similar protection for Europe. They propose to install ten antimissile



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interceptors in eastern Europe, at a cost of almost US\$2 billion.

Even ignoring the likelihood of such a ballistic-missile attack from a terrorist state — as opposed to, say, detonating a nuclear device on a container ship in a major port — one hopes the physics community in Europe will also stand up for the scientific method when it comes to strategic security issues. Perhaps the Bush administration is using missile defence as a pretext for building military installations in eastern Europe. But no matter; by openly raising issues of technological viability, the international physics community must attempt to insert much-needed reality checks into the debate.

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