The Legacy of Reykjavik: Preserving a Security Option for Dealing with Madmen, Missiles, and Missile Defense

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"We should have some way of defending ourselves against nuclear missiles."

—Ronald Reagan, July 31, 1979*

"I think we had a reasonable chance of shooting it down."

—George W. Bush, July 7, 2006, in response to a question about North Korea's launch of its Taepodong 2 missile three days earlier†

THE FORTUNATE LEGACY of the Reykjavik Summit lies in wisdom of the American delegation to preserve the option for a missile defense system. Twenty years after the landmark meeting in Iceland, the world is witnessing a plenitude of missile threats, a key, if not *the central*, motif at the Soviet-American parley. The thunderstorm of rocket firings from Lebanon to North Korea in 2006 makes it clear that the missile menace did not expire with the Soviet Union. The projectiles launched by the

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*Cited in Martin Anderson, *Revolution: The Reagan Legacy* (Stanford, California, Hoover Institution Press, 1990), page 83.

† Quoted from the President's White House Press Briefing, July 7, 2006. Downloaded: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/print/20060707-1.html

North Koreans and Hezbollah alert mankind to the very real prospect that even more frightening payloads will exist in the next-generation missiles. The apprehension of missile warfare has not receded in the twenty years since Soviet-American negotiators met to discuss nuclear disarmament and missile defense in Reykjavik.

The Defense of Missile Defense

Nuclear-tipped missiles—and a possible defensive shield—were uppermost in the minds of the Soviet-American delegations at Reykjavik. Even before taking office, President Ronald Reagan wanted to defend against incoming nuclear missiles. In his 1983 speech that publicly announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), Reagan committed the United States to the search for a strategic missile defense system. This novel American approach soon encountered stiff Soviet opposition to what Moscow termed "space-strike weapons."

Two salient facts about America's commitment to an antimissile system stand out from the pivotal 1986 summit.[1] First and foremost, Reagan did not regard the SDI as a bargaining chip in the crucial negotiations with the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev.[2] President Reagan pressed hard to convince the Soviet general secretary about the necessity of a defense against nuclear-armed ballistic missiles for both the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Kremlin chief was wedded to the status quo in the strategic construct as set forth in the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile

1. For a vivid and authoritative account of the Reykjavik summit, see George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), pages 751–80.

2. A description of the evolution of the Strategic Defense Initiative up to Ronald Reagan's announcement speech to the nation on March 23, 1983, can be found in Anderson, *Revolution*, pages 80–99.

Treaty, which enshrined the notion of mutual assured destruction (MAD) for both signatories if nuclear war were to break out. In the arms control calculus, MAD represented the ultimate stable deterrent against a Soviet nuclear attack, for Moscow risked joint destruction with the United States. President Reagan argued that in the event of a Soviet inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) attack, the MAD strategy left the United States with the unpalatable decision of either doing nothing against a barrage of long-range nuclear missiles or retaliating in kind against Moscow. He hated the choices.

At the historic Soviet-American meeting in Iceland, Ronald Reagan argued for the elimination of all ballistic missiles, for he had long held an especial distaste for the thought of a thermonuclear war. Capitalizing on this apprehension, the Soviet leader offered his U.S. counterpart what seemed the deal of the twentieth century—the reduction of both sides' strategic offensive arms over a ten-year period to achieve total elimination. But Gorbachev's proposal contained a catch that remained a deal breaker. The Kremlin chief wanted Reagan to halt all testing in space of new SDI technologies, confining research and testing on SDI technologies to the laboratory. The Soviet leader never defined what he meant by a laboratory, but his intent was to keep the SDI from going into operation.

In response to this sweeping proposal, Ronald Reagan asked: "If we both eliminate nuclear weapons, why would there be a concern if one side wants to build defensive systems just in case?"[3] Trying to forge an agreement, America's fortieth commander-in-chief even offered to share SDI technology with the Soviet Union. But he and his secretary of state, George Shultz, would not renounce SDI, believing that without it they had "no leverage to propel the Soviets to continue moving our

3. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, page 771.

way."[4] The Reagan foreign policy team held firm on sustaining research and development on an antimissile system for strategic long-range ballistic missiles at Reykjavik, despite the immediate perception by the media and pundits of a monumental diplomatic failure on the subarctic island. These first impressions judged that the United States had walked away from an array of Soviet concessions because of a dubious Star Wars fantasy.

Without "SDI as an ongoing propellant," in the words of George Shultz, Moscow's arms control "concessions could wither away over the next ten years."[5] As the secretary of state and others realized, without the SDI impetus there was no reason for their opposite numbers to come to the negotiating table. As it turned out, during the subsequent George H. W. Bush administration, Gorbachev did, in fact, enter into sweeping nuclear arms reductions in the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks with the United States that had been furthered by the Reagan administration's stance. Had Reagan bargained away the prospects and promise of some type of defense-based deterrence system, it would have been the greatest one-sided bad bargain since Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for bread and pottage. Killing the concept of a defensive option to the MAD strategy would have increased the vulnerability that confronts the United States in the post–Cold War era.

The second and other significant Reykjavik factor that looms large today is that Reagan saw beyond focusing on just the Soviet Union as the only target for his proposed missile defense. It is true that President Reagan strove to eliminate nuclear weapons. But his passion for a protective defense system against strategic ballistic missiles encompassed a much

4. Ibid., page 773.
5. Ibid., page 775.

wider scope than just the Soviet Union. In a March 1988 speech, nearly two years after Reykjavik, he asserted: "People who put their trust in MAD must trust it to work 100 percent forever—no slip-ups, no madmen, no unmanageable crises, no mistakes—forever."[6]

Madman and SDI

Before exploring the vindication of President Reagan's post-Soviet view, it is important to note his thinking on the uses of a missile defense system. Even before Reykjavik, he envisioned the SDI as protection against not only the Soviet Union but also other threats. After his 1983 speech inaugurating the SDI, Reagan faced accusations that he simply employed a stratagem, or bargaining chip, to compel the Soviets to reduce their nuclear armory. He argued otherwise to American and Soviet listeners. Later, Reagan wrote with unusual prescience: "One day a madman could come along and make the missiles and blackmail all of us—but not if we have a defense against him."[7]

President Reagan saw the SDI, not as an "impenetrable shield—no defense could ever be expected to be 100 percent effective," but, as he later wrote, as "a safety valve against cheating—or attacks by lunatics who managed to get their hands on a nuclear missile."[8]

Reagan desperately wanted to reach a verifiable agreement with the Soviets before, after, and during Reykjavik to eliminate nuclear weapons by year 2000, as Gorbachev proposed in early 1986, ten months before the Icelandic summit. What gave the U.S. chief executive officer serious pause were worries

6. Quoted from Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005), page 240.

7. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), page 548.

8. Ibid., page 608.

about an SDI-less America. Such a defenseless scenario left the United States vulnerable, even naked, to long-range strategic missile threats. The ABM treaty did permit tactical and air defense–type missiles.

In his autobiography, the former president wrote a rhetorical question to his readers about the passing of nuclear-tipped missiles into the wrong grasp: "What about the Qaddafis of the world or a lunatic who got his hands on an A-bomb?"[9]

In mentioning by name Muammar al-Qaddafi, the Libyan strongman and terrorist mastermind of a rash of bombings and murders from the 1970s through the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, Reagan farsightedly identified the type of threat America would face in the post-Soviet period. By resorting to terrorism and defying the international community, Qaddafi was the quintessential rogue dictator of the past era. Later, even more wicked and violent men displaced him as terrorist chieftains or took the reins of government in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

Just as Reagan wanted to trust but verify arms agreements, he wanted insurance in a dangerous world, even if Gorbachev did scale back on land-based ballistic missiles. In President Reagan's view, if practical, the SDI provided that insurance policy.

The "Qaddafis" of the Post-Soviet Period

Rogue states and substate actors, like terrorist networks, were not envisioned during the Reykjavik proceedings. And these entities now pose special dangers to the United States. Rogue nations burst on the international scene following the breakdown of the Soviet Union to preoccupy U.S. attention. The or-

9. Ibid., page 651.

igins of contemporary rogue states date from the Cold War divisions, however. Much is made, and rightly so, of the immense changes that the Soviet Union's implosion ushered into Central Europe and Central Asia. The legacy of this side of the story was freedom from Soviet rule and independent capitals, stretching from Tallinn to Tashkent. Yet, another dimension of the dissolving of Moscow's imperial apparatus has been less explored. The imploded empire left behind pernicious endowments that, like the dragon teeth sowed by the mythical Cadmus, sprang up as outlaw states. Moscow had funded, trained, and armed client states as proxies to confound the United States; they became the rogue states of the post–Berlin Wall era. North Korea and Cuba boasted avowedly Marxist-Leninist governments that masked personal authoritarianism despite Communist trappings. Other proxy states, such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria, professed a bastardized socialism through which their strongmen weaved fascistic systems, replete with secret police, subservient-party structures, and leader-praising slogans. Whatever their internal variations, these Soviet clients shared an abiding antipathy toward the West in general and the United States in particular.

History is replete with examples of rogue polities on the international scene, from the ancient Gauls to Nazi Germany, which functioned outside the world community of their eras. In the contemporary scene, rogue states demonstrate contempt for international norms by repressing their own populations, promoting international terrorism, flouting traditional diplomatic intercourse, and, most of all, seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMD). With the ouster of the Saddam Hussein regime, North Korea and Iran meet these broad criteria in spades.[10] Moreover, they cooperate with one another in developing weapons and missiles.

10. For more analysis of the rogue state phenomenon, see Thomas H. Henrik-

Both Iran and North Korea have devoted immense resources to the perfection of missiles whose range is longer and longer as well as to secret nuclear programs with the goal of developing atomic weapons. Iran, for example, had developed its ballistic missile capacity in spite of setbacks. Iran's Shahab 3 medium-range missile is thought to have the capability of reaching Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and U.S. troops stationed in the Middle East. These liquid-fueled, road-mobile ballistic missiles are similar to the North Korean No Dong series. The Iranian missiles are designed to carry a 1,200-kilogram payload some 1,300 kilometers. Other longer-range missiles, such as the Shahab 4, remain cloaked in secrecy.

In its arsenal, Tehran also has short-range, liquid-fueled missiles of the SCUD B and SCUD C type. North Korean assistance enabled Iran to produce such projectiles on its own. The Iranian arms inventory also includes solid-fueled missiles, such as the Chinese-manufactured CSS-8, the type that damaged an Israeli naval vessel in July.

North Korea, which is the rogue missile supply hub for illicit sales, is also hard at work in its research, design, and production of advanced rocketry. The July Fourth 2006 launching of its much ballyhooed Taepodong 2 fizzled. This multistage sequel was to have surpassed its progenitor, the Taepodong 1, parts of which flew 3,000 kilometers in August 1998, when it traversed over Japan's northern islands.

Other shorter-range missiles include the SCUD-B, C, and D variants. The SCUD-D, or No Dong, has a range of 1,000 to 1,300 kilometers, with a payload of 700 to 1,000 kilograms. These types of weapons pose a threat to American forces posted in South Korea and Japan.

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sen, "The Rise and Decline of Rogue States," *Journal of International Affairs* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2001), pages 349–373.

If the Taepodong series is perfected, then it has the potential for hitting Guam, Hawaii, Alaska's Aleutian Islands chain, perhaps even California. Neither this capability nor the miniaturization of nuclear warheads atop ballistic missiles seems to be imminently within the grasp of North Korea or Iran. But it does seem inevitable over time. The madmen that Ronald Reagan worried about are now running North Korea and Iran. Pyongyang's Kim Jong Il's regime threatens dire consequences for the United States, South Korea, or the region at any perceived provocation, and Tehran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad harbors apocalyptic visions while he advocates wiping Israel off the map.

Along with the threats from rogue regimes, the West in general and the United States in particular face potentially catastrophic assault from terrorist networks or so-called substate entities. Groupings such as Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda and Hassan Nasrallah's Hezbollah now complicate the international landscape as they raise difficulties for defending nation-states. It is highly unlikely that such groups will acquire sophisticated missiles for an attack against the United States; but it is not improbable beyond the realm of reason. It is more likely they would smuggle a nuclear "dirty bomb" into an American city, using regular explosives to spread nuclear materials at levels unsafe for life, thereby causing deep economic and societal disruption. But the release of toxic chemicals or deadly biological agents might do as much, or even more, harm than a nuclear "dirty bomb."[11] These threats require a set of defenses different from an anti-missile structure.

11. For information on dirty bombs, see Sidney D. Drell and James E. Goodby, *The Gravest Danger: Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), pages 48 and 86.

Actualizing Missile Defense Plans

Unfortunately, the scenarios that the American participants at Reykjavik feared are, in fact, materializing, with the proliferation of nuclear weapons capacity and the spread of missile technology to nontransparent dictatorial regimes.

Thus the option of long-range missile defense that the United States secured at the Iceland summit stands it in much better stead than the actual progress toward an effective defensive system. Admittedly, there is as of yet no impenetrable shield. But as Reagan wrote in his autobiography, he "never viewed the SDI as an impenetrable shield—no defense could ever be expected to be 100 percent effective."[12]

Even President George W. Bush, an enthusiastic proponent of building and deploying a ground-based ballistic missile defense in Alaska and California, hedged when he expressed that he thought there was "a reasonable chance" of shooting down North Korea's Taepodong 2 this past summer if it approached American territory; its range was projected to be as far as 6,700 kilometers (4,200 miles). He added: "At least that's what the military commanders told me."[13] Even President Bush's somewhat tentative statement marked a substantial improvement from Reagan's acknowledgment that the United States lacked any defense against incoming missiles.

This is not the place to review the successes and setbacks of the various weapon systems to bat down missiles. In fact, many of these defensive efforts are not aimed at the long-range Soviet-type ICBMs that so imperiled the United States during the Cold War. Instead, they aim to "kill" the short- and medium-range missiles tested by North Korea in July. Some of

12. Reagan, *An American Life*, page 608.
13. President's White House Press Conference, July 7, 2006.

these systems, however, reach beyond Earth's atmosphere, hitting experimental targets at over 100 miles high.

Showing some promise are SM-3 interceptors from the U.S. Navy AEGIS system borne by naval destroyers and cruisers, the Army's Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD), and the much more limited range Patriot Advanced Capability-3 system. Moreover, the United States has embarked on cooperative missile defense designs with Germany, Italy, Israel, and Japan. Partially from American support, Israel has developed its own Arrow against longer-range missiles, but not against the Katyusha and Qassam rockets that poured down on it in July and August 2006. Other countries, some long skeptical of U.S. exertions, have embarked on their own anti-missile umbrellas. For example, France is experimenting with its anti-aircraft missile, the Aster, for a defensive capability against hostile missiles.

Other experiments involving advanced laser technology, both ground- and aircraft-based concepts, are under way and hold out promise.[14] Clearly, missiles have come to stay in the world's arsenals—in nation states as well as terrorist organizations—and so have missile defenses. Still, much work remains to make a missile defense system effective, if not ever a 100-percent umbrella.[15]

Having escaped the Sirens wailing that "missile defense is not possible," the years after the Reykjavik Summit have seen the U.S. effort navigate between the Scylla of too much too soon and the Charybdis of too little too late. But like Ulysses, the current administration has sailed beyond these two mon-

14. I am grateful for Sid Drell's insights on advanced laser technology as well as on other aspects of the paper, especially on the fine points of the ABM treaty and its allowance for tactical defensive missiles.

15. Dave Ahearn, "ABL, KEI Missile Shields Must Improve: Obering," *Defense Daily* (August 17, 2006), page 1.

sters in deploying a limited defense system in hopes of avoiding catastrophic consequences. It was the Reykjavik decision that made this course possible by not trading away American security. Had the Reykjavik negotiators traded away the SDI, the decision might have sent a chill on all antimissile defense experiments. Instead, work could go forward. The advances in SDI research could thus be integrated with tactical-level systems. Thus, by holding on to the SDI, the Reagan administration at the least paved the way for President Bush to declare that the United States had a "reasonable"—rather than no—chance of intercepting a North Korean long-range ballistic missile.

At this point, twenty years later, the Reykjavik decision looks inspired as we face an ever more perilous world. One mark of a higher order of statecraft involves the success of preserving a nation's long-term security in the pursuit of its short-term interests. In this realm, the legacy of Reykjavik shines brightly.