

By Justin Hamilton

NATO leaders and heads of state met in Lisbon this weekend for what can only be described as the most amicable summit in recent memory. For the spectator, amiability rarely makes for an interesting spectacle. However, amongst the expected statements concerning forces in Afghanistan and future relations with NATO's prior *raison d'être*, Russia, were a series of far less publicised announcements surrounding the future development of NATO's Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) programme.

Often ridiculed as a 'Star Wars' concept during the Regan administration, BMD could become a central pillar within NATO's new strategic concept, promising to provide a protective missile shield across all member states within the next decade. This is a development of particular reassurance to European countries feeling intimidated by the Shahab 3; Iran's most advanced Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile, capable of delivering a payload over distances of up to 3,000km.

In the current climate there can be little doubt that most of the dangers faced by NATO are of a less conventional kind, arguably none more so than the threat of rogue states wielding weapons of mass destruction. For a stated cost of \$800 million over 14 years, the proposed Active Layered Theatre Missile Defence (ALTBMD) programme would provide ballistic missile protection for active forces within NATO's area of operations. It is estimated an additional \$200 million, spread over 10 years, could expand the programme to include European populations and territory as well.

With an annual budget currently exceeding \$3.3billion, \$200million (or even a combined \$1 billion) spread over more than a decade and between 28 member states would seem like good business. NATO's bullish Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, claims that BMD represents 'a lot of defence at an affordable price'. With Britain delaying the renewal of its Trident nuclear arsenal and the German Luftwaffe set to retire their nuclear delivery system, the Tornado strike aircraft, in 2015, BMD seems an increasingly attractive option. The programme offers not just a potential shield against ballistic missile attack, but a powerful weapon against the threat of hostage posed by a nuclear Iran. Although repeatedly denied by President Obama, some NATO insiders have even begun to see BMD as a viable alternative to nuclear deterrence.

In an age of fiscal austerity does it make financial sense to spend more than \$1 billion on a questionable technology such as BMD, much less to consider it as a replacement to nuclear deterrence? The additional cost of \$200 million has also been disputed by a number of news agencies, who place the current figure somewhere closer to \$270 million. This is a relatively minor correction perhaps, but who knows how much it could increase between now and the projected completion date of 2020?

Far beyond the concern of increased costs however is the hidden reliance on US technology and ultimately, funding. In 2011 alone the US Department of Defence has budgeted more than

\$9.9 billion for BMD research and technology, much of which will be directly transferred to the NATO programme. In addition, BMD requires a symphony of support vehicles including unmanned aerial vehicles and low orbit satellites, each with affiliated support costs.

It is by no means unusual for a NATO programme to be dominated by US capabilities, even less so during a period of extreme fiscal austerity and power depreciation among the European powers. Nonetheless, the wisdom behind implementing a programme of such fundamental importance to Europe's potential future security framework that is almost wholly dependent on US technology must be questioned. Should the European nuclear powers seriously consider BMD as an alternative security measure to nuclear deterrence, it would represent an erosion of national sovereignty and more deeply entrench the global status quo.

Of course NATO leaders were quick to reinforce their unswerving commitment to mutual defence, enshrined under NATO's most sacrosanct clause, Article 5. Yet given the obvious move towards a more Eastern orientated foreign policy under the Obama administration one must question the future value of NATO as far as US defence policy is concerned. Outsourcing vital defence capabilities is always a dangerous option :One the European powers may wish to re-think before making any lasting decisions.