

The Offense-Defense Relationship

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Since the late 1960s, missile defense has reliably been at the nexus of defense, foreign policy, and arms control for the United States and Russia. In the current state of strategic instability—including the withering of arms control agreements—where an accident or mishap could trigger a catastrophic chain of events, the stakes associated with finding a truly cooperative path forward on missile defense, and more broadly an agreed framework for managing the relationship between strategic defense and offense and reducing nuclear risks, have never been higher. In the absence of such cooperation, the cycle of competition between deployment of missile defenses and advances in offensive capabilities to defeat them will continue to fuel dangerous nuclear competition and pose an obstacle to reaching new agreements to limit and reduce nuclear weapons.

Further progress in improving U.S.-Russia relations and nuclear threat reduction depends in part on developing a cooperative approach to missile defense, beginning with the U.S./NATO and Russia. Unfortunately, the historic track record on U.S./NATO-Russia missile defense cooperation is not promising:

- Political follow-through has been lacking. While U.S. and Russian presidents have previously agreed in principle to pursue cooperation on missile defense, these agreements have rarely been followed by detailed accords. When agreements have been struck—such as the one by presidents Bill Clinton and Vladimir Putin in June 2000 to establish a jointly manned center in Moscow to exchange data from U.S. and Russian early warning systems¹—they have not been implemented.
- Identifying technical areas for cooperation on missile defense has been difficult, involving extremely sensitive technologies.
- Missile defense has historically been linked to nuclear deterrence; whether one accepts or rejects such a linkage, failure to develop a durable post-Cold War understanding of the offense-defense relationship has set back cooperation across the board.
- There is a severe trust deficit, where each side suspects the other's motives: Moscow fears Washington cynically seeks to co-opt Russia so America can deploy unlimited defenses that will erode its deterrent; Washington believes Moscow only wants to derail U.S. missile defense programs.

Enter China—A further complication in the offense-defense relationship, in particular as it relates to missile defense, is China. Over the past 20 years, China has consistently objected to U.S. missile defense deployments, in particular U.S. “theater” missile defense deployments in the Asia-Pacific region. Going

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forward, as the United States seeks to engage China more broadly on regional and global security and stability, including discussions relating to Chinese nuclear forces, the issue of missile defense is likely to play an even greater role.

While legally binding limits on missile defense are almost certainly politically infeasible in the United States at present, progress on improving U.S.-Russia—and to some degree U.S.-China—relations and reducing the risk of nuclear use will require the United States to review this matter with fresh eyes and develop a more cooperative approach to missile defense, one that will address at least some Russian and Chinese concerns about U.S. missile defense capabilities. Practical steps could be agreed to create a positive dynamic for discussions and further boost what will be a continuing effort in the years ahead to deepen cooperation in this area.

U.S. Policy and Programs

In the 2019 Missile Defense Review (MDR),² missile defense was identified as “an essential component of U.S. national security and defense strategies,” contributing both to deterrence of adversary aggression and the assurance of allies and partners. The program is designed to “counter the expanding missile threats posed by rogue states and revisionist powers to us, our allies, and partners, including ballistic and cruise missiles, and hypersonic vehicles.” Russia and China are explicitly named in the discussion of the evolving threat. North Korea, Iran, Russia, and China (which “can now potentially threaten the United States with about 125 nuclear missiles, some capable of employing multiple warheads”) are identified as current or future threats to the U.S. homeland.

The MDR narrative goes on to state that the United States relies on deterrence to protect against large and technically sophisticated Russian and Chinese threats to the U.S. homeland: the purpose of U.S. missile defense is to “outpace” existing and potential rogue state (i.e., North Korea and Iran) offensive missile capabilities. These efforts “will require” the examination and possibly fielding of advanced technologies, including space-based sensors and boost-phase defense capabilities, and possibly adding capacity and capability to “surge” missile defense. For this reason, the MDR states “the United States will not accept any limitation or constraint on the development or deployment of missile defense capabilities needed to protect the homeland against rogue missile threats.” The MDR also notes that, “As rogue state missile arsenals develop, the space-basing of interceptors may provide the opportunity to engage offensive missiles in their most vulnerable initial boost phase of flight.”

Today, the United States deploys the Ground-based Mid-Course Defense (GMD) system to defend against a limited ICBM attack from “any source.” Forty Ground-Based Interceptors (GBIs) are deployed at Fort Greely, Alaska, and four at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California. Congress appropriated an additional \$1.3 billion in FY21 for missile defense above the administration’s Missile Defense Agency (MDA) budget request of \$9.13 billion.³ The MDR states that DOD will increase the number of deployed GBIs, including a new GBI interceptor, from 44 to 64 beginning as early as 2023; and the Fort Greely site has the potential for up to an additional 40 interceptors. The MDR also references the possibility of a new GBI interceptor site in the continental United States.

Regional defenses include seven Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries, including one in Guam and one in South Korea. The United States is testing improved variants of both the Aegis SM-3 and

SM-6 missiles, for deployment at sea and ashore. An Aegis Ashore site in Romania is operational, armed with the SM-3 interceptor; an Aegis Ashore site in Poland is expected to be operational in 2022. Both Aegis Ashore sites are expected to be equipped with the SM-3 Blk IIA—capable of providing added protection against ICBM threats. The U.S. MDA tested the ship-based SM-3 Blk IIA against an ICBM-class target in November 2020. Patriot Advanced Capability-3 is now deployed with U.S., allied, and partner forces in multiple theaters to defend against short-range ballistic and cruise missiles.

Russian and Chinese Capabilities

The MDR states that Russia is maintaining and modernizing its anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system deployed to protect Moscow from nuclear attack, including 68 nuclear-armed interceptors, and multiple shorter-range systems throughout Russia. China is described as “aggressively pursuing a wide range of mobile air and missile defense capabilities,” including testing a new mid-course missile defense system.

Perhaps more significant programmatically, both Russia and China are developing and deploying offensive nuclear, cyber, and space capabilities explicitly to defeat U.S. missile defenses. Thus, as has been true historically, improved U.S. missile defense capabilities are fueling the development and deployment of new, more sophisticated offensive capabilities by U.S. competitors and adversaries.

Political and Security Context

The domestic political and international security context for an initiative to engage on the “offense-defense” relationship and take concrete, specific steps relating to missile defense is fraught with challenges. Threading the political needle at home, and security and diplomatic needle with Russia and China, will be a challenge for any U.S. administration.

To begin, a core tenet of conservative orthodoxy for decades has been support for missile defense, unfettered by the ABM Treaty and any other constraint regimes. Moreover, lawmakers in both political parties support U.S. missile defense programs. Any initiative that appears to open the door to limitations or constraints, in particular legally binding constraints, will be strongly resisted.

Second, the Russian position for some time has been that not just constraints, but “legally binding” constraints, are necessary in the area of missile defense for there to be any additional constraints, including reductions, in U.S. and Russian nuclear forces.

Third, at least in the area of strategic stability and nuclear threat reduction including arms control, any improvement in U.S.-Russia relations and reduction of risk of nuclear use are likely to require the United States to engage on missile defense. A new U.S. administration almost certainly will conduct a defense policy review that would include missile defense, offering an opportunity to revisit the issue; however, domestic opposition, including in Congress, to constraints on missile defense will continue to be a significant factor.

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Lastly, although missile defense and the offense-defense relationship in general may be more immediate and central to a review of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Russia, any decisions taken in this context also could significantly impact U.S.-China policy, including with respect to engaging China on regional stability and nuclear forces. At a minimum, a framework for engaging Russia in this area should be conscious of the potential impacts on U.S.-China policy; more proactively, the United States might seek to discuss some of the same issues with China, or even involve China in implementation.

Steps to Unlock the Offense-Defense Stalemate

The most realistic frame for engaging on missile defense in a U.S.-Russia context almost certainly includes NATO—in part owing to NATO deployments that concern Russia, but also to enhance trust and cooperation between Washington and Brussels.

Additionally, although the objective would be to develop practical steps that could be taken through politically binding arrangements, a frame that focuses first on specific steps that would not require new legally binding treaties is most realistic from the standpoint of U.S. domestic politics, recognizing that this may not be sufficient for Russia.

If it can be done, this approach could create a positive dynamic for discussions and further boost what will be a continuing effort in the years ahead to deepen cooperation in this area. Such an approach also could inform negotiation of any new legally binding treaties and improve prospects for their approval by legislatures and parliaments.

In this context, there are a number of steps that could ensure that the historic and persistent barriers to a truly cooperative approach to missile defense do not thwart future efforts. Political will and leadership from the most senior levels in Washington and Moscow will be needed to make progress; otherwise, they will get stuck in the usual bureaucratic ruts in both capitals.

Steps could include

- **Joint U.S./NATO-Russia analysis to develop a framework for cooperation**—The U.S./NATO and Russia could task the NATO-Russia Council to reengage on this issue, beginning with a new and comprehensive joint analysis of the future framework for missile defense cooperation. All parties should have realistic expectations and focus now on those activities that lend themselves to near-term success and broader cooperation down the road. Such a tasking would need to come from the highest levels within the U.S./NATO and Russia and involve senior officials in capitals—accompanied by a clear deadline.
- **Joint data exchange center**—The U.S./NATO and Russia could commit to updating the Clinton-Putin-era agreement to establish a joint data exchange center in Europe to include all of NATO (or alternatively, implement the center concept “virtually”) to exchange information derived from missile launch warning systems on the launches of missiles and space launch vehicles. The new U.S./NATO-Russia center could be expanded over time to include other nations facing missile threats, including China, making it a truly global center for nuclear threat reduction.

The original rationale for establishing a joint data exchange center—to reduce the danger that ballistic missiles might be launched on the basis of false warning of an attack and to promote increased mutual confidence—persists. Today, these concerns are amplified by the threat of cyberattacks on nuclear facilities, nuclear command-and-control structures, or early warning systems. A clear benefit of the center would be to bring together U.S./NATO-Russia personnel in “day-to-day” operations on a dedicated joint activity. In the future, the center could also have potential for cooperation in other related areas, including cyber and space.

- **Maximize transparency**—There have been periodic bursts of exchanging information on ballistic missile threats and missile defense programs in the past. These activities should be reviewed and a future work plan agreed, with the goal of maximizing transparency with respect to all ballistic missile defense assets deployed from the Atlantic to the Urals.

This effort could include the proposal made by Ernest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn in 2019 to negotiate soft guidelines on missile defense, including reciprocal transparency measures to reduce first-strike concerns and increase decision time. These could include exchanges of information about the missile defense deployments and plans of each side, on-site visits to monitor missile defense capabilities, and written understandings not to deploy missile defenses in ways or at levels that would threaten the other’s nuclear deterrent.⁴

In the context of underscoring that missile defense is not meant to threaten deterrence, as part of the written understanding not to deploy missile defenses in ways or levels that would threaten the other’s nuclear deterrent (i.e., an implicit recognition of “mutual vulnerability”), the United States and Russia could commit not to deploy more than 100 strategic-range land-based interceptors (or freeze current deployments at existing levels for each side).

- **Technology exchange and joint research and development**—An element of technology exchange and joint research and development should be established to support mutual activities in the area of missile defense, including receiving and exchanging information from early warning systems to provide an enhanced understanding of, and ability to counter, missile threats. This does not mean designing and constructing from the ground up a missile defense architecture for Europe manned by joint U.S./NATO-Russia crews with multiple fingers on the button. But a series of joint pilot projects could help to establish and deepen cooperation. A permanent U.S./NATO-Russia government-industry missile defense council could be established, similar to what was done in initiating the U.S.-Russia nuclear lab-to-lab program years ago, to identify promising avenues for cooperation.
- **Ensure that missile defense cooperation is not rigidly linked with other issues**—U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces, forward-deployed nuclear weapons, conventional forces, long-range conventional weapons, and cyber and space all are vital, complex, and related topics at the core of building a peaceful and secure U.S./NATO-Russia relationship. Mindful of the interrelationships, leaders can and should take further steps in each of these areas to improve security for all nations, without rigid linkages to missile defense cooperation.

Endnotes

- ¹ White House Fact Sheet, “Agreement on the Establishment of a Joint Warning Center for the Exchange of Information on Missile Launches and Early Warning,” June 4, 2000. Available at: <https://fas.org/nuke/control/jdec/news/000604-warn-wh2.htm>.
- ² Missile Defense Review, 2019. Available at: https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Interactive/2018/11-2019-Missile-Defense-Review/The%202019%20MDR_Executive%20Summary.pdf.
- ³ Jen Judson, “Congress Boosts Missile Defense Agency Budget by \$1.3 Billion,” *Defense News*, December 21, 2020. Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2020/12/21/congress-boosts-missile-defense-agency-budget-by-13-billion/>.
- ⁴ Ernest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn, “The Return of Doomsday,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-08-06/return-doomsday>.