

MISSILE DEFENSE

U.S. missile defense policy emphasizes countering limited missile threats posed by rogue states and the risks of accidental launch. However, China and Russia believe the steady expansion of the size and sophistication of America's missile defense systems undermines their respective nuclear deterrents, prompting both to make countermoves. The action-reaction spiral threatens nuclear stability at a time of increasing tension among great powers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Prioritize “regional” systems.** Capabilities optimized to protect against shorter-range threats are more reliable and less damaging to nuclear stability than “homeland” systems.
- **Limit funding for space-based missile defense systems.** The pursuit of such capabilities is harmful to America's long-term national security interests.
- **Leverage potential reductions to homeland missile defense capabilities.** For example, restricting the number of homeland defense interceptors—while allowing for qualitative improvements—could reinvigorate arms control with Russia and bring China into a multilateral agreement.

BACKGROUND

America's missile defense systems have steadily grown in quantity and quality over the past two decades. While this has produced the most advanced missile defense capabilities in the world, the unrestrained expansion has had negative strategic effects. Despite America's assurances to the contrary, both China and Russia view America's missile defenses as a threat to their nuclear deterrents. China has responded by increasing the size of its arsenal and intentionally making its nuclear doctrine more ambiguous. Similarly, Russia has invested in new types of delivery systems designed to defeat missile defense, including an unmanned underwater vehicle and hypersonic glide vehicle systems. America's expansion and Chinese and Russian reactions to solidify the survivability of their deterrent capabilities increase the risk of a limited conventional conflict becoming nuclear and accelerate an arms race in offensive versus defensive capabilities.

Slowing, or reversing, this destabilizing action-reaction cycle would burnish America's arms control reputation and strengthen deterrence against limited regional conflicts. The United States should set limitations on its homeland missile defense capabilities—those optimized to protect against intercontinental ballistic missiles—namely, the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system, which has been plagued by high costs and unreliable performance in testing. Capping the number of deployed GMD interceptors would reduce spending on an ineffective system while also bolstering U.S. efforts to engage Russia and China on new arms control agreements.

Limiting homeland missile defenses while expanding regional ones has benefits for deterrence and escalation control. Regional systems create densely layered protection for U.S. military installations, thus raising the costs of hostile action. For escalation control, a restrained homeland missile defense posture would alter the “use-or-lose” incentive (i.e., the pressure to use nuclear weapons earlier in a conflict lest they be degraded and lose their ability to deter further attacks).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

["It Can Get You into Trouble, but It Can't Get You Out: Missile Defense and the Future of Nuclear Stability"](#) by Eric Gomez, in *America's Nuclear Crossroads: A Forward-Looking Anthology*, eds. Caroline Dorminey and Eric Gomez (Washington: Cato Institute, 2019).

["The New Missile-Defense Policy Won't Make Us Safer"](#) by Eric Gomez, *Defense One*, January 18, 2019.

["Should the United States Reject MAD? Damage Limitation and U.S. Nuclear Strategy toward China"](#) by Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter, *International Security*, Summer 2016.