
On the Strategic Value of Ballistic Missile Defense

Brad Roberts

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Abstract

The strategic value of missile defense remains in considerable debate in Europe but less so in the United States. The rising American consensus in support of BMD follows from its perceptions of a changed and changing security environment since the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new problem for which BMD has important and in some cases unique values. This new problem is posed by regional adversaries armed with long-range missiles and WMD and strategies for nuclear blackmail of U.S. allies and nuclear brinkmanship with the United States. To adapt deterrence to these new challenges, the United States is pursuing a comprehensive approach to strengthen regional deterrence architectures. In this approach, BMD has a number of critical roles. Taking North Korea as an example, the author characterizes this new strategic problem and the associated deterrence values of BMD in preventing conflict, containing its escalation, and ultimately if necessary defeating an enemy. He argues further that the destabilizing impact of limited U.S. BMD on the relationships with Russia and China have been exaggerated and warns against weakening deterrence of new WMD-armed regional challengers by abandoning the BMD project.

* * *

Contrairement à l'Europe, où son utilité est encore largement débattue, la défense antimissile balistique (DAMB) bénéficie aux Etats-Unis d'un fort soutien. Un consensus favorable à la DAMB est apparu à Washington à mesure que changeaient les perceptions des menaces après la guerre froide. Il a été renforcé par l'émergence d'un nouveau défi contre lequel la DAMB présente des avantages majeurs, voire uniques : l'apparition de puissances régionales équipées de missiles à longue portée et d'armes de destruction massive, et s'adossant à ces capacités pour conduire des stratégies de chantage vis-à-vis des Etats-Unis et de leurs alliés. En réponse à cette menace, les Etats-Unis ont engagé une refonte de leurs architectures de dissuasion régionale, au sein desquelles la DAMB remplit plusieurs fonctions critiques. En se fondant sur l'exemple nord-coréen, l'auteur examine les stratégies de coercition pouvant être employées par des adversaires régionaux et identifie les rôles spécifiques de la DAMB afin de maintenir la crédibilité de la dissuasion américaine et, par là même, prévenir, limiter, voire remporter un affrontement. L'auteur souligne enfin que, s'agissant des capacités DAMB américaines actuellement envisagées, leur caractère déstabilisateur sur les relations avec la Russie et la Chine a été exagéré, et affirme qu'abandonner les efforts en termes de DAMB n'aboutirait qu'à affaiblir la dissuasion vis-à-vis des adversaires régionaux.

Introduction

In the United States, over the last 15 years support for ballistic missile defense (BMD) has broadened and deepened across the political spectrum. This follows from widespread recognition of a new strategic problem for which missile defense is relevant and from an assessment that technical options are available that promise stabilizing as opposed to destabilizing benefits. To be sure, many issues remain in policy dispute, including especially how much to spend to grow capabilities. But the consensus is striking in comparison to decades past.

In Europe, it appears that the consensus is neither as broad nor as deep. NATO did embrace territorial missile defense as a mission in 2011 and accepted the European Phased Adaptive Approach of the United States as part of an updated deterrence and defense posture. Moreover, some European countries are fielding lower-tier defenses. But a few years later the political commitment appears unenthusiastic and the progress in fielding lower-tier capabilities has been slow. Moreover, Russian complaints about the future impact of ballistic missile defense in Europe on strategic stability have not diminished, prompting continued debate in NATO about whether and how to accommodate Russia.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an American perspective on the strategic value of BMD in today's security environment. It begins with a description of the new strategic problem for which Americans see missile defense as relevant. In short, this is the problem posed by regional actors like North Korea seeking nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them at all ranges, with the hope of creating a relationship of mutual vulnerability with the United States, which might then be exploited to fundamentally alter the strategic calculus of the United States and its allies in a manner harmful to their interests. The paper then defines the place of BMD in the intended comprehensive approach to this new strategic problem. It then catalogues the particular and specific values of BMD. Turning to the stability topic, it then addresses the particular concerns of Russia and China in the context of specific technical considerations. The paper also considers two main counter-arguments to the propositions set out here, with an eye to helping lead the debate in a productive direction.¹

¹ Having played a role in formulating, advocating for, and implementing the missile defense policies of the Obama administration, this author has strong views on the strategic values of BMD. On the other hand, I have not devoted a career to advancing a BMD agenda and had no track record of publication or advocacy in this area prior to my service in the administration. It is important to underscore that

the views expressed here are my own and should not be attributed to the Obama administration, except where I do so explicitly in the paper. This paper builds on the foundational work in the 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review but also includes additional analysis that amplifies or expands on that foundation.

Understanding the Emerging New Strategic Problem

During the Cold War, U.S. concepts and postures of deterrence and defense were mostly focused on maintaining stability at a global level and preventing the risk of all-out war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although it remains a possibility, global conflict is no longer at the heart of the kind of challenges the United States now faces. The emergence of nuclear-armed, regional adversaries poses a distinct set of challenges to the credibility of the U.S. deterrence posture. To assess BMD's value in the face of this threat, it is first necessary to analyze the challenge posed by increasingly ambitious and capable regional adversaries and to understand how they might attempt to undermine U.S. interests.

The Rise of Regional Adversaries

For the U.S. national security community, there could have been no more compelling wake-up call than the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91. It dramatically illuminated the end of the Cold War and a new strategic problem: regional challengers arming themselves with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in service of aggressive strategies. Apparently, it was also a wake-up call for those regional challengers – to the fact that they must contend with the possibility of future Desert Shields, Desert Storms, and regime removal strategies.² As they pursue their efforts to counter and prepare for this possibility, they must find some kind of credible response to U.S. hegemony, U.S. conventional and nuclear supremacy, and to the American alliance system. They must also contend with what might be called the “spirit of *Joint Vision 2020*” – a document prepared by the Pentagon more than a decade ago setting out a vision of a future joint force offering “full spectrum dominance” over others and freedom from attack and freedom to attack.³

In the famous words of a former Indian Army Chief of Staff, General K. Sundarji, “the lesson of Desert Storm is, don't mess with the United States without nuclear weapons”⁴ Apparently, few regional challengers

² Patrick Garrity, “Implications of the Persian Gulf War for Regional Powers,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 171-184.

³ Department of Defense, *Joint Vision 2020: America's Military Preparing for Tomorrow*, 2000.

⁴ The view was expressed to a conference of the Defense Nuclear Agency in June 1993. See *Proceedings*, Defense Nuclear Agency Second Annual Conference on Controlling Arms, Richmond, June 1993.

intend to mess with the United States in this manner, as there has been no rush for nuclear weapons by such states. Nor has there been a rush for intercontinental range ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons onto the American homeland. But North Korea appears to have taken such advice to heart. Iran is also concerned about deterrence of the United States, though whether it might stop short of the fielding of nuclear weapons, at least for some interim period, is obviously a key question today. Others may have had similar aspirations at different times – Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi, and Bashar al-Assad chief among them.⁵ Russia and China have also had to worry about the possibility of American-led military action along their peripheries, but this is a separate problem to which this paper will return at a later point.

For analytic purposes, let's take North Korea as the model of this new strategic problem. North Korea's leadership appears to be pursuing a strategy with two main objectives.⁶ The first is to compel the United States to alter its strategic calculus so that it is willing to accept a political settlement on the Korean peninsula conducive to regime interests in North Korea, though a series of provocations and threats. The second is to be prepared to defend its interests in case of renewed military action on the peninsula, including ensuring survival of the regime.

As its conventional military posture has disintegrated over the last two decades, North Korea has transformed its strategic posture with the introduction of missiles of ever longer range and the development of nuclear weapons.⁷ It has or will soon have the ability to credibly threaten to deliver nuclear warheads onto the Republic of Korea (RoK), onto Japan and U.S. bases there, onto Hawaii and Alaska, and onto the rest of the American homeland. The regime in Pyongyang has overtly and specifically threatened nuclear attacks on the RoK, Japan, and the United States. It has employed nuclear threats as part of its campaign of provocations and its use of force at the conventional level to contest the status quo on the peninsula. It has also signaled its rejection of the Armistice agreement and its continued commitment to the achievement of its long-term aim of reunifying the peninsula under its rule.⁸ Moreover, it retains the ability to decimate Seoul with conventional artillery and to use chemical and biological weapons to slow and frustrate U.S. power projection.

This analysis implies that North Korea's leaders have been motivated to go beyond the minimum necessary to meet the Sundarji requirement – a simple bomb in the basement and a minimum deterrent – in an effort to ensure that their nuclear threats are credible. Given how little

⁵ James R. Clapper, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Washington, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 12 March 2013.

⁶ See Jonathan D. Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*, Abingdon, Routledge/IISS, 2011.

⁷ *Ibid.* See also *North Korean Security Challenges: a Net Assessment*, IISS Strategic Dossier, London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011.

⁸ Choe Sang-Hun, "1953 Armistice is Nullified, North Korea Declares," *New York Times*, 12 March 2013.

is known about real intentions behind the rhetoric, it is impossible to know if the threats to employ these weapons might be more than bluff. From the perspective of U.S. security strategy, it would be a huge gamble to bet that such threats are merely bluff. From the perspective of assuring U.S. allies in the region, such a bet is unacceptable.

A North Korean Theory of Victory

Accordingly, we are required to have some understanding of how North Korea's leaders might utilize these new capabilities in time of war with the hope of achieving some decisive leverage that might enable it to escape such a conflict with its core interests intact. How might that be possible? Based on the capabilities now available to it, it appears that North Korea's strategy in war would likely encompass the following main elements.

The foundation would be a strategy of nuclear brinkmanship, not nuclear war-fighting. Nuclear war-fighting would likely be seen as quickly legitimizing a U.S. decision to employ its full strengths at the conventional and nuclear levels to achieve the most decisive possible outcomes as quickly as possible. This is not in North Korea's interest. But blackmail might seem plausible. To be successful, nuclear blackmail requires both the credible demonstration of resolve and the credible demonstration of restraint. The resolve relates to the willingness to make good on an escalatory threat and the restraint relates to the willingness not to inflict punishment if terms are met. North Korea's strategy would require that its leaders believe that they can escalate an unfolding conflict in various ways but without crossing the nuclear response threshold of the United States. They may believe that there are vulnerabilities in U.S. power projection that can be exploited and illuminated, both of an operational kind (the dependence on a few key ports and bases in the region) and of a political kind (the willingness of U.S. allies to stand with it in an escalating crisis). And if they see the threat of nuclear attack on the U.S. homeland as credible, they may also believe that they can employ nuclear weapons in the theater in support of these operational and political objectives and restrain U.S. retaliation by threatening the U.S. homeland. In the language of escalation control, North Korean leaders may come to believe that their new tools of coercion enable them to manage escalation if it becomes necessary, both horizontally (by attacking more targets in the region and/or beyond) and vertically (by increasing the lethality of those attacks).⁹

Further, North Korea's leaders seem to believe with Sun Tzu that it is preferable to subdue an enemy than to defeat it. More precisely, they may believe that the United States, RoK, and Japan can all assess the impact of a nuclear-armed North Korea on the calculus of regional deterrence and decide accordingly to alter their strategic calculus in various ways. U.S. allies may come to believe that the United States has become de-coupled from their defense (to invoke a cold war term) by virtue of the new vulnerability of the American homeland to North Korean attack. The United States itself may conclude that the likely costs and risks of seeking

⁹ Forrest E. Morgan *et al.*, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2011, especially pp. 18-19.

regime removal in war outweigh the potential benefits. Thus, North Korean leaders might hope that the United States will abandon its hostile policies and agree to a political settlement on the peninsula consistent with Pyongyang's preferences.

The conditional verb tense highlights the speculative nature of this line of reasoning. Little is known about how North Korea thinks about or plans for armed confrontation with the United States under the nuclear shadow. The typical American instinct is to believe that North Korea's leaders too will believe that nuclear war cannot be fought because it cannot be won. There is no evidence one way or the other with regard to North Korea's instincts. But the capabilities they have deployed and are developing and deploying enable a bold but risky strategy of nuclear blackmail.

From a U.S. perspective, these developments are highly consequential. Successful North Korean blackmail in peacetime or war would set precedents of a far-reaching kind, calling into question the credibility of U.S. security guarantees more generally while also validating the implicit Sundarji premise that nuclear weapons are useful for coercing the United States into accepting an outcome to a regional conflict that it would not accept in the absence of adversary nuclear threats. The wrong choices by the United States and its allies in a military crisis with North Korea under the nuclear shadow could tip the security environment in a dangerous new direction. To be coerced into appeasing a nuclear-backed challenger or to accept defeat in a regional war with some nuclear aspect could have wide-ranging repercussions for the international situation after such a war. The wrong choices could also lead to the "nuclear cascade" long feared by policymakers.¹⁰ For instance, a failure of U.S. deterrence could embolden others to seek capabilities of their own with which to challenge the United States and U.S.-guaranteed regional orders. A failure of assurance of key allies could similarly lead them to conclude that they can no longer count on the U.S. nuclear umbrella to protect them.

As a model of the new strategic problem, North Korea helps to illuminate a broad spectrum of deterrence challenges in regional conflict under the nuclear shadow. Those challenges come in three distinct sets.

1. At the low end of the conflict spectrum are provocations and confrontations just below the level of armed conflict. These encompass for example North Korea sinking of the Cheonan or the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island or China's confrontational posturing in support of its claims in the maritime environment. These are what the latest Japanese defense white paper defines as "gray zone" conflicts.¹¹

¹⁰ See for example *Report on Discouraging a Cascade of Nuclear Weapon States*, International Security Advisory Board of the U.S. Department of State, Washington, Department of State, 2007.

¹¹ Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2013*, Tokyo, 2013.

2. At the opposite, high end of the spectrum are nuclear attacks on the homeland of the United States. Think of this as the “black-and-white zone,” where any attack by nuclear means on the homeland of the United States or an ally should be understood as generating a U.S. nuclear response.
3. In the middle are what might be termed “red zone” threats – conflicts involving actual combat operations and efforts by newly capable regional actors to try to exploit new nuclear and missile capabilities to their advantage with actions that they calculate or hope to be beneath the U.S. nuclear response threshold.

Each of these areas poses new deterrence challenges in the 21st century. Assertiveness in the “gray zone” by North Korea has markedly increased, perhaps as a result of North Korea’s success in developing strategic forces that it believes can negate the risks of escalatory responses by the United States and RoK.¹² Deterrence in the “black and white zone” is not a new challenge but it is new in form, as a dangerous and unpredictable North Korea acquires the means to conduct such strikes. The “red zone” is an area that heretofore has attracted little analytic attention.¹³ But there are new challenges that seem to be little understood. Among those is the significant potential for miscalculation by the aggressor.

In this red zone, it is possible to identify some of the key decisions by the adversary related to these new nuclear and missile capabilities for which U.S. deterrence strategies and capabilities must be credible and effective. Again, it is useful to use North Korea as a model. In a war on the peninsula, the leadership in Pyongyang would likely face a number of specific decisions about how to utilize nuclear-tipped missiles and other means to try to persuade Seoul and Washington to accept a political settlement on terms favorable to its interests but without generating a response by the allies involving the employment of the overwhelming nuclear forces available to them.

¹² This recalls the cold-war discussion of the stability-instability paradox. See Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, July 1984, pp. 461-495. See also Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury (ed.), *The Balance of Power*, San Francisco, Chandler, 1965, pp. 196-201 and Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, especially pp. 29-34.

¹³ The nature of such a conflict remains under active exploration in the U.S. analytic community. See for example Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Next Korean War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3, May/June 2013; Lieber and Press, “The Nukes We Need: Preserving the American Deterrent,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 6, November/December 2009, pp.40-41; Bruce W. Bennett, “Weapons of Mass Destruction: The North Korean Threat,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Fall 2004, pp. 79-108; and Bennett, *Uncertainties in the North Korean Nuclear Threat*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2010. See also Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *Coercive Nuclear Campaigns in the 21st Century: Understanding Adversary Incentives and Options for Nuclear Escalation*, a report of a collaboration between the authors, the Naval Postgraduate School Center on Contemporary Conflict, and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Report No. 2013-001, January 2013.

These are decisions:

1. To move from a strategy of military provocations into military action aimed at accomplishing a *fait accompli* on the ground quickly, and reversible at high cost to the United States and its allies (and perhaps involving the use of chemical and/or biological weapons against key allied bases on the peninsula to slow U.S. intervention and local operations and also to signal escalation risks for the RoK and explicit threats to employ nuclear weapons if the allies do not accept the *fait accompli*).
2. If this strategy fails to produce the desired political results, to escalate by conducting missile attacks with non-nuclear weapons on U.S. bases and other targets in Japan.
3. If this fails, to conduct a limited nuclear attack. North Korea might believe that such an attack could break the alliance (by inducing the RoK to sue for peace before the United States is prepared to do so) without running a significant risk of U.S. retaliation. It might believe that an off-shore demonstration shot or a high-altitude burst for its electro-magnetic pulse effects would not be seen by Washington as warranting a retaliatory strike that would potentially kill many. Presumably this type of action would also be accompanied by a threat of more North Korean nuclear attacks if the allies do not sue for peace on the North's terms.
4. If this fails, to threaten or conduct limited nuclear attacks on Japan or U.S. bases there, with the threat of more to come.
5. If this fails, to threaten or conduct limited nuclear attacks on U.S. military facilities in the American homeland engaged in military operations against North Korea (for example, Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu or the missile defense facilities in Alaska).
6. And if the United States employs nuclear weapons in retaliation, to respond or not with additional nuclear attacks of its own, whether on U.S. bases and forces in the region or on the American homeland more generally.

The regional deterrence architectures of the United States and its allies in East Asia must be effective in shaping each of these six choices.¹⁴

¹⁴ This analytic framework draws from but significantly amplifies early thinking about limited nuclear conflict done in the Cold War and subsequent explorations. See Robert Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957; Kenneth Watman *et al.*, *U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies*, Santa Monica, RAND, 1995; Dean Wilkening and Kenneth Watman, *Nuclear Deterrence in a Regional Context*, Santa Monica, RAND, 1995; Lieber and Press, *Coercive Nuclear Campaigns in the 21st Century*, *op. cit.*; and

Each decision in this hierarchy would involve assessments of the resolve of the United States and its allies to continue in an escalating conflict, as well perhaps as assessments of Pyongyang's own resolve. Each new action by Pyongyang can be understood as a test of the separate or collective resolve of Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. In the scenario above, Kim Jong Un would be making choices to signal his resolve to safeguard his interests even in an escalating conflict, while testing the resolve of the alliance arrayed against him to remain intact. The United States would seek to signal its resolve to safeguard its ally and forces and the American homeland, while testing the resolve of the aggressor regime to remain committed to aggression and escalation.

This is a competitive and inherently risky strategy.¹⁵ Any such competitive testing of resolve would bring to the fore in the decision-making process the stake each "side" perceives in the conflict – and the perceived stake of the adversary. Presumably each side begins with the premise that its stake is more substantial. For North Korea, a vital interest would seem to be at stake – regime survival. For the United States, the vital interest of an ally or allies would be at stake – their long-term viability under a political outcome dictated by the North if the United States were to concede. North Korean leaders may believe that their vital interest is the more compelling, thus lending credibility to their escalatory threats in their eyes.

Accordingly, a key danger is the potential for miscalculation of resolve.¹⁶ To escalate by any means seems to require a conviction that the other side lacks the resolve to retaliate or to counter-escalate. Leaders in North Korea may calculate that the resolve of the United States and its allies is weak, perhaps because of a belief that democracies are paper tigers or so casualty averse as to avoid escalation at all costs. The United States and its allies may calculate that the resolve in Pyongyang is weak, perhaps because of a belief that nuclear war is unwinnable and thus will not actually be fought. In tests of resolve, bluffs are often employed. This creates the additional risk of miscalculation derived from a decision to dismiss as a bluff a statement of resolve that is no bluff at all. It is possible also that a regional aggressor might choose to conduct nuclear attacks even in a lost war for the sole purpose of exacting vengeance on the victorious side (a purpose for which Saddam Hussein's biological weapons may have been intended).¹⁷

This analytical model derives from the situation on the Korean peninsula but has broader applicability. In today's security environment, the deterrence challenge facing the United States and its allies is not

Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner (eds.), *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014.

¹⁵ Victor A. Utgoff and Michael O. Wheeler, *On Deterring and Defeating Attempts to Exploit a Nuclear Theory of Victory*, Alexandria, Institute for Defense Analyses, April 2013.

¹⁶ Barry Wolf, *When the Weak Attack the Strong: Failures of Deterrence*, Santa Monica, RAND, 1991.

¹⁷ Graham S. Pearson, *The UNSCOM Saga: Chemical and Biological Weapons Non-proliferation*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 1999.

associated with a global conflict; rather, it arises from the potential for regional conflicts under the nuclear shadow (that is, the presence of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the combatants and the potential for their use in extreme circumstances). North Korea is the latest and most vivid example of this emerging problem. Iraq and Libya came as models of this problem soon after the Cold War, though neither ended up posing this particular deterrence problem. Iran may yet fit this model, if it chooses not to freeze its nuclear program. The continued prevalence of nuclear and missile proliferation in the international system implies that there could well be other such challenges in the future.

Responding to an Adversary's Theory of Victory

This new strategic problem has been taking shape ever since the wakeup call provided by the Persian Gulf War. With an eye on this emerging problem, the United States has made some clear and decisive strategic choices. To a significant extent, these are common across administrations since the end of the Cold War and enjoy a significant degree of bipartisan support. In its national strategy, the United States has chosen to remain engaged, not retreat into isolationism, and to modernize its alliances for 21st century purposes. In its military strategy, it has chosen to project power in support of its international commitments and to maintain strong capabilities for deterring and defeating potential regional aggressors.

The United States has also rejected mutual vulnerability as the basis of the strategic relationships with states like North Korea. It has done so in part because of an abiding concern that a multipolar world based on the principle of mutual assured destruction would be deeply unstable. In a world of multiple nuclear powers large and small with nuclear arsenals of intercontinental reach, the vision of world order set out in the United Nations system – of cooperative and collective security – might be seen as finally failed, as a handful of major powers are no longer able to exercise power to secure international peace. But there are other reasons as well. U.S. nuclear threats may not be credible, especially for gray zone conflicts and for red zone conflicts if the adversary believes there are significant military actions he can take that fall beneath the U.S. nuclear response threshold. U.S. nuclear threats may also not be effective, especially for reducing the coercive value of aggressor nuclear threats and against leaders who calculate that an asymmetry of stake lends credibility to their threats that the U.S. lacks because its interests at risk are not vital. Heavy reliance on nuclear threats is also not reassuring to allies, who seek protection and assurance in addition to deterrence. Heavy reliance on nuclear threats would also be unhelpful to the effort to strengthen international cooperation for nonproliferation and disarmament.

The Comprehensive Approach to Strengthening Regional Deterrence Architectures

This new deterrence challenge cannot be met by missile defense alone. The Obama administration has set out a comprehensive strategy for strengthening regional deterrence architectures, building on solid bipartisan

foundations from the two decades since the end of the Cold War.¹⁸ Key elements of that approach are the following:

- Strong political partnerships between the United States and its allies and partners that focus cooperative action on new (as opposed to past) problems of international security;
- Preservation of a balance of conventional forces that is favorable to the interests of the United States and its allies/partners;
- Conventional strike capabilities, including a long-range prompt component;
- Ballistic missile defense in two dimensions: (1) protection against regional threats to U.S. forces and U.S. allies/partners and (2) protection of the American homeland against limited strikes from countries like North Korea and Iran;
- Resilience in the cyber and space domains;
- A nuclear component tailored to the unique historical, geographical, and other features of each region where the nuclear “umbrella” is extended.¹⁹

These various elements contribute in different but complementary ways to the deterrence of regional aggression under the nuclear shadow. This comprehensive approach is the game changer, not any single element. It provides a strong and diverse tool kit for addressing the particular challenges of deterrence in a regional conflict against a state like North Korea. Missile defense is an essential part of the solution, but not the solution in and of itself.

The Strategic Values of BMD

As argued above, for deterrence in a regional context to be effective, it must be effective in decisively influencing the adversary’s assessments of resolve and restraint at each of the decision points in the transition from “gray zone” to “red zone” to “black-and-white zone”. Missile defense operates differently but constructively on each of those main decision points.

¹⁸ See the Obama Administration’s *National Security Strategy of the United States of 2009*, *2009 Quadrennial Defense Review*, *2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report*, and the *2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review*. See also the *2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Report*.

¹⁹ For more on tailoring deterrence, see M. Elaine Bunn, *Can Deterrence be Tailored?*, Strategic Forum No. 225, Washington, National Defense University, 2007.

Before illustrating this assessment, it is important to understand the current state of U.S. missile defense capability. With the systems in hand and in current development, it is possible for the United States and its allies to have a defense in depth from attacks by states like North Korea. Defenses against regional ballistic missiles have been developed, successfully tested, and deployed.²⁰ Defenses against intercontinental-range missiles were deployed during the George W. Bush administration before developing and testing were complete and have a number of reliability and other performance problems.²¹ But as a general proposition, the existing homeland defense posture is effective against small numbers of early generation intercontinental-range ballistic missiles. Early generation missiles are relatively unsophisticated technically, meaning that they take longer to ready to launch, are slower in flight, lack missile defense countermeasures and, if not the result of a rigorous development and testing program, may lack reliability. An early generation force, as opposed to an early generation missile, is also likely to be relatively small in number. Later generation missiles fly sooner, faster, further, and more reliably, may have missile defense countermeasures along with multiple warheads, and are likely to exist in numbers sufficient to enable the kind of salvo launches that can overwhelm either sensors or interceptors or both. The shortcomings of available BMD systems in dealing with countermeasures and large raid sizes are well known.²² Hence they can be deployed and effective against early generation threats from countries like North Korea but cannot be effective against the large and mature forces of Russia and China. This analysis is the basis of the American assessment that BMD technical options are available that promise stabilizing as opposed to destabilizing benefits.

Accordingly, the Obama administration set out as national policy commitment to (1) maintain an advantageous defensive posture of the homeland against limited strikes by countries like North Korea and Iran and (2) field phased, adaptive regional defenses in partnership with U.S. allies in each region where it offers security guarantees.²³ In follow up to the 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review, the administration and its regional

²⁰ As of October 2013, there had been 11 successful intercepts by the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 11 attempts since the beginning of the Engineering and Manufacturing Development (EMD) phase, and 28 successful intercepts by the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System in 34 at sea attempts. See *Missile Defense Agency Fact Sheet*, "Ballistic Missile Defense Intercept Flight Test Record," 4 October 2013. See also Statement by J. Michael Gilmore, Director, Operational Test and Evaluation Office of the Secretary of Defense, to the House Armed Services Committee, Strategic Forces Subcommittee, 6 March 2012.

²¹ As of October 2013, 8 of the 16 attempted intercepts by the Ground-based Midcourse Defense system had been successful. *Ibid.*

²² Dean A. Wilkening, "Does Missile Defence in Europe Threaten Russia?", *Survival*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Winter 2012, pp. 31-52; L. David Montague and Walter B. Slocombe *et al.*, *Making Sense of Ballistic Missile Defense: An Assessment of Concepts and Systems for U.S. Boost-Phase Missile Defense in Comparison to Other Alternatives*, Washington, The National Academies Press, 2012; and *Science and Technology Issues of Early Intercept Ballistic Missile Defense Feasibility*, Washington, Department of Defense, Defense Science Board, September 2011.

²³ See *2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review*, *op. cit.*

partners have made substantial progress toward the latter objective.²⁴ The administration has also taken subsequent decisions to adjust the homeland posture in the light of new information about the threat, by implementing certain hedge capabilities identified in the 2010 BMDR (and emplacing additional Ground-based Interceptors in available silos once technical fixes are confirmed).²⁵

With this defense-in-depth portfolio of improving missile defenses, what then are the particular strategic values of BMD in this comprehensive approach to strengthening regional deterrence? And what other values should be accounted for in a comprehensive stock-take of BMD strategic values?

In an emerging political-military crisis, one potentially transitioning from the gray zone to the red zone, missile defense has various strategic values. It:

1. Creates uncertainty about the outcome of an attack in the mind of the attacker.
2. Increases the raid size required for an attack to penetrate, thereby undermining a strategy of firing one or two and threatening more, thus reducing coercive leverage.
3. Provides some assurance to allies and third party nations of some protection against some risks of precipitate action by the aggressor.
4. Buys leadership time for choosing and implementing courses of action, including time for diplomacy.
5. Reduces the political pressure for preemptive strikes.

In short, BMD helps to put the burden of escalation in an emerging crisis onto the adversary, thus helping to free the United States and its allies from escalation decisions that might seem premature.

When a crisis has become a hot war and where testing is underway in the red zone, missile defense again has various strategic values. It:

1. Helps to preserve freedom of action for the United States and its partners by selectively safeguarding key military and political assets.

²⁴ See *Regional Ballistic Missile Defense*, Report to Congress, Department of Defense, 23 August 2013.

²⁵ See *Missile Defense Protection of the Homeland: Hedge Strategy*, Report to Congress, Department of Defense, 15 March 2013. See also remarks on this topic delivered by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel on that date, available at <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1759>.

2. Increases time and opportunity to attack adversary's missile force with kinetic and non-kinetic means, potentially eliminating his capacity for follow-on attacks or decisive political or military effects.
3. Reduces or eliminates the vulnerability of allies, thus reinforcing their intent to remain in the fight.

If and as a regional adversary begins to contemplate possible nuclear attacks on the American homeland, perhaps only in revenge, missile defense:

1. Significantly reduces if not eliminates the vulnerability of the U.S. homeland to one or a few shots, thus taking the adversary's "cheap shot" off the table and driving him to larger salvos that will seem less like blackmail than all-out nuclear war and thus should be deterrable by other means.
2. Reduces the vulnerability of the U.S. homeland to repeat attacks, thus reinforcing its intention to remain in the fight.

A catalogue of the strategic values of BMD must also include an assessment of its contributions in peacetime to the foundations of effective deterrence in crisis and war. In this context, it:

1. Provides opportunities for close defense cooperation among the United States and its allies and security partners.
2. Signals the resolve of the United States and its allies/partners to stand up to coercion and aggression (regional missile defense can be demonstrated in live testing with our partners to demonstrate that resolve).²⁶
3. Erodes the perceived potential effectiveness for both military and political purposes of nascent ballistic missile capabilities.
4. Imposes additional costs and uncertainty on those considering the acquisition of nuclear weapons to challenge U.S. regional guarantees.
5. Encourages engagement with Russia and China to slow or halt missile proliferation in both its quantitative and qualitative aspects.
6. Provides non-nuclear allies a means to contribute to the strengthening of extended deterrence, thereby reducing incentives to acquire nuclear deterrents of their own.

²⁶ I am grateful to General Patrick O'Reilly, former director of the Missile Defense Agency, for this important point.

This catalogue identifies 16 specific strategic values of missile defense. Some of them are direct to the deterrence challenge, some indirect, and some are relevant only to related challenges. Of note, U.S. allies participating in the BMD project have identified and elaborated many of these strategic values.²⁷ In the language of strategy, BMD reinforces the comprehensive approach by lowering the cost and risk of our continued resolve and by raising the cost and risk for the challenger, essentially taking his “cheap shots” off the table and requiring him to resort to larger salvo shots that undermine a blackmail strategy of doing a little damage while threatening to do more. Missile defense also has important assurance values, especially for those allies who might be targeted by an adversary’s efforts to split the United States from its allies.

On the Value of U.S. Homeland Defense for Regional Deterrence

In a missile defense strategy that clearly distinguishes between capabilities for homeland defense and for regional defense with allies, it is important to be clear about the value for regional deterrence of missile defense of the American homeland. As a general matter, protection of the U.S. homeland from long-range missile strikes by countries like North Korea and Iran reinforces the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence guarantees. If the United States is not vulnerable, regional adversaries will not be credible in threatening to put the American homeland at risk in an effort to “de-couple” the United States from the defense of its allies by deterring U.S. military action with threats to the homeland. Homeland protection strengthens extended deterrence by ensuring that the United States has the freedom to employ whatever means it chooses to respond to aggression without risk of enemy escalation to homeland strikes. It also strengthens the assurance of allies; especially in East Asia but also in Central and Southern Europe, allies are worried about the de-coupling effect of long-range ballistic missile threats to the U.S. homeland.

This way of thinking runs counter to the view often expressed a decade ago by some allies that protection of the American homeland has a de-coupling effect by allowing the United States to sit out a regional conflict rather than be drawn into it by a regional enemy’s provocative threats to the homeland. In fact, homeland defense would work in service of two very different national security strategies – one of isolation and disengagement

²⁷ See for example Jacek Durkalec, “The Role of Missile Defence in NATO Deterrence,” in M. Piotrowski (ed.), *Regional Approaches to the Role of Missile Defence in Reducing Nuclear Threats*, Warsaw, Polish Institute of International Affairs, July 2013, pp. 19-28; Lukasz Kulesa, *Poland and Ballistic Missile Defense: the Limits of Atlanticism*, Proliferation Paper No. 48, Paris, French Institute of International Relations, 2014; Hideaki Kaneda *et al.*, *Japan’s Missile Defense: Diplomatic and Security Policies in a Changing Strategic Environment*, Tokyo, Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 2007, pp. 125-141; Shinichi Ogawa, *Missile Defense and Deterrence*, NIDS Security Reports No. 3, March 2002, pp 24-55; Vit Stritecky, “Missile Defence as Reinforcement of Deterrence in the 21st Century,” in Piotrowski (ed.), *Regional Approaches to the Role of Missile Defence in Reducing Nuclear Threats*, *op. cit.*; and Sugio Takahashi, *Ballistic Missile Defense in Japan: Deterrence and Military Transformation*, Proliferation Papers No. 44, Paris, French Institute of International Relations, 2012.

and one of power projection and forward engagement. The choice of all U.S. administrations since the Cold War has been clear.

A complementary case can also be made that regional missile defense contributes to U.S. homeland defense. Although the Obama administration has not pursued the globally integrated missile defense architecture of the Bush administration, some capabilities forward deployed in key regions help to strengthen defense of the homeland. In particular, sensors deployed outside the United States improve the effectiveness of the Ground-based Mid-course Defense (GMD) system.

The Place of Russia and China in this Framework

The “new strategic problem” set out above is clearly defined as the regional deterrence problem posed by newly nuclear-armed regional powers, with North Korea as the main problem and model. Regional conflicts with Russia and China are also possible, as recent crises in Ukraine and the East China Sea have vividly suggested. What role, if any, might U.S. or allied BMD play in negating the coercive strategies of Russia and China? Although the United States has expressed its intention that its missile defenses will not undermine the strategic deterrents of either Russia or China, both have articulated various concerns about U.S. plans.

Russia’s concerns about missile defense of the United States and in Europe are well known to the European expert community. Russia’s leaders do not agree that the strategic problem identified above exists. They do not agree that the homeland and regional defense capabilities of the United States are being tailored to this specific problem. They resent missile defense cooperation with states formerly allied with them. And they fear what these capabilities might become in the future. Their core fear appears to be that the “Joint Vision 2020 vision” will be fulfilled – that America will achieve full-spectrum dominance as well as freedom from and to attack, thereby escaping the nuclear revolution in world politics in a way that seems likely (to Moscow) to bring American military forces to Moscow’s door.²⁸

Fears cannot easily be dispelled at the technical level, but arguments about the operational impact of BMD on Russia’s deterrent can. As Dean Wilkening has argued, the NATO missile defense project lacks multiple key attributes to be effective against Russian strategic forces, including kinematic reach, probability of kill, resilience, and simple numbers.²⁹ And as influential Russian scholars have argued, “as an objective analysis of the actual situation shows, ten years after the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, the United States has not, and in the foreseeable future will not have, a strategic missile defense system capable

²⁸ See for example Dimitry Rogozin, *The Hawks of Peace: Notes of the Russian Ambassador*, London, Glagoslav Publications, 2013, and Carmen-Cristina Cirliig, “Russian Reactions to NATO Missile Defense,” *Library Briefing*, Library of the European Parliament, 14 September 2012.

²⁹ Dean Wilkening, “Does Missile Defence in Europe Threaten Russia?,” *op. cit.*, pp. 31-52.

of fending off a retaliatory counter-strike, and even a retaliatory strike by Russian strategic nuclear forces.”³⁰

Central to the official Russian complaint is that the U.S. focus on the regional threat “is constantly based on the worst-case scenario when the military and technical capabilities as well as aggressive intentions of Pyongyang and Tehran are greatly exaggerated.”³¹ The worldviews of Washington and Moscow (and Beijing) have simply diverged significantly in this particular respect.

Because Russia’s responses to BMD seem driven largely by political as opposed to technical considerations, it is difficult to predict actual future adjustments to Russia’s strategic posture as U.S. and European missile defenses continue to mature. Of course, some of these are already in place, such as Iskander deployments.³² Others are threatened. Yet others will be evident only in the deployment of future strategic systems now being modernized. Russian force adjustments that seem measured and aimed at preserving the balance of power and influence in the Euro-Atlantic security environment in the face of evolving NATO capabilities would be met with a response from NATO that would perhaps seem measured to Russia. But a very different NATO response would be likely if NATO perceives that Russia’s force adjustments are part of a Russian attempt to gain new strategic advantages, including for example the deployment of missiles in violation of the Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF), as recently rumored.³³

The crisis in Ukraine and Russia’s decision to unilaterally re-make by force agreed international borders raise a host of new strategic questions and the prospect of future armed hostilities between Russia (asserting its perceived need to defend Russian-speakers in a nearby country) and NATO in a chapter V operation. Russia’s military has prepared for a wide range of perceived dangers and threats from NATO, including with the deployment of Iskander missiles and long-range cruise missiles.³⁴ Western missile defenses would have little or no operational effectiveness against such Russian missile attacks, as they are designed for the relatively unsophisticated threat from the Middle East. But Russia may perceive them as negating its theater deterrent as opposed to its strategic deterrent, and thus as undermining the credibility of any escalatory threats it might make in a mounting crisis. Of note, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and

³⁰ S.M. Rogov *et al.*, *Ten Years Without the ABM Treaty: the Issue of Missile Defense in Russian-US Relations*, Moscow, Institute for the US and Canadian Studies, 2012, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Andrew Roth, “Deployment of Missiles is Confirmed by Russia,” *New York Times*, 16 December 2013.

³³ Keith B. Payne and Mark B. Schneider, “The Nuclear Treaty Russia Won’t Stop Violating,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 February 2014, and Nikolai Sokov and Miles Pomper, “Is Russia Violating the INF Treaty?,” *National Interest*, 11 February 2014.

³⁴ Jakob Hedeskog and Carolina Vendil Pallin, *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2013*, Stockholm, Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2013.

allegations of its violation of the INF treaty have inflamed sentiment in some quarters in Washington to develop and deploy defenses aimed at negating Russia's nuclear deterrent – a position outside the prevailing consensus, technically implausible, and prodigiously expensive.³⁵

China shares many of the concerns of Russia about the U.S. ballistic missile defense project. It prefers to criticize what it perceives as an American search for Absolute Security that enables it to deter, shape, and otherwise influence the external environment without running any risks that would lead to constraints on its exercise of power. It has a particular concern that the United States will promote missile defense cooperation among its allies in East Asia with a hidden agenda of deepening their integration as part of a strategy to encircle and contain China's rise. But unlike Russia, its complaints to the United States about BMD largely ceased with U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, when it simply got on with the task of modernizing its strategic forces in a way that would ensure that U.S. missile defense cannot negate its strategic deterrent.³⁶

In the 2010 BMDR, the Obama administration set out a differentiated approach to the concerns of Russia and China. It sent a similar message to both about the role of BMD in the strategic balance.

“Today, only Russia and China have the capability to conduct a large-scale ballistic missile attack on the territory of the United States, but this is very unlikely and not the focus of U.S. BMD. Both Russia and China have repeatedly expressed concerns that U.S. missile defenses adversely affect their own strategic capabilities and interests. The United States will continue to engage them on this issue to help them better understand the stabilizing benefits of missile defense – particularly China, which claims to have successfully demonstrated its own ground-based midcourse interception on January 11, 2010. As the United States has stated in the past, the homeland missile defense capabilities are focused on regional actors such as Iran and North Korea. While the GMD system would be employed to defend the United States against limited missile launches from any source, it does not have the capacity to cope with large scale Russian or Chinese missile attacks, and is not intended to affect the strategic balance with those countries.”³⁷

However, the report sent a different message to China from Russia on regional defense: “the United States will defend U.S. deployed forces from regional missile threats while also protecting our allies and partners and enabling them to defend themselves.”³⁸ China's dramatic build-up of modern ballistic (and cruise) missiles targeting U.S. forces, bases, and

³⁵ Michaela Dodge, *U.S. Missile Defense Policy After Russia's Actions in Ukraine*, Washington DC, Heritage Foundation, 21 March 2014.

³⁶ Bradley H. Roberts, *China and Ballistic Missile Defense: 1995 to 2002 and Beyond*, Paper P-3826, Alexandria, Institute for Defense Analyses, 2003.

³⁷ *2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 12-13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

allies in East Asia is unmatched by Russia. The Obama administration has sought an enhancement of deterrence and defense at the regional level while not jeopardizing stability at the strategic level.

Accordingly, some of the strategic values of BMD set out in the model above apply also to the China case. But those would be localized at the regional level, as the homeland defense posture would not be capable of adding value against Chinese escalation.

On Strategic Stability

Russia and China raise some important and valid questions about the strategic stability implications of the U.S. BMD project. Some questions can be answered at the technical level and some only at the political level (intentions, both present and future). They adhere strongly to strategic stability as the key organizing principle in their strategic military relationships with the United States, not least because they fear the consequences of their failure to deter the United States in a future regional conflict.

The Obama administration is similarly committed to strategic stability, though not precisely in the same way. In the relationship with Russia, it has made some headway in a strategic dialogue aimed at setting out a comprehensive view of stability in a changed and changing security environment. But this effort has now been taken hostage by President Putin's military aggression against Ukraine, and it is difficult to predict when, whether, or how such a dialogue will be renewed in a substantive and constructive manner. In the relationship with China, there has been no such headway as China has opted not to accept the invitation to strategic dialogue again offered by the Obama administration.

But the Obama administration is, like its two immediate predecessors, more motivated by the instability associated with what is defined here as the new strategic problem than by instability in the strategic relationships with Russia or China. After all, the United States perceives neither Russia nor China as an enemy – while states like North Korea clearly see the United States as an enemy and are creating capabilities that could fundamentally change the security environment for the worse. Whether and how this traditional assessment will be affected by Russian aggression against Ukraine is now an open question.

Accordingly, this paper has taken a U.S.-centric approach to the fundamental question about the value of BMD. Missile defense has important strategic values in the 21st century for the United States and its allies and security partners. This is not the same as arguing that it is in the interest of all countries or of Russia or China.

But there is also a case to be made that the stabilizing benefits of strong regional deterrence architectures are enjoyed by more than just the United States and its allies and partners. Nuclear-backed aggression by regional actors like North Korea and Iran would be deeply unsettling in their own regions and beyond, and not just for small neighboring powers. Having

an effective answer to this potential challenge is key to protection of a stable and secure environment in which all but the belligerent can prosper. An ineffective answer could result in a complete loss of confidence in U.S.-backed security orders in at least three key regions (East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe), and among other results this could help to catalyze the long-feared nuclear cascade.

Two Counterarguments

Having now set out the case for the strategic value of ballistic missile defense, let us now consider two counterarguments.

The Offense Always Trumps

It might be argued that the strategic values set out above require that the United States and its allies achieve complete defense dominance over regional actors and, further, that doing so is essentially impossible as they are able to improve their forces both qualitatively and quantitatively more rapidly than the defense can improve. With this view in mind, it might be argued further that regional aggressors with missile programs are effectively and successfully pursuing a cost-imposing strategy on the United States and its allies, leading the United States and its allies to squander resources endlessly on a competition they cannot hope to win.

Of course this line of analysis assumes that the two competitors in an offense-defense competition have roughly equivalent capacities to bear costs. The economy of the United States, despite its many difficulties, is outsized compared to all others and continues to generate significant wealth, including significant investments in military capabilities. An offense-defense competition between North Korea and the United States and even between China and the United States would be uneven in this fundamental respect.

But more significantly, the strategic values set out above do not require defense dominance. They do not require that regional defenses perform perfectly or outnumber attacking forces. If the adversary “theory of victory” in limited war, as set out in the model above, is valid, then the missile threat that must be “defeated” can be understood at various thresholds. For a regional aggressor to attempt to coerce neighbors, threats to fire many missiles and thus start a big war may be dismissed as not credible. To prevail in an unfolding conventional conflict that has not reached “total” war, the regional aggressor might well seek to keep significant capability in reserve with the hope of “managing” escalation. Only in a last-gasp effort might a regional actor be likely to fire any and all remaining ballistic missiles.

The implication of this way of understanding the problem is that defense dominance is not required. Even limited defenses can take the “cheap shots” off the table and negate the credibility of the threat of limited use.

So how much regional defense capability is enough? Investments by United States and its allies and partners must be maintained at a level sufficient to ensure limited protection against limited strikes in the early phases of a conflict but not to ensure perfect protection against unlimited attack. As regional adversaries make qualitative and quantitative improvements to their forces, the countering defenses must also improve in a manner that ensures their viability for dealing with limited strikes.

America's Problem in Northeast Asia is not NATO's Problem

Of course this is true as far as it goes. NATO plays essentially no role in the Northeast Asian security environment. On the other hand, any conflict there under the nuclear shadow would likely have precedents and repercussions that would impact the Euro-Atlantic security environment, not least if they raise questions about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees in light of the new strategic problem.

Moreover, Iran is not a simple substitute for North Korea in a different regional context. After all, Iran has stepped up to but not across the brink of nuclear weaponization. It has not overtly threatened nations in Europe the way North Korea has in East Asia. It has not articulated a strategy for nuclear brinksmanship that involves splitting the United States from its European allies.

On the other hand, developments in Iran are deeply troubling. If it finally decides not to stop short with a latent capability and to proceed to weaponize and deploy nuclear capabilities, then a new variant of the strategic problem will have emerged. And even if it stops short in the nuclear realm, it is developing a very robust posture of conventionally armed ballistic missiles capable of reaching targets in Europe.

More significantly, it is useful to recall that there are multiple potential sources of concern in the Middle East about the possible future proliferation of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. Over time, concern about Iran may give way to concern about another country or set of countries with both the capabilities and intention to try to blackmail a vulnerable Euro-Atlantic community. And if Iran stops short and no new problem emerges, the "new strategic problem" need not be a prominent driver of NATO's deterrence and defense posture.

In sum, although North Korea is not NATO's problem, the strategic problem it presents may well confront NATO in some other guise, sooner or later. Unless NATO wishes to be blackmailed into inaction in a world marked by the proliferation of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, it must continue the work of comprehensively strengthening the available regional deterrence architecture (as best summarized in the 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review).

Conclusion

Americans like to use the term “game changer” to describe something that fundamentally alters the rules or other parameters of a strategic competition. For potential regional adversaries, the game changers they seek are nuclear weapons and long-range missiles – not perhaps because they believe they can fight and win a nuclear war but because of the coercive value of nuclear blackmail in deterring a U.S.-led coalition intervention. If they succeed in changing the rules of this particular game, much will change in the international system more generally and not for the best from the perspective of our shared interests in a safe and stable Euro-Atlantic community.

Some missile defense advocates argue that it is in fact the game changer. This is an overstatement. In and of itself, missile defense cannot decisively influence the strategic calculus of a regional aggressor. But it is an essential element in a comprehensive approach that does offer increasing leverage and effectiveness in influencing that strategic calculus in a way that serves our interests. It does not substitute for other tools, but complements them well, bringing some unique deterrence, defeat, and assurance values. Missile defense deployments help to reduce the probability of regional conflict and, failing that, they help to reduce the probability of a successful challenge to the U.S. security guarantor role.

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