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U.S. Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense

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The views expressed are the author's own.

For decades, ballistic missile defense and its alleged “stabilizing” or “de-stabilizing” effects have been among the most controversial issues in the international security debate. Like genetically modified food or homeopathic medicine, everyone has an opinion on it, no matter how superficial. It is also an area where the United States and Europe have sometimes struggled to find common ground. Europeans share U.S. concerns about the risks posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery means, and some allies are deploying their own missile defenses. However, many of them do not share the vigor demonstrated by the United States in searching for technical solutions. For many European observers, missile defense remains a U.S. obsession: a dose of strategic escapism, fueled by a boundless belief in technology and a desire to regain the invulnerability of a bygone era: “typically American.”

Is the persistent—and bi-partisan—interest of the United States in missile defense “typically American”? As a global power, the United States must pay far more attention to global



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military-technological developments than its European allies. Since the United States is the only country that extends security assurances to over 30 nations in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, it constantly needs to assess the implications of such a policy, including the vulnerabilities that result from it. The desire for missile defense could thus be explained solely by mainstream political and military analysis. However, a closer look reveals that the U.S. preoccupation with missile defense is indeed much more than that: missile defense is a firm part of its national “strategic culture.”

Security policy, like any other policy, emanates from a distinct historical, political, and societal context. This “strategic culture,” a rather firm pattern of fundamental beliefs and behavior, creates the subconscious background for political decisions. Thus, while the actual policy of a country might change rapidly, its strategic culture cannot. Its roots are too deep. Of course, the concept of “strategic culture” is not without problems. Treating an entire nation like one coherent personality entails the risk of over-simplifying the complex set of differing views and experiences that shape a nation’s history and political style. Hence, “culture is an explanation of last resort.”¹ Still, as military historian John Shy noted, “national peculiarities” are a compelling idea to explain international behavior.² This is all the truer for a multi-cultural nation that was formed by immigrants, and thus has a long tradition of generating a unifying identity through powerful national myths.

What, then, are the fundamental characteristics of American strategic culture? There is, first and foremost, geography. The quasi-insular position of North America allowed Americans for a long time to cultivate a self-image as a “City Upon a Hill.” For a considerable period, the challenge of colonizing an entire continent focused attention inward. In contrast to densely populated Europe, where most countries have many neighbors, and where security was always a relative state of affairs, the United States required neither a large standing army nor a complex foreign policy. The United States did wage several wars on its own continent. However, during the almost 200 years between the founding of the Republic and the advent of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles, there were only two occasions where the existence of the United States was truly at stake: The War of 1812 and the Civil War (1861-1865).

The many challenges the colonists faced in conquering North America generated another characteristic that has remained formative for American strategic culture even today: technical prowess and a general optimism regarding technical solutions. This characteristic trait also extended to military affairs. Industrialization and the affluence of natural resources favored the emergence of an “American Way of War” that put the emphasis on massive superiority over the enemy – an approach that corresponded with the moral imperative of sparing the lives of one’s own soldiers.

These basic traits of American strategic culture contributed to an unmatched history of military success. The victory in the War of Independence, the successful continental expansion, and the



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two World Wars nourished the belief in U.S. omnipotence. Furthermore, the secure geographical position allowed for the full exploitation of U.S. military-industrial capacities. In short, time and again, the “American Way of War” prevailed.

With the end of World War II, American defense policy became global. Permanent engagement in Europe and Asia marked the victory of internationalism over isolationism. With the rise of the Soviet Union as a political and ideological opponent, the world became simultaneously bipolar and nuclear. The era of “free security” (C. Vann Woodward) was over.³ Still, many characteristic traits of American strategic culture remained alive and continued to shape U.S. security policy. To this day, for example, U.S. leaders are having a hard time conveying complex foreign policy matters to a largely uninterested Congress and an even less interested public. Hence, while moralizing one’s own goals and demonizing opponents (“rogue states,” “axis of evil”) may strike outside observers as bewildering, it makes perfect sense in the context of a generally inward-looking culture.⁴

The initial embrace of the “nuclear revolution” was another trait of U.S. strategic culture. Nuclear weapons were embraced as symbols of U.S. technological superiority; they were a cost-effective means to protect oneself and one’s allies; and they allowed for a substantial reduction of conventional forces. However, the end of the U.S. nuclear monopoly and the vulnerability against Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles changed the situation dramatically. Both superpowers were now mutually vulnerable, leading many observers to question the continued credibility of U.S. extended deterrence for the defense of Western Europe. Washington’s way out of this dilemma was a stronger emphasis on conventional forces as well as on arms control. Yet neither policy track met with much success. In the early 1970s, the Soviet Union acquired strategic nuclear parity and thus (at least in Moscow’s eyes) political equality. Accordingly, the Soviet Union began to act self-confidently as an interventionist power on a global scale.

By contrast, the United States faced a disaster in Vietnam. The gradual sliding into that conflict did not correspond to the traditional pattern of responding to a clear and present danger. The “American Way of War” of employing massive firepower had proven ineffective against an insurgency, let alone for “winning the hearts and minds” of the indigenous population. In the eyes of many observers, there was only one way out of the crisis: a return to the more comforting elements of U.S. strategic culture. Missile defense, which until then had remained a side issue in the strategic arms competition, now became the symbol of the effort to regain U.S. self-confidence.

President Ronald Reagan’s *Strategic Defense Initiative* (SDI) proclaimed the vision of protecting the United States and its allies by a space-based missile defense system at the cutting edge of technology. Reagan sought to address the widespread post-Vietnam and post-Watergate desire for renewed pride and self-confidence by invoking the old, optimistic myth of the



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frontier. In so doing, the “Great Communicator” appealed unabashedly to key tenets of American strategic culture.

SDI was never realized technically. Nevertheless, politically, the initiative turned out to be a success. Through SDI, the United States dominated the security agenda throughout the 1980s, an effect that, ironically, was only reinforced by the widespread criticism of the program’s technical feasibility and its potentially destabilizing effects. Most of all, however, the initiative turned out to be an effective diplomatic instrument in dealing with the Soviet Union. Soviet observers, who interpreted SDI as America’s “technological mobilization,” understood that the initiative threatened the USSR with moving the arms competition onto a technical level that it could never hope to match. U.S. missile defense thus helped expose the failure of Soviet military overextension. In that way, SDI might have contributed to hasten the end of the Cold War. Ronald Reagan’s simple but effective return to the traditions of U.S. strategic culture had done its job.

In its most recent incarnation, missile defense has gained strategic plausibility. Today, when the issue is protection against limited threats posed by regional powers, the requirements for defensive systems can be less perfectionist. To address the large and more sophisticated Russian and Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities, the United States continues to rely first and foremost on nuclear deterrence. In short, missile defense is seen as a complement to, rather than a replacement of, deterrence. U.S. allies, too, are part of the missile defense effort, with NATO characterizing missile defense as a third category next to conventional and nuclear forces.

Of course, Europeans (as well as U.S. missile defense critics) will continue to bicker. If a hijacked aircraft can be converted into a weapon of mass destruction, as was demonstrated on September 11, 2001, why bother building an expensive missile defense? If a “dirty bomb” can enter into the harbor of a major U.S. city in a ship’s container, why bother spending billions on a defense system of unproven effectiveness? Yet arguing along these lines risks missing the forest for the trees: criticizing missile defenses for offering no protection against the proverbial “suitcase bomb” is like criticizing aspirin for not curing cancer. Most importantly, none of these arguments will carry the day in a country whose strategic culture has been shaped by momentous disasters like the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks of “9/11.” Against this background, European advice to the United States to remain in a permanent state of calculated — “stabilizing” — vulnerability is likely to fall on deaf ears.

Even the current approach to missile defense reflects contending elements of American strategic culture. Some isolationists reject any security policy based on mutual vulnerability, and view missile defense as a means to restore a “Fortress America.” At its core, however, missile defense is about the other, younger, trait of American strategic culture: internationalism. It is about maintaining U.S. freedom of action in areas such as Southeast Asia



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or the Taiwan Straits, and it could help neutralize the kind of threats a medium power (such as North Korea or Iran) might employ in order to deter the United States from using conventional forces in a crisis. In short, missile defense is about making the risks of internationalism more tolerable to the United States. If Europeans want the United States to remain internationalist, they would do well to understand that this country will express its internationalism in ways that correspond to its own, deeply rooted strategic culture.

1. Jack Snyder, The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor, in: Carl G. Jacobsen (Ed), *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (London: Palgrave MacMillan 1990), pp. 3-10.
2. John Shy, The American Military Experience: History and Learning, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 1971, pp. 205-228. See also Colin S. Gray, Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, January 1999, pp. 49-69.
3. C. Vann Woodward, The Age of Reinterpretation, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 1, October 1960, pp. 1-19. (p. 3: "The end of the era of free security has overtaken Americans so suddenly and swiftly that they have not brought themselves to face its practical implications, much less its bearing upon their history. Conventional aircraft and jet propulsion had shrunk the time dimension of the Atlantic and Pacific from weeks to hours by the mid-fifties. But before military adjustment could be properly made to that revolution, the development of ballistic missiles shrank the two oceans further from hours to minutes. In the same period the hitherto impenetrable Arctic Ocean has not only been navigated by atomic-powered submarines under the ice cap, but has been shrunk in time width to dimensions of minutes and seconds by which we now measure the other oceans. The age of security and the age of free security ended almost simultaneously.")
4. See Michael Rühle, *The America We Need*, Federal Security Academy Berlin, Security Policy Working Paper No. 7/2015.

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