



PROCEEDINGS

THE BENEFITS OF STRENGTHENED HOMELAND MISSILE DEFENSE

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “The Benefits of Strengthened Homeland Missile Defense” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on October 25, 2022. The symposium highlighted a recent National Institute Occasional Paper by Matthew Costlow entitled, Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense, and which is available on National Institute’s website.

David J. Trachtenberg

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy. Previously, he served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2017-2019.

For many years, the United States has refused—as a matter of policy—to build and deploy active defenses against the strategic missile forces of either Russia or China under the theory that such defenses would be destabilizing and upset the “balance of terror” created by a situation of mutual societal vulnerability. The potential consequences of a failure of deterrence were seen as so horrific that neither side would be foolish enough to launch a nuclear attack and, therefore, deterrence would be preserved.

Today, with both Russia and China making brazen nuclear threats against states that dare to challenge Moscow’s aggression against Ukraine and Beijing’s claim to Taiwan, the issue of whether an expanded homeland missile defense capability now makes sense is again subject to debate.

This raises two fundamental questions: 1) Is the vulnerability of the U.S. homeland to large-scale missile strikes an immutable fact of life that—much like the laws of physics—cannot be overturned; and, if not, 2) Is it prudent to try to do so?

There are those who argue that it is technologically impossible to defend the entire country against the strategic arsenals of either Russia or China...that the numbers and sophistication of their respective arsenals makes effective homeland defense impossible. Indeed, as one recent analysis argued, “...the United States should acknowledge mutual vulnerability as a fact and necessary policy.... there is no technological escape from this condition.”¹

However, I would argue that our current inability to defend against large-scale missile attacks is due—at least in part—to policy decisions made years ago that precluded more aggressive defensive efforts to protect the nation. In other words, the lack of investment in and support for robust homeland missile defenses helped to codify our current vulnerability.

¹ George Perkovich, “Engaging China on Strategic Stability and Mutual Vulnerability,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 12, 2022, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/12/engaging-china-on-strategic-stability-and-mutual-vulnerability-pub-88142>.



Moreover, I am reminded of those skeptics whose predictions—presumably based on a wealth of scientific knowledge—turned out to be wildly in error. For example, as Adm. William Leahy told President Truman, “The atomic bomb will never go off, and I speak as an expert in explosives.”² And there are those who thought it impossible to develop a hit-to-kill missile defense system because that would be like “hitting a bullet with a bullet”—which, of course, is exactly what we can now do.

As Yogi Berra said, “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.”

Importantly, however, the benefits of a missile defense system go beyond simply providing a measure of protection against the failure of deterrence. It also bolsters deterrence by complicating the attack plans of a potential aggressor such that the odds of a successful attack are minimized and the potential costs to the aggressor of conducting an attack are prohibitive.

Moreover, the expansion in both Russia’s and China’s strategic arsenals, coupled with a growing chorus of threats against the United States and its allies—including possible nuclear employment—suggest a growing reliance by Moscow and Beijing on coercive nuclear threats to achieve their goals. In the face of continued U.S. societal vulnerability, such coercive threats may be difficult to defeat given the potential consequences. Indeed, strengthening U.S. homeland missile defense capabilities can hedge against the coercive effects of greater military cooperation between Beijing and Moscow as well as a potential failure of deterrence.

That said, I am skeptical that the benefits of expanding U.S. homeland missile defense are appreciated by the current administration. Indeed, the “Fact Sheet” released in March on the Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review openly declared the administration’s intent to emphasize “strategic stability”—an intellectual-sounding euphemism for continued societal vulnerability—and its recently released National Security Strategy does not even mention missile defense, making only a single vague reference to “missile defeat capabilities.”

Just last week, the administration expressed its strong opposition to improvements in the U.S. homeland missile defense posture contained in the Senate Armed Services Committee version of the annual National Defense Authorization Act, including a provision that would more than triple the number of planned Next Generation interceptors, which the administration said would be “inconsistent with both the 2022 NDS and 2022 Missile Defense Review”—neither of which, of course, have yet been publicly released. In addition, the administration opposes efforts to increase funding for hypersonic defense and homeland cruise missile defense programs because they are inconsistent with current DoD plans.

² Cited in Louis Morton, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 35, No. 2, January 1957), p. 339.

If defense of the homeland is, in fact, “Job #1,” as multiple administrations on a bipartisan basis have stated, then shouldn’t the programs designed to defend the homeland be commensurate with the threats we face?

Matthew Costlow

Matthew Costlow is a Senior Analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy. Previously, he served as Special Assistant in the Office of Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy at the Department of Defense.

Thank you, Dave for the great introduction and to all my fellow panelists for their participation in this webinar. I have learned a great deal from them in my career and I am sure you will benefit from their insight as I always have.

Today I want to focus my remarks on how expanded and improved U.S. homeland missile defenses can play important roles in the emerging threat environment—specifically as counters to Russia’s and China’s military theories of victory.

My remarks are drawn from my recently-published report that Dave mentioned—and I wrote this report because I saw a gap in how analysts in and out of government were talking about approaching the problem of Russia’s and China’s growing nuclear arsenals.

That gap, to be clear, is perhaps better described as a barren gorge—a near complete lack of thought being given to how U.S. homeland missile defenses can contribute to deterrence, damage limitation, and other missions—with a notable exception being some of the reports out of CSIS.

So, I set out to read every policy-oriented product I could on missile defenses, from the Cold War to the present, and compile all the strategic benefits in this report. While the United States during the Cold War did not face the security environment of today, the great thing about how defenses writ large can contribute to deterrence is that its lessons are essentially timeless. I wanted to pull all the great insights of the past into one document for the benefit of others, and the broader debate.

So if you listen to my talk and think, “Hey, that sounds like something Kahn, or Wohlstetter, or Gray, or even Keith Payne said”—you are likely right. The whole point of the report was to take their wisdom—written for and during another time—and see how it might apply to today.

But before I dive into the strategic benefits of expanded and improved homeland missile defense, let me say a word about why I think missile defense is uniquely relevant to the emerging threat environment.

I think General VanHerck, Commander of U.S. Northern Command, has been the most articulate of U.S. military officials in explaining the problem of Russia’s and China’s military

theories of victory. Speaking on Russia specifically, he stated, “In crisis or conflict, we should expect Russia to employ its broad range of advanced capabilities—nonkinetic, conventional, and nuclear—to threaten our critical infrastructure in an attempt to limit our ability to project forces and to attempt to compel de-escalation.”³

General VanHerck also describes China’s military theory of victory similarly, and describes the military arsenals each state is building to give credible expression to their strategies. I commend his testimonies to you all.

Why is this a problem? Well, the United States RELIES on its ability to project forces abroad to defend allies and achieve U.S. objectives. That ability, in fact, is the main pillar of U.S. defense strategy.

Where does this leave us? A U.S. homeland that can deter major nuclear attack with its nuclear arsenal, but cannot defend against lesser attacks, leaves a gap that potentially invites aggression.

Now, how does the United States today deal with the problem of coercive missile strikes against the United States? One could be forgiven if a ready answer is not at hand, other than, threaten punishment. With a ballistic missile defense primarily aimed at the rogue state ballistic threat, a National Capital Region cruise missile defense, and an aging northern warning system, one of the only things the United State CAN do right now is threaten punishment for deterrence purposes via a variety of means.

In my opinion, deterrence threats of punishment are necessary, but not sufficient. But an adversary that is willing to strike the U.S. homeland has likely already considered the potential U.S. reply and calculated that the benefits of attacking outweigh the risks and costs of the likely U.S. response.

Adding more and more varied ways of punishing the adversary may improve deterrence prospects up to a point, but if the primary reason that deterrence failed was a lack of perceived U.S. will, then deterrence threats of punishment (which depend on will) may be less likely to work.

The problem of a lack of U.S. political will (both actual and perceived) potentially extends even past the point of the initial deterrence failure. That is, should the adversary strike the U.S. homeland, whichever response U.S. political leaders choose, they must take into account the continued vulnerability of the U.S. homeland to the adversary’s response to U.S. action.

In short, a vulnerable U.S. homeland potentially restricts U.S. freedom of action in times of crisis or conflict. Russia and China know this and have developed the military policies and requisite capabilities to exploit this fact.

³ Gen. Glen VanHerck, “NORAD–USNORTHCOM Commander’s House Armed Services Committee Statement,” October 25, 2021, available at <https://www.960cyber.afrc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2821381/noradusnorthcom-commanders-house-armed-services-committee-statement/>.

This is where, I believe, the United States can considerably improve its deterrence prospects by expanding and improving U.S. homeland missile defenses—both cruise and ballistic, and, in the future, maneuvering hypersonic threats.

I propose a change in U.S. missile defense policy, that the United States will develop and deploy missile defense systems for the U.S. homeland to deter, and if necessary, defeat coercive attacks from Russia and China while staying ahead of the rogue state threat.

Much hinges on the word “coercive” admittedly, exactly what constitutes a “coercive” missile attack from Russia or China is something that would need to be worked out at a classified level with the intelligence community. But, for the purposes of this discussion, suffice it to say that defending against coercive attacks should be distinguished from a policy of defeating all missile attacks, no matter the size. Currently, such a policy is technologically infeasible, and thus, not credible—whereas a defense against coercive attacks is more manageable and with significant deterrence benefits.

I will end by quickly running through some of the deterrence benefits that an improved and expanded U.S. homeland missile defense set of systems could provide. I elaborate more on each in my report, and I am sure my other panelists will expand on my cursory remarks here with their own insights.

First, and perhaps most importantly, improved and expanded U.S. homeland missile defenses would help deny Russia’s and China’s military theories of victory by removing the “cheap shot” temptation and raising the “entry price” for attacking the U.S. homeland.

In essence, a Russian or Chinese strike on the U.S. homeland would already be potentially politically fraught and leaders in Moscow and Beijing would likely seek a high chance for success before approving such a strike.

The United States can use this desire for certainty against them by greatly complicating their attack plans—raising the frightening prospect that Russia or China might not only fail to achieve their attack objectives, but also face an overwhelming and unexpected response. In short, an “all pain and no gain” scenario.

Another important benefit of improved and expanded U.S. homeland defenses would be the ability to limit damage without resorting, necessarily, to offensive strikes. Trying to re-establish deterrence while limiting damage with the only tools available being offensive forces is a fraught and risky process to say the least. Yet, limiting damage through homeland missile defenses is far less potentially “escalatory” than offensive strikes, whose effects are difficult to predict. Additionally, the U.S. ability to limit damage to critical targets could enable the United States to recover more quickly, thus making the attack a failure and perhaps contributing to deterring further attempts.

Another important benefit of expanded and improved U.S. homeland missile defenses is that it can help confer some level of credibility and resolve to U.S. political leaders simply because it is inherently credible that the United States would employ missile defenses to defend itself from attack.

While there will always be some level of doubt that the United States would employ nuclear weapons to defend its interests, that same uncertainty does not apply to homeland missile defenses.

To use the words of Herman Kahn in this regard, “To put it another way, the side with some kind of defense has an excuse for being firm or arguing that it will stand firm. The side without the defense correspondingly has an excuse or a motivation for backing down, or strong incentive for accepting arguments in favor of backing down.”

I will end my remarks by noting a final benefit for expanded and improved U.S. homeland missile defenses: improved assurance and extended deterrence.

With such a system in place, U.S. leaders may be seen as more able to take risks in defense of allies and partners—even nuclear risks. Such a decision will certainly not be taken lightly, even in the presence of significantly effective homeland missile defenses, but such a system may be the crucial factor that provides credibility to U.S. deterrence threats in the eyes of adversaries—which is what matters for deterrence purposes.

In conclusion, the deterrence challenges the United States faces requires looking beyond deterrence threats of punishment to deterrence threats of denial. We can do no less.

Robert G. Joseph

Robert G. Joseph is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. Previously, he served as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security and as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Proliferation Strategy, Counterproliferation and Homeland Defense.

Good morning. David, thank you for the invitation to be part of today’s panel on a topic that I have been engaged on for a very long time. My involvement with strategic missile defense dates to the Reagan Administration in the early days of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program when I served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear Forces and Arms Control.

In that position I had the policy lead in the Pentagon for what was then a revolutionary idea contrary to the dominant view within the national security establishment that defending the American homeland against a Soviet missile attack would be both destabilizing and unaffordable—if it could be done at all. Forty years later, does that sound familiar? One take-away from this experience was to never underestimate the power of ideas—even bad ideas that are inconsistent with our national security interests.

It’s amazing—and rather depressing—how little the arguments have changed despite fundamental changes in the threat and in the technology that can be applied to the missile defense mission. Almost four decades later, here we are talking about the same bad ideas that still serve as the foundation for much of official thinking about strategic deterrence.

Well, thinking may be the wrong word. As it has been since 1971, when the ABM treaty was signed, arguments against homeland missile defense are based not on reason and facts -- but rather are taken as articles of faith. How else can you explain the perverse notion that vulnerability is a virtue?

Matt does a great job countering these persistent and pernicious arguments against homeland missile defense. But you should note that this section is the longest section of the paper—which I think is quite telling. We are still debating among ourselves this vapid notion that defenses are destabilizing and will lead to an arms race—when as Matt notes, the facts tell us the opposite.

We also continue to argue among ourselves whether strategic defenses are technically feasible and affordable—when we know they are both. When I say we, I mean U.S. defense experts and planners inside and outside of government—with some of the worst offenders in the Pentagon. It's interesting to note that there is no such debate in Russia or China, which are both seeking not only advantages in offensive strategic weapons but with defenses as well, including most notably in space. The U.S. notion of strategic stability is one that has been used by Moscow and Beijing to achieve unilateral advantage but not one that either ever believed in.

In his paper and in his opening comments, Matt also does a great job making the positive case for how and why the defense of the US homeland from missile attack is needed to strengthen deterrence in the current and evolving threat environment. Here, it may be useful to consider defenses against North Korea and Iran separately from defenses against Russia and China. While this may be an artificial dichotomy, it can still be instructive.

For North Korea, I think no serious analyst would argue in favor of mutual vulnerability. Maintaining limited defenses against a limited threat -- especially one that is considered potentially irrational like North Korea—is now generally accepted—and has been since the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002. The emerging predicament is that, with the ongoing expansion of the North's nuclear arsenal and missile force, we will need to expand our defenses to keep up with the threat well beyond, in my view, the expected capability of the next generation interceptor. At some point, that increase in our defense capability will become a factor in the strategic relationship with Russia and China.

When we reach this point, those who espouse the virtues of vulnerability will almost certainly argue that we can deter North Korea solely with the threat of nuclear annihilation—somehow reinventing the North as a rationale actor. Defending against the North Korean missile threat will be considered less important than avoiding any perceived threat to Russia's or China's ability to destroy the United States—because that is what is at the core of the strategic stability argument.

An analogous case might be Israel and Iran. Just imagine trying to convince an Israeli defense expert—or any Israeli for that matter—that Israel should rely only on offensive retaliation to deter Iran from attacking Israeli cities. In other words, accepting vulnerability would be the preferred course of action because defending against a missile attack from Iran would be destabilizing—causing an arms race with Iran. I think the reply would be to recommend you get your head examined.

But it is with Russia and China that we constantly hear the old—now debunked—chestnuts about missile defenses causing arms races, and defenses being beyond our technical ability and affordability. Here, Matt points out what I think is the most important contribution of his paper—and that is the ability to strengthen deterrence through the deployment of defenses—not as an impenetrable shield—but as a means to increase the uncertainties in the calculations of the attacker—to undermine his confidence that he will achieve the objectives of the attack. This concept goes back to the original so-called phase one requirements for SDI but is now more important than ever.

Today, as David and Keith Payne argue in a recent *Occasional Paper*, deterrence is more complex and uncertain than ever before—just consider Putin’s nuclear threats over Ukraine and Xi’s large-scale buildup of China’s ICBM force. Russia and China—individually and in combination—present much greater challenges to deterrence than those posed by the Soviet Union. Because deterrence is more problematic, we must act to strengthen it—in part through the deployment of effective strategic defenses which in turn means going to space with sensors and interceptors.

But how can we move forward? Looking at the recent *National Security Strategy*, I would say there is no chance to do so with the Biden administration—whose officials are the chief purveyors of the missile defense myths that Matt has highlighted. We need a new president committed to new concepts of deterrence and to protecting the American people from missile attack—not the concocted virtue signaling we have come to expect from the current crowd.

The new president must appoint a team that will overcome institutional resistance in all national security departments and engage with Congress, the allies and others to win the intellectual argument by explaining the strategic-level benefits of deploying effective defenses not only against rogue states but also Russia and China:

- By complicating the attacker’s confidence in his ability to conduct a coercive limited strike—a “cheap shot” as Matt termed it—with little expected consequence.
- By limiting damage to the American homeland.
- By strengthening extended deterrence with allies.
- All of the benefits Matt has laid out.

We did something similar in 2001 and we can do it again.

Rebecca L. Heinrichs

Rebecca L. Heinrichs is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute and the director of its Keystone Defense Initiative.

Thank you for the invitation to address this distinguished group. I continue to learn from many of you and so I realize that much of what I'm going to say today are things many of you have been saying for years.

What are the benefits of a strengthened homeland missile defense architecture?

Before addressing this, it seems reasonable to acknowledge what we have today. We have a layered missile defense architecture that utilizes all military domains. But it remains strictly designed to defend against missile threats from rogue state actors and, in particular, North Korea.

The Obama Administration left open the possibility of providing a third interceptor site to provide a "shoot-look-shoot" opportunity to defend areas of the homeland that are not sufficiently covered should Iran finally complete its intercontinental ballistic missile program.

It remains the case, according to open-source literature, that Iran does not have a fully developed ICBM program. But I don't have to remind this group that Iran's space-launch program is advancing technologies that are directly applicable to an ICBM program. And the fact that it has been the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that has conducted recent and successful satellite launches only underscores this point.

So for now, the 44 deployed ground-based interceptors defend the U.S. mainland, not our territories of course, from North Korean ICBMs. But because the Trump Administration did not advance the program, despite the President's direction to deploy 20 additional GBIs, the last administration to improve homeland defense in any real way, was the Obama Administration.

My argument, based largely on the threat and what I view as an entirely rational and prudent strategy, has been to advance U.S. homeland defense in a more urgent and focused way.

We should scope what I mean by "advance U.S. homeland defense."

According to U.S. law, there is nothing prohibiting our engineers, in the private and government sectors, from developing systems to intercept missiles other than ballistic missiles and beyond those in North Korea that are threatening Americans. But the direction that the Missile Defense Agency has received, for all intents and purposes, is to build an architecture to defend the homeland against North Korean ballistic missiles. According to the Trump *Missile Defense Review*, the United States would continue to rely on strategic deterrence to manage the ICBM threats from peer adversaries like Russia.

But U.S. Northern Command has the responsibility to defend the United States from categories of threats that go beyond those captured by MDA's mandate. There are threats from non-ballistic missiles, especially cruise missiles, and the threats to the U.S. homeland from Russia are real—especially given Russia's war against Ukraine and its continuing truculence toward the United States for supporting Kyiv.

We should also consider that the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) is in the midst of a strategic breakout, according to outgoing U.S. Strategic Command Commander Admiral Charles “Chas” Richard.

Humility on the part of the U.S. government is required—humility to admit that there is great uncertainty in the international strategic environment and also that, given this uncertainty, relying only on the threat of retaliation in the event of a strategic attack against the United States is woefully insufficient.

The benefits of strengthened homeland defense in this era of great uncertainty, with two advanced nuclear powers, with one rogue nation that continues to improve its nuclear missile capabilities, and with another on the brink of a nuclear ICBM potential, are four-fold.

One, by providing a defense of the most critical military and civilian infrastructure assets that a peer adversary like Russia or China might target, the United States can limit damage in the event of an attack.

Two, by having the ability to limit damage, and by advertising that we could do this (this is what the Biden Administration has labeled deterrence “campaigning”), it bolsters the credibility of U.S. deterrence efforts.

Three, advancing the U.S. homeland defense architecture not only demonstrates to adversaries that the United States has the ability to intercept plausible (however unlikely) attacks against the U.S. homeland, but it also increases the credibility of our nuclear umbrella and allied confidence in our nuclear assurances. Countries like South Korea have sought greater evidence of the U.S. commitment to their defense, especially given North Korea’s rapid missile-testing spree. Reassuring allies like South Korea strengthens extended deterrence and lowers the risks of unwanted nuclear proliferation from allies seeking their own nuclear capability.

Four, it imposes a cost on our adversaries and further complicates their calculations, thus bolstering the credibility of our overall deterrence efforts. Just as adversaries have seen value in building defenses that impose planning challenges on us, so should we do the same to them.

In conclusion, the United States has limited its missile defense capabilities for a variety of reasons: for the sake of “strategic stability,” to avoid unintentionally prompting our adversaries to invest in new offensive capabilities; and to avoid an arms race. But by restraining ourselves in this way we have gained none of the promised security benefits. Our adversaries have invested in both defenses and new and advanced offensive strike systems to challenge U.S. military planners. It is advisable, therefore, to move forward with a change in policy and to send a demand signal to industry to develop new systems that advance U.S. homeland missile defense in ways that align it with the security challenges we face in the modern era.