



ASSESSING THE 2022 MISSILE DEFENSE REVIEW

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Assessing the 2022 Missile Defense Review” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on January 25, 2023. The symposium discussed the Biden Administration’s approach to U.S. missile defense policies and programs and assessed areas of continuity and discontinuity between current missile defense priorities and the policies and programs of previous administrations.

David J. Trachtenberg

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In October, the Biden Administration finally released the unclassified version of its *Missile Defense Review* (MDR), which was embedded in the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) along with the *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR).

What I find noteworthy about the MDR is less what it says than what it doesn’t say.

Consistent with the other strategy documents, the 2022 MDR acknowledges a more volatile and dangerous international security environment than that which existed only a few years ago, but it fails to adequately articulate how the United States will defend itself against the growing missile threats it highlights.

For example, the MDR acknowledges that “missile-related threats have rapidly expanded in quantity, diversity, and sophistication,” noting that both Russia and China have developed new, “diversified” nuclear missile capabilities,¹ but it gives no indication that the United States will develop new, diversified capabilities of its own to bolster deterrence by countering such adversary developments or seek to defend itself against the more sophisticated strategic nuclear capabilities of these adversaries.

Indeed, the MDR appears to adopt a “business as usual” approach by foreswearing defenses against Russia’s and China’s strategic missile threats and identifying no new programs of record to counter the growing missile threats it acknowledges. The MDR states that we will continue with current plans for a limited defense against rudimentary threats such as those posed by North Korea but take no action to defend against the more serious missile threats posed by peer nuclear-armed powers.

For a strategy document that declares, “Missile defenses...are critical to the top priority of defending the homeland and deterring attacks against the United States,”² it is remarkably mum on offering any practical solutions. Americans may be forgiven for wondering if the Biden Administration believes its own statements about defending the homeland being “the top priority” or if these words are simply a throwaway line meant to suggest nothing more than a platitude to make the public feel good.

¹ Department of Defense, *2022 Missile Defense Review*, October 2022, pp.1-3, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.



While noting that adversaries “are pursuing and demonstrating advanced, long-range space and missile systems” that “could increasingly blur the line between regional and homeland defense,”³ the MDR is silent on developing U.S. space-based interception capabilities, focusing only on space sensors for the missile defense mission.

Moreover, the MDR provides scant detail on how the United States will bolster its missile defense cooperation with allies and partners, simply noting that this “continues to be an important priority for the United States.”⁴ While the MDR notes that the United States has “a long history of working with Israel” and “a longstanding relationship of robust cooperation on missile defense,”⁵ it is silent on the specifics of that cooperation or whether or how the administration will seek to intensify it.

In short, the MDR acknowledges the growing missile threats to the U.S. homeland but fails to offer a comprehensive roadmap for countering them. It perpetuates the Cold War notion that continued societal vulnerability to peer nation nuclear missile threats is stabilizing. It fails to address the utility of space-based capabilities beyond sensors that could prove valuable for defending against adversary ballistic missile attacks, including boost-phase defenses. And it lacks any significant discussion of the administration’s plans to enhance missile defense cooperation with allies and partners, especially Israel.

Finally, I would note that National Institute plans to publish an *Occasional Paper* soon on the 2022 *Missile Defense Review* with commentaries from multiple subject matter experts, including some of our panelists today. So watch for that in the near future, along with our forthcoming *Occasional Papers* on the National Security Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review.

Matthew R. Costlow

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Thank you, Dave and thank you to this distinguished panel of experts on missile defense policy and programs. My remarks today are drawn from my soon-to-be published chapter in a National Institute *Occasional Paper* focused on the 2022 *Missile Defense Review*. I hope everyone will be on the lookout for this forthcoming series of *Occasional Papers* that compile the assessments of a broad range of experts, with the first *Occasional Paper* assessing the *National Security Strategy*, the *Missile Defense Review*, and finally, the *Nuclear Posture Review*.

We hope that compiling these assessments on each major national strategy document will help provide the necessary context for how domestic and international experts view these documents.

³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

Today, I want to use my remarks to take a step back from the current missile defense debate which I fear has come to resemble the trench warfare of World War I, in which both sides lob their arguments back and forth and the lines of the debate hardly move. Missile defense proponents cannot imagine why critics will not acknowledge the deterrence benefits of missile defense; while critics are befuddled by proponents' seeming nonchalance about creating first strike fears.

Now, in the spirit of full disclosure, I have been party to this trench warfare as recently as last year with my *Occasional Paper* on the subject, which was not-so-subtly titled, "Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice." I address the arguments about deterrence and first strike incentives in that paper extensively, so today I want to venture elsewhere, out into "No Man's Land," so to speak, and try a different tactic.

President Biden and many of the officials in his administration have a history of skepticism, if not outright opposition, to U.S. homeland missile defense. So instead of trying, once again, to show why they are wrong, today I want to examine those values and priorities, expressed in the 2022 *Missile Defense Review* and elsewhere, and point out how missile defense might contribute to achieving those goals. In other words, let's take the Biden Administration at its word that those officials truly are concerned about misperception, accidents, and crisis stability—and then examine how improved and expanded U.S. homeland missile defense can contribute to alleviating those concerns.

First, let's examine the Biden Administration's concerns about the risks of accidental or unauthorized launches. Now, these kinds of launches are not expressly called out in the 2022 MDR; instead, they are found in the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*. The Biden Administration says accidental or unauthorized launches, which can potentially lead to nuclear escalation, are a "risk" and then proceeds to show how the United States mitigates these risks for its own forces through open-ocean targeting, technical safeguards, etc.

Given the Biden Administration's concern about these kinds of launches, it is regrettable that the 2022 MDR does not recognize U.S. homeland missile defense as perhaps the most important contributor to minimizing these risks from adversaries. Russia's and China's technical safeguards might fail, and deterrence might not apply in the scenario of an unauthorized launch, making U.S. homeland missile defense the last line of defense for damage limitation and minimizing the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation.

I also want to touch on another potential role for U.S. homeland missile defense that goes unmentioned in the 2022 *Missile Defense Review*, but which I think even homeland missile defense skeptics might agree could be useful. I am honestly not sure how concerned I should be about this risk that I will talk about, but since it appears to be technically possible and potentially cataclysmic in effect, I will lay it out here.

The great strategist Herman Kahn pontificated about the possibility of "catalytic war" which he defined as, "based on the notion that some third party or nation might for its own reasons deliberately start a war between the two major powers." In other words, and applied to today, Russia could conceivably launch missiles from one of its submarines, perhaps modified to perform like Chinese missiles, against the United States in the hopes of triggering

a Sino-U.S. war, leaving it standing in a relatively better position amidst the ashes of the aftermath.

Or, might China attempt the same tactic, fulfilling Sun Tzu's admonition to "win without fighting" by provoking a U.S.-Russian conflict? Again, I fully recognize the incredibly risky nature of this problem, and perhaps both Moscow and Beijing would blanch at the prospect of gambling on the future of their nations; but I cannot help but agree with Donald Brennan who over 50 years ago pointed out the potential contribution that a strong U.S. homeland missile defense system could make toward lowering the risk of inadvertent nuclear war in this scenario.

Moving on to my final point, the Biden Administration stresses throughout the 2022 MDR its desire to reduce the risks of crisis instability. In other words, it wants to minimize the risks of misperceptions, or incentives to escalate, during a crisis. And, not only will I commend the Biden Administration for stating this important point, but I will gladly praise the 2022 MDR authors for recognizing the role that U.S. homeland missile defense can play in reducing these risks. My only complaint, and, I believe, it is not an insignificant complaint, is that the 2022 MDR does not go far enough in recognizing the full scope of homeland missile defense contributions to stability.

First, U.S. homeland missile defense can serve as an important deterrent to an adversary seeking to escalate a crisis to conflict. By potentially eliminating the option for a "cheap shot" against the U.S. homeland, one meant to demonstrate resolve or ability, U.S. homeland missile defense can serve as an important firebreak between crisis and conflict. Second, should deterrence fail and an adversary seek to impose costs against the U.S. homeland via conventional strikes on critical infrastructure, U.S. homeland missile defense can again act as a firebreak against a conventional conflict escalating to nuclear conflict. By vastly complicating the attack plans of an adversary, and making the possibility of failure that much more of a reality, U.S. homeland missile defense can contribute to the overall deterrence effect against attack, in conjunction with the threat of an overwhelming response. Finally, in a potential North Korea scenario, the United States would benefit from an expanded and improved U.S. homeland missile defense system which could potentially minimize a U.S. president's perceived need to rely on preemptive strikes to limit damage to the U.S. homeland—providing more options and freedom of action during a crisis.

To wrap up, my conclusion is rather simple. If the Biden Administration means what it says about wanting to reduce the risks of inadvertent nuclear escalation, accidents, unauthorized launches, and crisis instability, then it should not cast such a critical eye on the role of improved and expanded U.S. homeland missile defense. Far from impeding progress on reducing these risks, expanded and improved U.S. homeland missile defense could instead act as a great contributor to deterrence and risk reduction. I hope the Biden Administration, and other skeptics of U.S. homeland missile defense, begin to recognize that there are multiple tools that can be used to improve deterrence and risk reduction, and U.S. homeland missile defense should get a fair appraisal in light of the importance of those stated goals.
