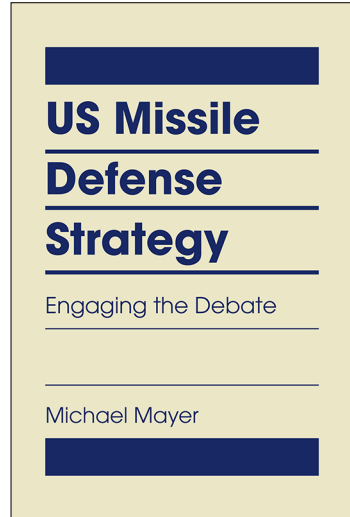


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US Missile Defense Strategy: Engaging the Debate

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1

Why Missile Defense?

Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith emerged from the Russian Ministry of Defense, having just concluded a round of discussions over the Bush administration's plans to move forward with a ballistic missile defense program. It was a rainy autumn day in Moscow, slightly warmer than usual. Together with his colleague, Assistant Secretary of Defense J.D. Crouch, Feith was on his way to a press conference at a nearby hotel when a US embassy official notified them of unconfirmed reports that a plane had struck one of the World Trade Center buildings in New York. Upon arriving at the hotel, the two Pentagon officials then received word of a second plane crashing into the towers and the declaration of President George W. Bush that "terrorism against our nation will not stand." Feith's clearest memory of the press conference was, as he recounted in his 2008 memoir, "the badgering of the *New York Times* reporter, who wanted Crouch and me to agree with him that if airplanes could attack the World Trade Center, it made no sense for the United States to invest in protection against ballistic missiles" (Feith 2008, p. 3).

Across the Atlantic, national security advisor Condoleezza Rice most likely awoke that morning with missile defense on her mind as well. Rice was scheduled to deliver a speech at Johns Hopkins University later that day which, as the *Washington Post* reported and the administration later confirmed, "was designed to promote missile defense as the cornerstone of a new national security strategy" (Wright 2004). Terrorism was a concern for the newly installed Bush administration, but more in the context of increasing missile proliferation and the worry that rogue states might wield weapons of terror, rather than non-state actors such as al Qaeda. According to excerpts of the speech later obtained by the *Post*, her address would have provided an answer to the badgering *New York Times* reporter in Moscow: "We need to worry about the suitcase bomb, the car bomb and

the vial of sarin released in the subway,” Rice was to argue, “[but] why put deadbolt locks on your doors and stock up on cans of mace and then decide to leave your windows open?” The speech was ultimately postponed due the terrorist attacks, and the remarks Rice gave at the rescheduled speaking engagement in April 2002 dealt primarily with international terrorism. Missile defense was, according the *Post*, “mentioned only once, almost in passing” (Wright 2004).

But the question posed by the *Times* reporter remains highly relevant. Why does the United States continue to develop and deploy missile defenses? After all, the country faces no real existential threats, given its advantageous geographic position, its conventional military dominance, and a highly credible deterrent capability provided by an unmatched and unquestioned capacity to rapidly project power globally. There appears to be little reason to assume that emerging nuclear states would be immune to the same deterrence structures that many have credited with the absence of nuclear conflict during the Cold War.

In the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, ballistic missiles appear to be among the most expensive, most complicated and least reliable means of attacking the United States, one that instantly reveals, moreover, where a reciprocal attack may be directed. The analogy in Rice’s prepared remarks should therefore have included the fact that, while the windows remain open, you are also able to clearly advertise your ability not only to almost instantly destroy the home of any potential invaders, but also to find and hold accountable their accomplices. Since “closing windows” that have always been “open” is an expensive project, often with unintended strategic consequences, it is reasonable to wonder why the United States has invested so heavily in missile defenses.

Furthermore, insofar as some critics—including a number of respected physicists—believe that the system will almost certainly never function as intended, pouring significant research and development dollars into a fatally flawed defense capability would seem at best a case of bad policy. To this could be added the additional concern that missile defense – ineffective or not – may even aggravate proliferation trends and prompt new arms races characterized by quantitative and qualitative improvements to national missile arsenals. Finally, there have been those who disagree that states such as Iran and North Korea – two of the states which missile defenses are intended to protect against – will even develop long-range ballistic missiles capable of threatening the United States. It’s hardly surprising when missile defense skeptics like Joseph Cirincione argue, as he did in 2008, that the United States was rushing

“to deploy a technology that does not work against a threat that does not exist” (Circincione 2008).

Missile defense proponents and officials from multiple US administrations, on the other hand, have viewed developments in the post-Cold War world with trepidation. For Director for National Intelligence (1993–1995) James Woolsey, the transition from an international security system structured largely around the great power competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to a more dynamic and open security environment was akin to slaying a large dragon, only to discover a “jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes” (Jehl 1993). Exacerbating the new threats – ethnic conflicts, transnational criminal networks, terrorism, ‘rogue states’ and failing states – in this open security architecture was a set of “globalization” trends: the increasingly interconnected nature of international economic and commercial activities, profound advances in communications technology and improved access to advanced technological expertise. The implications for the spread of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile technology were particularly worrisome.

Administration officials also began to consider how these developments might limit the nation’s policy options and its ability to honor global security commitments. With less at stake in regional conflicts, the US might be seen as more easily deterred from intervening when important – but not vital – national interests were threatened. Similarly, proliferation of WMD and ballistic missile technology could give regional powers the ability to coerce the United States into accepting undesirable political outcomes (what some have referred to as nuclear blackmail), and US attempts to employ deterrent threats would be less credible.

These assumed limitations on US freedom of action could also weaken extended deterrence and other security commitments, inspiring allies to take independent measures to ensure their own security. Allies such as Turkey or Japan may decide to initiate a nuclear weapon development program, adding to proliferation pressures and ultimately reducing US influence and security. The far-reaching implications of “leaving the windows open” were seen as increasingly problematic in this new security setting, and missile defenses – especially national missile defenses – could contribute to far more than simply defending the territorial integrity of the US homeland.

Strategy or Politics?

The quest to develop ballistic missile defenses (BMD) is an epic tale that stretches back to the advent of ballistic missiles in the 1950s, a history as rife with technological breakthroughs and failures as with high stakes political drama. From the ill-fated Sentinel/Safeguard program of the 1960s to Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) effort in the 1980s – quickly dubbed “Star Wars” by its critics – the operational components of the US ballistic missile defense system are a result of numerous research and development programs conducted over the past five decades. The effort is remarkable for its longevity and constant renewal through multiple administrations, and also for the polarizing debate it engendered. Former US Senator Sam Nunn once referred to discussions in Congress over SDI as resembling a theological rather than technological debate. The public debate over missile defense often exhibits a binary for/against dynamic, with deeply entrenched positions from which both sides talk dogmatically past one another.

Even as missile defenses are being deployed by the United States, understanding the motivations for building them remains highly relevant. If the skeptics are correct in their belief that the technology will never work and the threat environment does not warrant the development of defenses, then decisionmakers must be guided not by strategic rationales but by some combination of domestic factors. To say that domestic political maneuvering has played a central role in the formation of missile defense policy is to understate the case dramatically. Political gamesmanship often appears to function independently from the discussion over threats and strategy, to a point where winning the political battle was of far greater importance than crafting a reasonable policy.

Recent academic works, however, have focused almost entirely on the domestic factors behind the system's deployment.¹ Many scholars appear to begin with the fundamental assumption that missile defense cannot possibly be strategically advantageous and therefore constitutes a policy aberration in need of explanation, for which they explore a range of domestic factors. This is a mistake. Before seeking out alternative explanations, the Occam's razor approach of exploring the simplest explanation should at the very least be fully discounted by thoroughly investigating the strategic utility of missile defense. Whether based on domestic politics, an unswerving faith in technological solutions, American exceptionalism or wishful thinking, such explanations ultimately become secondary in importance if missile defense is found

to be a crucial element in the overarching grand strategic thinking of all three administrations.

Defining Grand Strategy

Grand strategy is both a process and an outcome. Colin Dueck defines grand strategy as the “self-conscious identification and prioritization of foreign policy goals; an identification of existing and potential resources; and a selection of a plan which uses those resources to meet those goals” (Dueck 2004, p. 514). Similarly, Paul Kennedy writes that “the crux of grand strategy lies therefore in *policy*, that is, in the capacity of the nation’s leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term (that is, in wartime *and* peacetime) best interests” (Kennedy 1991, p. 5). Policymakers develop grand strategy, according to Christopher Layne, through a three-step process of “determining a state’s vital security interests; identifying the threats to those interests; and deciding how best to employ the state’s political, military, and economic resources to protect those interests.” (Layne 1997, p. 246).

Grand strategy must therefore be viewed as a set of decisions about the use of limited military, economic and diplomatic resources, informed by state’s core national interests, threats and strategic goals. But these three sets of elements of national power are not equal in their efficacy or in the risks inherent in their use. In an international environment characterized by anarchy –that is, the absence of a world government – military power represents the ultimate guarantor of state security. Military matters are therefore given additional emphasis.

The use of the term “grand strategy” is not without pitfalls. Some argue that no such comprehensive and overarching strategy exists or is even possible. Others regard stated United States grand strategy to be an amalgamation of official strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy or the Quadrennial Defense Review. Regardless of whether this is so, decisionmakers are constantly making countless strategic decisions and prioritizations while implementing the nation’s security policy. A state may pursue a grand strategy that need not appear to be effective or even wise. There may be structural limitations on how well the elements of any given strategy can forward a state’s strategic interests, in addition to unanticipated events and the vagaries of chance in the international system. In any regard, a strategy exists against which the value of individual military systems can be evaluated.

Consistency Argument

It seems implausible that a combination of domestic variables would result in a missile defense policy that exhibits such internal coherence and consistency with an overarching grand strategy. Therefore, if the development of missile defenses represents a rational strategic response to perceived external factors, BMD policies should be fully and logically consistent with and contribute to the nation's overarching set of strategic goals, which are in turn based upon policymakers' interpretation of the international system. If, on the other hand, the pursuit of missile defense can be explained primarily by other domestic political-bureaucratic factors such as bureaucratic coalitions, political dealmaking and the distributive nature of congressional district politics, less logical consistency between strategy and implemented policy regarding missile defense should be expected.

The comparison between strategy and implemented policies represents a necessary first step to gaining a deeper understanding of the causal explanations behind US missile defense policy. This book seeks to examine the first piece of the puzzle by comparing strategy and implemented policy and requires a systematic means of assessing whether missile defense policy is consistent with US grand strategy. A three level hierarchy of consistency is employed, extrapolated from the assumption that a rational policy response necessarily exhibits logical consistency between perceived strategic requirements and implemented policies. The first test will be that of *notional consistency*, a purely academic exercise judging whether a logical coherence exists between the threat perception and strategic goals of each administration, and the ability of missile defense to address them.

If there is a causal connection between strategy and policy, however, missile defenses should not only be notionally consistent with strategy, they should also react to shifts in the nation's grand strategy. This *reactive consistency* judges whether changes on the grand strategic level are reflected in implemented missile defense policies. Finally, the book assesses whether missile defenses represent an optimal response (that which would constitute a "fully consistent" policy), taking into account the nation's grand strategy, the implemented system's efficacy and its military, economic and diplomatic costs. Evaluating this most stringent level of *optimality consistency* may, in other words, provide insight into whether missile defenses have been a beneficial component of US national security policy. This final test is the most challenging, due to varying evaluations of the system's efficacy and diverse judgments concerning current and future opportunity costs.

Consistency alone is insufficient for establishing causality: synergy between missile defenses and overall US grand strategy does not preclude the involvement of domestic causal factors. The level of congruence between US grand strategy and the strategic utility of missile defense found in this study may simply provide one plausible yet often overlooked and understudied explanation. An even-handed approach to these questions requires objectivity not only in describing the strategic predilections of each of the three administrations, but also (and more challenging) peeling away the often argumentative rhetoric on both sides of the missile defense debate. Missile defenses must be treated as nothing more than an instrument to be used to further the strategic goals of the United States and ultimately increase the nation's security. Simply put, do the strategic roles for missile defense – as defined by US policymakers themselves – make sense from a grand strategic perspective?

Outline of the Book

The book proceeds in the following manner. In Chapter 2, I outline the four principle strategic rationales for ballistic missile defense as expressed by the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. The system's perceived value to US grand strategy has remained surprisingly consistent over the past two decades, with only minor modifications in later years. I provide an overview of the technology of missile defense in Chapter 3, including a primer of basic principle and a brief description of current systems. Much of the information presented in this chapter will be well-known for readers already familiar with missile defense, but certain technological details have significant strategic implications that are important background for readers with less knowledge of the subject. Experienced readers might choose to skip this review while novice readers are encouraged to treat it as a reference.

Afterwards, the grand strategy and missile defense policy of each administration is analyzed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The military, economic and diplomatic components of grand strategy are compared to BMD system architecture, testing and budget, and diplomatic outreach. Finally, in Chapter 7, I offer some conclusions based on the preceding analysis and argue that although missile defense appears consistent with US grand strategy, it may not be an optimal policy choice. Given the polarized climate dominating the missile defense discussion, I have been exceptionally focused on maintaining a balanced perspective. If supporters and detractors find portions of the analysis objectionable, I will most likely have succeeded in this.

Notes

¹ Examples include Earnest Yanarella, *The Missile Defense Controversy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002); Coloma Peoples, *Justifying Missile Defense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Natalie Bormann, *National Missile Defense and the Politics of US Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) and Richard Dean Burns, *The Missile Defense Systems of George W. Bush: A Critical Assessment* (Westport: Praeger, 2010). At first glance, Andrew Futter's recent contribution, *Ballistic Missile Defense and National Security Policy* (London: Routledge, 2013) appears to conduct such an analysis, but fails to fully explore the connections between strategy and missile defense and reverts quickly back to domestic explanations.