

# Trump's Missile Defense: Challenges for Europe

The Trump administration's missile defense plans would undermine key NATO policies. A better approach would be to combine missile defense efforts with arms control initiatives.

By Oliver Thränert

When US president Donald Trump announced his administration's Missile Defense Review (MDR) in January 2019, he stated that, in his view, the goal of missile defense would be simple: to ensure that missiles launched against the United States and its allies would be detected and destroyed – anywhere, anytime.<sup>1</sup> The president's remarks fueled the concerns of many – particularly in Europe – who fear a new arms race between the West and Russia. The introduction of a new arms system, with offensive and defensive applications, takes place at a time when arms control treaties are collapsing (the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, or INF, treaty being the most prominent example), and neither Russia nor the United States are engaged in negotiating new agreements. Notwithstanding Europe's limited impact, governments should nonetheless seek to ensure that developments do not spin out of control. While introducing new weapons systems, in order to enhance deterrence, may be unavoidable, it is crucial to keep in mind a key lesson of the Cold War: deterrence cannot be stabilized without arms control. It is also worth noting that, in an age of renewed great power compe-

tion, missile defense is a key feature of the deterrence equation between the United States and Russia, and the United States and China.

The administration's MDR is a relatively modest document, but it departs from the Obama administration's 2010 review in a few key respects.<sup>2</sup> The MDR includes attacks from hypersonic weapons under development in

## Key Points

- The Trump administration's 2019 Missile Defense Report is more evolutionary than revolutionary
- Worryingly, it argues that missile defenses should be directed against Russia and China in regional contingencies and that they should be better integrated with offensive attack operations
- Also problematic is the fact that it does not include any arms control initiatives
- European NATO members should continue to support missile defenses, while also stressing the importance of arms control initiatives

Russia and China. To better detect these advanced weapons systems, which, due to their speed, low altitude and maneuverability may defeat existing missile defense systems, the Trump administration advocates the use of space-based sensors. The Pentagon will study the development of space-based missile interceptors for boost-phase defense, with the aim of identifying the most promising technologies. Another deviation from the 2010 review is that the MDR argues missile defenses should be directed at Russia and China in preparation for limited conflict, and should be better integrated with offensive attack operations.

Allies in Asia and Europe have a compelling interest in US missile defense policies. While there is strong cooperation between the United States and Japan, in particular, on the development of new missile defense interceptors, European governments are often more cautious. Various European NATO members contribute to the alliance's missile defense programs, which are mainly designed to counter shorter-range ballistic and cruise missile threats. Yet, in most European capitals, the issue of missile defense has never enjoyed real popularity. Critics contend that effective missile defense is technically unfeasible, too costly, and a potential risk to strategic stability. Moreover, they fear that the ability of the United States or NATO to successfully intercept incoming missiles might trigger an arms race, as adversaries would seek to introduce new weaponry to outsmart the existing system. The inability of European states to speak with one voice also diminishes its impact on US policies. Despite the skepticism of many "old" NATO partners, Eastern European members are in favor, particularly if such systems are stationed on their territory. Their rationale, as the cases of Romania and Poland show, is that US boots on the ground provide for better protection against Russia. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the Trump administration is inclined to unilateralism, and by the frequency with which the president is at odds with his own national security bureaucracy.

Military arguments would seem to favor more emphasis on missile defense, while more caution might be advisable from a political perspective. Given Russia's immense superiority in nuclear-capable, non-strategic launch systems and its violations of the INF treaty, enhancing regional missile defense could serve to strengthen NATO's deterrence posture. At the same time, such a move could undermine the prevailing NATO consensus, whereby missile defenses are not directed at Russia. Integrating active and passive defenses with attack operations to counter missile threats, as envisioned by the Trump administration, may also support NATO's defense posture, particularly in



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during the Missile Defense Review announcement at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, U.S., January 17, 2019. *Kevin Lamarque / Reuters*

light of Russia's new hypersonic weapons. Crisis escalation may, however, become more likely. Finally, most Europeans regret that the Trump administration has not initiated new arms control initiatives that would extend to offensive and defensive systems. Such an initiative might help square the circle between military and political aspects. Some European governments may be tempted to stall until 2020, in the hope that a new US administration will be more reasonable. Yet, such an approach is unlikely to work. Missile defense enjoys bipartisan support in Washington and will continue to complicate relations with Russia and China.

### Trump's Missile Defense Review

The MDR formulates largely moderate aims that are, for the most part, similar to what the Obama administration hoped to achieve. It should contribute to deterrence by adding uncertainty to an opponent's attack plans; help minimize damage should deterrence fail, or accidental or unauthorized missile launches occur; support military operations; preserve freedom of action; and strengthen diplomacy. Moreover, with allied cooperation in this sphere viewed as being increasingly important, the Trump administration has committed to completing the deployments under the "European Phased Adaptive Approach" – a NATO agreement reached during the Obama administration.

In terms of procurement, the MDR's plans are, again, rather modest. Beginning in 2023, the number of ground-based midcourse defense interceptors (GBI) already stationed in Alaska and California – and mainly meant to defend the United States against limited missile attacks from regional actors such as North Korea – will be increased from 44 to 64, and will carry a new kill vehicle. Contrary to the expectations of some observers, the Trump administration has not yet decided to construct a new interceptor site in the continental United States. Moreover,

by the end of 2023, the current fleet of 38 multi-mission Aegis ballistic missile defense-capable ships is to be increased to 60. Plans to develop the SM-3 Block IIA interceptor in collaboration with Japan are set to continue.

The focus on defending against new threats, such as hypersonic vehicles, requires an increased use of space-based sensors, as they allow for improved tracking and potential targeting. Furthermore, the Trump administration plans to integrate high-energy laser technology onto airborne platforms, notably drones, in order to facilitate boost-phase interception. However, given the enormous cost involved in acquiring and fielding space-based interceptors, as well questions about their efficiency, the Trump administration has not produced concrete plans.<sup>3</sup>

### Missile Defense and Russia

Just like its predecessor, the current MDR views threats emanating from North Korea and Iran – now referred to as “rogue states” – as critical. More importantly, however, especially from a European perspective, Russia is viewed as challenging US ability to deter or defeat aggression and coercion. Russia's assessment, it would seem, is that in the event of a crisis or conflict, the threat of nuclear first-use might compel the United States and NATO to capitulate on terms favorable to the Kremlin. To offset such calculations, the Trump administration maintains that regional missile defenses will help defend and assure US allies. Thus, while Washington continues to rely on nuclear deterrence to prevent Russian and Chinese nuclear attacks with strategic weapons, in regional scenarios where the United States and its allies might be confronted with the threat of non-strategic nuclear forces, greater emphasis is placed on bolstering regional missile defense systems.

Russia's clear superiority in non-strategic nuclear forces, which includes the new SCC-8 cruise missile that violates the INF treaty, poses a challenge to NATO, especially when it comes to defending the Baltic states. Some analysts advocate for regional and limited missile defenses, which could support alliance efforts to deter the threat of a limited nuclear attack by Russia. Point defenses, in particular, could protect critical infrastructure as well as important junctures for command, control and communication.<sup>4</sup>

Such proposals would provide NATO with additional non-nuclear options to counter Russian nuclear threats. Yet, they do not seem to reflect the current state of affairs within the alliance. The final communiqué of the 2018 Brussels summit states: “NATO BMD is not directed against Russia and will not

undermine Russia's strategic deterrence. NATO BMD is intended to defend against potential threats emanating from outside the Euro-Atlantic area.”<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the type of missile defense system NATO establishes in Eastern Europe, it will always be of limited character and will not call into question the credibility of Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent. Nonetheless, if, in the future, regional NATO missile defenses were directed at non-strategic Russian threats, as is advocated by the Trump administration, this change of policy would have significant ramifications for relations with Russia. For several years, Moscow has opposed NATO's “Aegis Ashore” missile defense deployments in Romania and Poland, which are designed to defend against Iran or other missile proliferators. The cohesion of NATO would also be at stake, as many European NATO members would hesitate to make missile defense an integral part of the NATO-Russia deterrence equation.

### From Defense to Offense

During crises, missile defenses provide policymakers with additional time and options. The more confidence they have in their ability to limit damage from an incoming attack, the less pressure they will likely be under to use their offensive capabilities early on in a conflict. The Trump administration takes this view, though it also emphasizes the need for greater integration of attack operations with active and passive defenses. The MDR holds that attack operations targeting missiles prior to launch can reduce the burden on US active defenses for post-launch intercepts.

In military terms, this view has merit. Given the fact that Russia and China increasingly have access to non-ballistic systems such as hypersonic weapons, thereby

### Further Reading

**2019 Missile Defense Review** *U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense, January 2019.* This document explains the administration's missile defense plans.

**From Offense to Defense? Extended Deterrence and Missile Defense** *Kerry Kartchner and Oliver Thränert, in Stefanie von Hlatky and Andreas Wenger, eds., The Future of Extended Deterrence: The United States, NATO and Beyond, Georgetown University Press, 2015.* This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the role that missile defense has played in the US-European extended deterrence relationship since the end of the Cold War, and future challenges, including nuclear proliferation.

**Missile Defense and Defeat: Considerations for the New Policy Review** *Keith B. Payne, Brad Roberts, Henry A. Obering III, Kenneth Todorov and Thomas Karako, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017.* This report provides analysis and recommendations on missile defense issues for what was, at the time, the incoming Trump administration.

making traditional missile defense systems obsolete, the ability to destroy such weapons prior to or soon after launch is attractive.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, integrating offensive options, which – in order to be successful – would need to be used early in a crisis, will provide a crucial advantage: granting decision-makers time before military action.

From a European perspective, integrating defensive and offensive components is particularly problematic. NATO's stance is different from that of the Trump administration. In its 2018 Brussels summit communiqué, the alliance states that "NATO BMD is purely defensive." Changing this policy would risk robbing European proponents of missile defenses of an important argument, namely that such systems can act as stabilizing tools in a crisis. On the contrary, it is likely to make escalation even more likely, with potential hotspots such as the Baltic states being especially worrisome for European policymakers.

### No place for Arms Control

During the Cold War, arms control was an essential element of security policy. The permanent dialog and jointly verified implementation of agreements helped create transparency and trust. It became easier for each side to understand the other. However, ever since arms control has largely been shelved.

The Trump administration denies that missile defenses undermine arms control negotiations, but it also stresses its unwillingness to accept any limitations or constraints on defenses intended to protect the homeland against rogue missile threats. Such rhetoric leaves open the option of agreeing to limitations with Russia or China on those systems that fall outside the scope of pure homeland defense. In any event, the Trump team does not mention arms control initiatives in the MDR at all. Moreover, even if it were discussed, it would be difficult to distinguish between missile defenses for regional and strategic contingencies. Since Russia and China see US missile defenses as a threat to the credibility of their nuclear second strike capabilities, it is unlikely that either will embrace agreements that ignore them. As a result, the current trend vis-à-vis offensive nuclear forces and missile defenses appears set to continue, dashing European hopes for progress on arms control.

### Time for a European Response

Missile defenses can increase security and deterrence, mitigate and limit damage, support military operations, preserve freedom of action, and strengthen diplomacy. However, from a European perspective several aspects of the Trump administration's MDR are problematic: that missile defense forms part of the deterrence equation for regional contingencies involving Russia; that plans exist to further integrate missile defenses with offensive attack operations; and the lack of any arms control initiatives.

Though there is some justification for each of these elements, in combination they form a toxic amalgam that is likely to intensify transatlantic discord. In order to avoid this, Europeans should formulate a common stance. They should tell Washington that European NATO allies continue to support missile defense systems, but that arms control initiatives are crucial. Areas of focus should be Russia's superiority in non-strategic, nuclear-capable launch systems and missile defenses aimed at bolstering NATO's deterrence. The goal should be to secure and strengthen cooperation and to prevent Russia from exploiting transatlantic differences.

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3. Aaron Mehta, "The next six months could define America's missile defense for a generation", *Defense News*, January 27, 2019.
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