Managing escalation:
missile defence, strategy and US alliances

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Since the end of the Cold War, cooperation in ballistic missile defence has become an important part of many US alliance relationships. In East Asia, it helped in the slow relaxation of Japan’s restrictive defence policies, promises increased scope for integration of US and Australian forces, and strengthens cooperation between Australia and Japan. In Europe, it saw NATO overcome internal disagreements dating back to Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) proposal of the early 1980s. At the Lisbon summit of 2010, the alliance agreed on developing a capability to defend the European allies’ populations, territory and forces. Since the turn of the century, significant advances have thus been made in general political agreement and technical cooperation; but less progress is evident on the question of how missile defence fits into broader alliance strategy.

Throughout this time, the debate on missile defence in allied countries has largely mirrored that within the United States. The attention of academics, think-tanks and officials ranged across technical feasibility, the strengths and weaknesses of specific systems, the fiscal costs of development and procurement, and the political risks of missile defence deployment, given opposition from China and Russia. Missile defence’s proponents, who argued that such systems would protect the United States and its allies against rogue states, and opponents, who argued that missile defence risks undermining deterrence stability, often tended to talk past each other. Yet now that missile defence capabilities are maturing and entering service in a number of countries, deciding how they fit into alliance strategy will become increasingly important, and contentious.

To date, commentary on this question has largely focused on whether missile defence cooperation might help compensate for a reduction in NATO nuclear sharing arrangements. Taking a different perspective, this article argues that allies should also expect disagreements on how best to make use of missile defence itself. It argues that missile defence is best understood as a tool for the management of escalation—the movement from peacetime relations to, in the extreme, global nuclear war.


the United States or its allies; they do so through strategies of deterrence and extended deterrence which also are predicated on a credible threat of escalation. How to manage escalation, however, is an inherently political question on which allies often do not agree.

As missile defence cooperation in US alliances begins to provide a level of protection for allied (and US) territory and populations, old questions about escalation in alliance strategy will gain new salience. Throughout the Cold War, arguments over NATO strategy were staple fare for official and academic debates, especially on the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence. How to interpret and implement the concept of ‘flexible response’ after its adoption in 1967 was the subject of often acrimonious debate, as allies sought to balance fears of abandonment, entrapment and a Soviet Union that threatened all allies, but in different ways depending on their geographic position.3 In so far as missile defence changes the relative costs of conflict within an alliance, it will also influence the political and strategic dynamics of managing extended deterrence.

Different geographic and political circumstances mean that allies will have different interests and perspectives on missile defence, and on its implications for strategy, posture and force structure. The relative importance of missile defence for collective defence; strategic implications of deployment locations; whether and how rules of engagement should conserve scarce interceptors; what adversaries the allies should plan against; and how missile defence cooperation would relate to alliance planning and policy on nuclear weapons, are questions with inherent political implications that the United States and its allies in Europe and East Asia are only beginning to confront.

Following a discussion of missile defence and extended deterrence, this article examines defence of the US homeland in the context of US alliances, and the potential to strengthen extended deterrence through forward basing. It then discusses the defence of the territory of other allies and its influence on decisions to escalate, before concluding with recommendations for the United States and its allies in NATO and Asia.

**Missile defence and extended deterrence**

Adversaries can use ballistic missiles to threaten deployed forces in out-of-area operations, outside the territory of alliance members, and also, increasingly, to threaten allied territory and populations directly. Regarding the former, the need for integrated air and missile defence is relatively uncontroversial and straightforward: the ability to prevent a debilitating disarming strike against regionally deployed forces, and to maintain operations under missile attack, are simply necessary conditions for operating militarily in regions under threat of ballistic missiles. In both Gulf Wars, for example, Iraq sought to hit coalition forces and bases with ballistic missiles.

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Regarding the defence of allied territories and populations, however, the range of ways in which an adversary might seek strategic effect from ballistic missiles, and the ways in which the United States and its allies might react, are far more varied. They range from signalling (e.g. repeated North Korean missile tests) to ‘exercises’ (e.g. in the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis) to demonstrative use (e.g. Libya’s attack with two Scuds on Lampedusa in 1986) to the threat of disarming strikes on major bases (especially in East Asia) or decapitation strikes (e.g. on Seoul or Taipei) to coercive conventional bombing of civilian areas (e.g. the use of the V2 in the Second World War, or the ‘War of the Cities’ during the Iran–Iraq conflict of the 1980s) or even nuclear bombing.

Missile defence against such threats is first and foremost a means to change the dynamics of escalation, which places it squarely in the context of strategic and political arguments about the management of extended deterrence in US alliances. It affects alliance strategy, threat perception, reassurance of allies (and adversaries), and the management of fears of entrapment and abandonment: introducing missile defence to collective defence tasks changes far more than the regional correlation of forces, affecting also political compromises, and mutual perceptions, among the allies.

Deterrence of an attack on alliance members is a core function of US alliances. Throughout the Cold War, allied security rested on the threat of nuclear retaliation by the United States as punishment for an attack on one of its allies. At the same time, the United States also sought to increase the ability to deter attacks by threat of denial of success, based on a credible ability to defend its allies. Deterrence by denial relies less on nuclear forces, requires less communication of specific threats, and inherently includes the ability to mitigate damage should it fail. Many analysts thus argued in favour of increased reliance on denial in the post-Cold War environment, in particular through the development of missile defence. As a means of deterrence, missile defence must thus be effective first and foremost in the minds of adversary decision-makers.

But deterrence in alliances tends to be of an extended form: the credibility of deterrence threats rests on the commitment of some allies, most importantly the United States, to provide security to other members that are under more immediate threat. The asymmetric nature of an extended deterrence relationship thus creates fears of both abandonment (on the part of the small ally) by its security guarantors, and entrapment (of all allies) in conflicts in which they have little direct stake. In practice, many policies that institutionalize extended deterrence relationships—including forward basing, joint strategic planning or nuclear

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sharing in NATO—are aimed at reassuring allies as much as deterring adversaries. Nonetheless, the cost of conflict in general, and the relative cost of alliance members’ intervention in particular, will still differ between allies, and influence their interest in escalation of a conflict.

Extended deterrence and missile defence of the US homeland

The logic of extended deterrence thus means that from the perspective of the United States’ allies, a missile defence system to defend the US homeland is only in their own self-interest in so far as it also increases their own security by raising the credibility of US security guarantees. Otherwise, US national missile defence could undermine what in NATO parlance is often referred to as the ‘indivisibility of security’, which is the political foundation of alliance trust and cooperation. How can US missile defence of its own homeland be structured to increase confidence in extended deterrence?

If the United States comes to the assistance of an ally under attack, it must countenance possible retaliation by the adversary—in particular, retaliation that would touch the security of the continental United States and US civilian population itself. So that it is not deterred by this prospect from fulfilling its alliance commitments, the United States needs to be able not only to deter the initial attack but also to negate the coercive potential of possible adversary escalation. The credibility of extended deterrence thus ultimately rests on confidence in US escalation dominance. Escalation dominance, however, is the result not just of the US ability to prevail at higher levels of conflict—a measure of relative cost compared to the adversary—but also of the US willingness to support its ally in the knowledge of this ability—a willingness for which the absolute cost of intervention to the United States is more relevant. During the Cold War, the fragility of this credibility was demonstrated by the loss of confidence among many Europeans in US guarantees after the US homeland had become vulnerable to Soviet missile attack in the 1960s, well before the Soviets reached so-called ‘parity’. Today, the same fragility underlies concerns in Asia that the United States might not be willing, in the end, to sacrifice Los Angeles for Taipei or Tokyo.

If a missile defence system can reduce the possible cost of conflict to the United States, it can thus maintain confidence in US guarantees. This is particularly relevant in case of adversaries about which there is less confidence that they can reliably be deterred by nuclear threats. Hence the 2014 US Quadrennial Defense Review argues that the ability to defend the US homeland against ‘limited ballistic missile threats from regional actors such as North Korea and Iran … protects the


9 During the Cold War, for example, European NATO front-line states (in particular, West Germany) were in general interested in rapid escalation to NATO use of nuclear weapons (so as to stop the conventional battle that would be fought on their own territory), with strikes on targets in Warsaw Pact countries. In contrast, the US interest was more strongly to delay nuclear retaliation so as to contain the conflict, and to avoid deep nuclear strikes so as to avoid Soviet retaliation in kind.

United States [and] reassures our allies and partners’. Given their relative imprecision and small numbers, any future Iranian or North Korean intercontinental range ballistic missiles (ICBM) could be used only for coercion (through threats or demonstrations) or for strategic (nuclear) bombing of—primarily civilian—large urban targets (as their ultimate level of escalation). Denying them success in either case would require defences that can credibly intercept all those of their missiles that might credibly be able to reach the US homeland. Given the very small number of ICBMs these countries are likely to be able to field, that is a level of capability against which the current US homeland defence system should be effective. While this still leaves the United States on the worse side of an offensive–defensive cost competition in absolute terms, it could in all likelihood sustain such a competition with Iran or North Korea, given its far larger economic resources.

In recent years, the effect of this dynamic on allies’ perception of extended deterrence has played out most strongly in East Asia. Japan saw a direct threat to Japanese population centres from North Korean missiles from the time of the 1998 Taepodong I test, which led it to seek its own national missile defence programme—a decision that still has no equivalent among European allies. US investment in its own national missile defence effort thus reinforced, rather than undermined, perception of a shared threat between the two allies, and hence also strengthened the political credibility of US guarantees. This was particularly important for Japan because of China’s economic and military rise, which raises questions about the ability and willingness of the United States to underwrite Japan’s security in the long term. Japan thus tends to be far more concerned than Europe about the possibility of further reductions in the US nuclear arsenal, especially any reduction below 1,000 warheads, and the effect this might have on US escalation dominance over China. In this context, even a limited US national missile defence system (of a size that can completely deny a North Korean threat, but could still be overcome by the much larger number of Chinese ICBMs) is useful for the management of escalation, because it reduces Chinese options to use its nuclear forces for demonstration or signalling purposes. Essentially, it forces China into the binary choice inherent in its official ‘no first use’ posture—at a time when its commitment to that posture may be subject to debate.

In contrast, US national missile defence could be seen as undermining the ‘indivisibility of security’ if it were perceived as an attempt at decoupling, insulating the United States from regional dangers while leaving US allies to bear

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the consequences of any resulting deterioration of relations with the adversary. The Reagan administration’s SDI programme was perceived this way in western Europe, where opposition resulted from fears of both abandonment (by a United States that might feel safe from the Soviet threat behind its missile defence shield) and entrapment (in a Soviet reaction to US policy). Similarly, European opposition to the Bush administration’s proposal for a ‘third base’ of ground-based interceptors (GBI) in Poland in the early 2000s, which was intended to help defend the United States and countries in north-western Europe against missiles from the Middle East, arose from concerns about American unilateralism and aggressive policies towards so-called ‘rogue states’, as well as the consequences of US policies for Europe’s relations with Russia.

Rightly or wrongly, there was little perception of a missile threat from Iran in Europe. Many west European countries saw the maintenance of a good relationship with Russia as a political priority, and professed Russian objections to US missile defence plans, however spurious, as a hindrance to improved cooperation. Russia’s large tactical nuclear arsenal gives it far more options for gradual escalation than are available to, for example, China—a consideration which further reduces the value of a limited US national missile defence system for managing escalation of conflicts with Russia. That said, support for US policy was strong among east European countries, especially Poland. This, however, had less to do with the defence of the US homeland than with the fact that the proposed installations would have been the first forward-based US military assets on the territory of the new NATO allies.16

Enmeshing regional and US homeland defence

Throughout the Cold War, the forward-basing of US forces on allies’ territory was an important element of US alliances, and regionally bolstered the balance of forces in favour of US allies. At times the presence of US forces also raised the confidence of allies in US guarantees by merely functioning as trip-wires, ensuring that American blood would flow in any major attack. Such was the strategic logic of western garrisons in West Berlin during the Cold War, for example. The political relevance of creating the prospect of US casualties in an attack on an ally also remains relevant today, as can be seen in the deployment of ‘reassurance’ forces to east European NATO members, which deliberately enmeshes US interests with those of the allies.

Some US facilities, however, are forward-based on allied territory primarily for geographic reasons and serve the defence of the United States itself, rather than primarily the defence of its allies. Australia continues to host so-called ‘joint facilities’, including early warning and intelligence satellite ground stations and a submarine communications station, that were integral to the US global command and control system during the Cold War, and remain of central importance to

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the United States today. Denmark (in Greenland) and the United Kingdom also continue to host early warning radars that can detect attacks against the continental United States. Any attack on these facilities would equate to an attack on the United States that happened to take place on an ally’s soil. Even if few or no US military personnel might be affected by an attack on these facilities, a robust US reaction would thus be a virtual certainty, given the potential consequences for (and demonstrated adversary intent towards) the US homeland.

The need for a globally distributed architecture of sensors for the interception of ICBMs now provides far greater scope than in the past for US allies to similarly enmesh their own countries and facilities with the direct defence of the North American continent. Successful defence depends on early cueing of sensors, and rapid establishment of a reliable post-burnout track, for which sensors are best placed as close as possible to the early part of a missile’s trajectory. In some cases, this requirement will lead the United States to forward deploy its own systems on its allies’ territory—as is the case with radars in Japan, Israel and Turkey, for example. In other cases, however, allies’ national systems can also become part of US defences. Japan, for example, began to reverse a decades-old policy in 2006, when it began to share data from its large air defence radar network with the United States for missile defence purposes. As a result, any attack on the Japanese network would now also materially affect the US ability to defend its own territory and population. Exploiting similar opportunities in the case of other allies would both strengthen the credibility of US security guarantees and reduce the asymmetry inherent in US alliances.

This does not, of course, mean that traditional reasons for forward basing in alliances are not relevant for missile defence as well. For example, US plans for missile defence installations in Poland were welcomed by Warsaw for their trip-wire character, rather than for the associated missile defence capability itself. As defensive systems, missile defence capabilities are particularly useful to demonstrate alliance commitment in a generally non-threatening manner. US Aegis ships now provide missile defence patrols in Japan and the Mediterranean. The United States is also emplacing an Aegis Ashore system in Romania, with construction of a second one in Poland beginning soon. In the longer term, this raises questions of burden-sharing in the alliance. However, it is clear from the deployment of German and Dutch Patriot batteries to Turkey since 2012, and France’s procurement of Surface-to-Air Missile Platform / Terrain (SAMP/T) systems, that European allies are already able to make contributions for defence against shorter-range threats.

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19 Łukasz Kulesa, Poland and ballistic missile defense: the limits of Atlanticism, Proliferation Papers no. 48 (Paris: IFRI, 2014), p. 34.
Defending the territory and population of US allies

European NATO member states and Japan are thus both developing and fielding missile defence systems that involve complementary US and allied elements for defence against regional threats. However, developing technology and fielding force structure do not themselves address questions about the strategic effect that the United States and its allies seek to achieve through these programmes, and how regional missile defence relates to deterrence and decisions to intervene on other allies’ behalf. In the end, the effect of both US national and regional missile defence on extended deterrence has to be seen in the context of the adversary’s options for escalation, of perceptions by allies of the regional threats they face, and of their expectations and concerns about alliance guarantees.

At the 2010 Lisbon summit, NATO member countries reached political agreement to ‘develop the capability to defend our populations and territories against ballistic missile attack as a core element of our collective defence, which contributes to the indivisible security of our Alliance’.20 The summit declaration provided little guidance, however, on how missile defence would fit into NATO’s overall strategy:

The aim of a NATO missile defence capability is to provide full coverage and protection for all NATO European populations, territory and forces against the increasing threats posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles, based on the principles of the indivisibility of Allied security and NATO solidarity, equitable sharing of risks and burdens, as well as reasonable challenge, taking into account the level of threat, affordability and technical feasibility, and in accordance with the latest common threat assessments agreed by the Alliance.21

NATO expanded its work on developing a command and control backbone for missile defence, and NATO’s air defence system is evolving into a broader integrated air and missile defence system. However, while NATO’s command infrastructure is commonly funded, the alliance will still depend on individual member states’ national missile defence sensors and interceptors. Given the cost of acquiring and operating such capabilities, and the need that they be able to operate as part of an integrated alliance system, they should be a prime candidate for future pooling arrangements among NATO members.22 At this stage, however, only the United States has provided dedicated missile defence sensors and interceptors.

Although agreement in principle was reached in 2010, NATO members did not then give the answers to a whole range of strategic questions that are essential to provide political guidance for capability development and employment of the new missile defence capability by the alliance. How would the capability to defend against ballistic missiles relate to NATO’s offensive deterrence posture? What should ‘full coverage and protection for all NATO European populations, territory and forces’ mean in practice? And if permanent coverage or operation of certain assets were required, what should be the respective roles of local, NATO-operated, US and other allied forces and assets?

20 NATO, Active engagement, modern defence: Strategic Concept (Brussels, 2010), para. 19.
21 NATO, Lisbon summit declaration, 20 Nov. 2010, para 36.
Two years later, NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture Review provided the most expansive public statement yet on how missile defence fits into NATO strategy, stating that:

Missile defence can complement the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence; it cannot substitute for them. . . . It is expected that NATO’s missile defence capabilities would complicate an adversary’s planning, and provide damage mitigation. Effective missile defence could also provide valuable decision space in times of crisis. Like other weapons systems, missile defence capabilities cannot promise complete and enduring effectiveness. NATO missile defence capability, along with effective nuclear and conventional forces, will signal our determination to deter and defend against any threat from outside the Euro-Atlantic area to the safety and security of our populations.23

NATO’s development of an alliance-wide missile defence capability thus did not change its quest for collective security through deterrence based on a combination of defence and retaliatory capability. The review did not repeat the aim of ‘full coverage and protection’ set out in the 2010 summit declaration. The aims of ‘complicat[ing] an adversary’s planning and damage mitigation’ can be fulfilled with a more limited missile defence system that is not designed to intercept every incoming missile. How, then, will this limited system influence decisions about escalation, which remain the bedrock of extended deterrence in the alliance?

Addressing these questions is further complicated for the alliance because the creation of a permanent missile defence capability for European populations and territory remains an undertaking separate from the normal NATO defence planning process.24 Politically, the NATO consensus remains that the system should not be directed against Russia, but limited to threats from NATO’s south-eastern flank. And yet this is not the whole story, for some assets (for defence against shorter-range threats) are also included in the regular NATO defence planning process. This defines NATO requirements for the conduct of several smaller concurrent operations, or one very large operation (for the defence of the alliance against a large attack). While these requirements are ‘capability-based’, they are informed by the forces existing in NATO’s strategic environment. Accepting the condition of ‘mutual assured destruction’ with Russia thus does not mean that NATO can disregard questions about the influence of missile defence on possible common defence operations in the East. On a national level, Poland is already purchasing Patriot interceptors to provide integrated air and missile defence of its own territory, including against Russia’s Iskander short-range ballistic missiles.25 Alas, beyond the Readiness Action Plan of 2014, which seeks to create the capability for rapid reinforcement of allies by the NATO Response Force, NATO does not have a military strategy to address how it would handle escalation and deterrence in such a conflict.

25 Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, Crossing the Vistula river: the importance of the air and missile defence of Poland, PISM Bulletin no. 44 (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2015).
Managing escalation: political aspects of deployment and interception

The ability of a country to ride out limited attacks from ballistic missiles reduces political and operational pressures to escalate, especially through counter-force operations that would significantly increase the intensity of a conflict and its geographic scope. Hence, NATO explicitly refers to the current deployment of German, Dutch and US Patriot missile defence batteries to Turkey as ‘de-escalatory’, and the Iron Dome system has given Israel the ability to delay and limit ground incursions in response to rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. Before the decision to field a missile defence capability, the Japanese government reportedly considered acquisition of long-range cruise missiles and pre-emptive strikes on North Korean missile launch pads.

But not all escalation is unwanted—in the end, extended deterrence is itself based on threats of escalation. In this context, history demonstrates that allied perspectives on the same capability can be quite different. During the Cold War, European allies (especially West Germany) saw US tactical nuclear weapons assigned to NATO as a complement to US strategic nuclear forces, to be employed in a manner that would make the use of US strategic nuclear forces—the ultimate basis of NATO security—more likely. In contrast, the United States preferred to see them as substitutes for its strategic forces, and wanted them employed in a manner that would contain a conflict and reduce the risk of further escalation, which would have placed the United States itself directly at risk.

Shifting the balance between local offensive and defensive systems towards the latter increases the likelihood that hostilities may remain localized. This, in turn, reduces the pressure on the United States (and other major allies) to escalate to terminate a conflict. The basic asymmetry of interests lies in the fact that a limited war for the United States (and other more distant allies) is a war that is contained on the territory of their ally. Again, NATO has been here before during the Cold War, when West Germany resisted proposals to fortify the inner-German border, because to do so would have made it more likely that the devastation of a conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact would have been confined to German territory alone.

In this context, it is notable that the NATO Deterrence and Force Posture Review remarked that ‘missile defence could also provide valuable decision space in times of crisis’—a point that is also sometimes made by US officials in respect of the value of regional missile defence in Asia. From the perspective of those allies under threat, however, this is not an altogether comforting effect: after all, the main decision that other allies have to take is whether to make good their guarantees and to provide the kind of robust support that would end (rather than merely limit) a conflict.

Hence, while there will be situations where the de-escalatory influence of missile defence will be in the interests of both the United States and its local

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ally—as is the case with the deployment of Patriot batteries to Turkey today—that congruence of interests is not a given. In the case of so-called ‘hybrid’ warfare, which combines conventional (and nuclear) threats with covert action and deniable subversion, maintaining alliance cohesion while developing coherent and credible military responses is a particular challenge. 28 NATO reinforcement of the Baltic member states with air and missile defence assets could, for example, be interpreted by Moscow and the Baltic states themselves as a sign that NATO allies were concerned more about escalation than about the lower-level tensions that would have led to the deployment in the first place. And yet, if such assets were not already in place on a permanent basis to protect air- and seaports of debarkation, it might well make sense from a military point of view to send them at the onset of any allied deployment. As was the case with NATO’s plans for nuclear use in the Cold War, the details of operational planning for missile defence can thus assume a political significance that will become apparent only in a specific real-life context.

Possible disagreements in this area are not limited to whether and when to deploy missile defence systems, but may also concern how they should be used. The 2010 US Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR) acknowledged that ‘perhaps the most important’ challenge for US missile defence was that regional demand for US BMD assets is likely to exceed supply … Today there are thousands of ballistic missiles and hundreds of launchers in countries other than Russia, China, the United States, and NATO members … Against this threat, the United States currently has only a few hundred defensive short-range interceptors deployed in multiple regions.29

The Israeli missile defence system is set up only to intercept missiles whose trajectory ends in built-up areas, and the US BMDR hints at a similar approach to conserving interceptors, stating that:

It is not necessary that the United States be able to negate every deployable missile in an enemy’s arsenal. Our forces must be able to protect what we and our partners value. These include … population centers … as well as military capabilities essential for prevailing in a conflict.30

And yet, faced with offensive missiles that are more precise and allies’ territories that are more densely populated than is the case in the Middle East, it is more likely that choices would have to be made: to defend population centres or military capabilities. The consequences of this potential dilemma are most pressing in East Asia, where Chinese ballistic missiles are a major threat to air bases and carriers—the basis of US military power. The region is a priority area for US missile defence, but ‘although this forward array of assets is impressive, when broken

30 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Ballistic Missile Defense Review, p. 27.
down between the homeland defense mission and the regional defense mission, [US] resources quickly spread themselves thin’. 31

Limited active defences are useful to negate Chinese (and North Korean) options for limited use of force, but plausible numbers of US interceptors are simply insufficient to defeat a major Chinese attack, or to sustain protracted attrition. 32 Long-range strikes against the Chinese mainland could compensate for this weakness, but they would themselves be escalatory, and an important option in managing intra-war deterrence. 33 If such strikes could be limited to missile bases that were being used to attack US forces and allies, they would not escalate the conflict beyond a level already set by Chinese attacks themselves. Historical experience with the difficulty of finding mobile launchers in the 1991 Gulf War, however, and the need to suppress China’s air defence system to enable such attacks, make it doubtful that such strikes could remain both limited and effective. And any large-scale campaign against China’s missile forces might well be misperceived in China as an attempt to reduce the country’s nuclear deterrent forces.

Given the risks of further escalation, the United States would thus be desperate in any conflict between Japan and China to conserve interceptors, so as to delay the moment at which it would have to decide whether to conduct extensive strikes against the Chinese mainland. Japan’s priority, in contrast, would be to limit the damage from the war already occurring in (or around) its territory, which would push it to argue for an intensification and extension of the US campaign.

Given this asymmetry of interests, decisions about what targets to defend with limited interceptor numbers, and what not to defend, become freighted with significant political implications and consequence. Put bluntly, whereas it is likely that Japan would want to intercept Chinese missiles aimed at Japanese civilian targets, to do so would only bring closer the moment at which allied interceptor arsenals are depleted, other national offensive capabilities have to be brought to bear, and major escalation by the United States might become necessary to avoid defeat. Attacks against the general metropolitan area in Tokyo would matter far less to the United States than attacks against Yokota Air Base, for example, as a coercive Chinese campaign of attacks on Japanese infrastructure would present far less pressure for escalation for the United States than Chinese attacks aimed at destroying US military forces. This difference, however, would be far less meaningful for Japan. As during the Cold War, the basic question is whether the ability to defend should be a complement to, or a substitute for, escalation by the United States. What sounds like a theoretical question has to be answered, however, if allies are to agree on rules of engagement for the prosecution of a joint missile defence campaign.

Conclusion: missile defence and alliance strategy

The extension of missile defence screens to defend the US homeland and the territory of US allies in Europe and Asia is an unequivocal positive for the West. Even if they are limited, they provide options to control escalation in conflicts with both rogue states and major powers that were not available before. Yet agreeing on the benefit of missile defence in principle is not the same as seeing eye to eye on where and how it should relate to the use of other conventional or nuclear forces in an overall strategy: abstract political agreement and detailed technical cooperation can still hide significant strategic differences between the allies. The introduction of missile defence capabilities into US alliances does not cause the difficulties of managing extended deterrence; but neither does it necessarily make them any easier to resolve, because the relative cost and benefit from escalation will still differ among allies.

On the one hand, it is unlikely that the consequences of any such disagreement between the allies will become as grave as NATO’s Cold War disagreements on nuclear escalation could have been. But, on the other hand, it is far more likely that NATO—or the United States and its Asian allies—will one day have to face the practical implications of such disagreements. Decisions on missile defence deployment, positioning and rules of engagement need to be addressed at the onset of a regional crisis, not once the unthinkable has happened. The United States and its allies in Asia and Europe should therefore consider the following steps to reinforce common security, reduce disagreement in crisis situations and strengthen deterrence through missile defence cooperation.

The guidance in NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture Review on the role of missile defence is a useful clarification of the strategic concept, but it is less specific than a military strategy that could guide NATO operational planning for deliberate escalation. The Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) was created during the Cold War to analyse and negotiate the political aspects of managing nuclear escalation. Often considered a leftover from the Cold War, and somewhat hampered by France’s continued abstention from participation, the NPG has now been given new energy thanks to the decision to study the implications of Russian nuclear doctrine for NATO’s nuclear posture. Such a study should also include consideration of the role that missile defence might play as part of NATO’s adaptation, especially in so far as the provision in the NATO–Russia Founding Act that NATO does not see ‘any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy’ remains relevant. NATO might, for example, consider making its decision not to direct its permanent missile defence capability against Russia conditional on Russian adherence to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces

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34 Richard Betts wrote that: ‘For decades, the bedrock of NATO military strategy made no good sense, but no alternative could be found that would not divide the alliance. The key to the apparent success of NATO strategy (winning the Cold War without firing a shot) was obfuscation of the strategy’s bad sense.’ See R. K. Betts, *US National Security Strategy: Lenses and Landmarks* (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, 2004), pp. 22–3.

(INF) treaty: aside from the political leverage such a declaration would provide, the SM-3 interceptors that currently form the basis of this capability would also technically be a relevant system to defend against a new intermediate-range ballistic (although not cruise) missile capability that Russia might field.

This does not, however, mean that missile defence cooperation can be considered a substitute for current nuclear sharing arrangements. Missile defence is a capability of first, not last, resort. Nuclear sharing mitigates the inherent asymmetry in the alliance that arises from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In contrast, missile defence has little bearing on the fact that some NATO members forswore the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Pretending that it carries a significance similar to that of nuclear cooperation would reinforce, not reduce, European dependence on US missile defence capabilities. It would also make it more, not less, complicated to work through the actual strategic implications of deploying missile defence capabilities for common defence operations.

Having agreed in the 2010 Strategic Concept to defend alliance populations and territory through missile defence, NATO members should recognize that protection of the US homeland is as congruent with this aim as is the defence of European allies, and that integrating the defence of Europe with that of North America could introduce a new element of reciprocity that would be of symbolic as much as practical importance. There is no need to assign the global US system to NATO, any more than there has been to assign the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) to it. But where NATO member states have the ability through their geography, or through ancillary uses of national capabilities, to make contributions to the defence of the United States itself, enabling them to do so through the NATO system would strengthen the perception of indivisible security in the alliance. Political agreement in the North Atlantic Council would provide the basis for resolution of detailed issues, such as the tasking of in-theatre sensors that could support NATO as well as national US operations.

Enmeshing US national and NATO missile defence would also encourage the United States to give more explicit consideration to the alliance implications of its national programme. The Bush administration’s plans to locate GBI in Poland would have provided for the defence of the western hemisphere as well as north-western Europe. When the Obama administration dropped this plan in favour of the European Phased Adaptive Approach based on the SM-3 interceptor, the notional phase four promised to maintain the link between the defence of Europe and the US homeland. However, technologically this was always improbable and it has since been dropped. If the United States were to locate a third US base for GBI on the US eastern seaboard, as is now being considered, it would be walking away from a transatlantic approach that two successive administrations at least nominally supported. This would not be in the interest of the European NATO allies, who should seek to engage the US administration and Congress—through, for example, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—to consider a European basing option as well.

For defence against shorter-range missiles, NATO should consider missile defence as a priority for the pooling of assets under the Smart Defence Initiative, perhaps including the United States as well as European members, and should examine where such assets could best be deployed to strengthen alliance deterrence. The case for pooling is not merely economic but also political, representing as it does a prominent investment in capabilities for collective defence. Moreover, as discussed above, deploying missile defence in crises may send contradictory signals to both allies and adversaries. The requirements for, and timing of, the deployment of missile defence capabilities in contingency plans should thus be considered in the location of such assets. Pooled funding in a voluntary arrangement between regional NATO member countries might also be the most feasible way to create a permanent presence of Patriot batteries, or similar assets, in the Baltic countries, which could provide persistent protection for air- and seaports for use by NATO rapid reaction forces without violating the promise in the NATO–Russia Founding Act not to forward base NATO forces.

In East Asia, missile defence cooperation between Japan and the United States is in many ways more advanced, and deeper (because also extending to the co-development and co-production of interceptors), than it is in NATO. None of the US alliances in Asia, however, have much experience of negotiating the strategic aspects of escalation in the way that NATO developed during the Cold War. Instead, planning for joint operations for the common defence tended to be dominated by the United States (in the case of South Korea), consciously parallel and separate rather than integrated (in the case of Japan) or simply non-existent (in the case of Australia). Both Japan and South Korea have, however, sought more formal dialogue with the United States on nuclear and deterrence policies in recent years. Detailed examination of missile defence by senior officials, reporting back to political leaders, would be a useful way to address the implications of emerging capabilities, and at the same time to develop mechanisms for closer alliance cooperation. Indeed, the announcement of a new ‘Alliance Coordination Mechanism’ in the April 2015 US–Japan defence guidelines takes the US–Japan relationship one step further in this direction.37

Advancing missile defence in US alliances in this manner will allow the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia to maximize the strategic benefit from missile defence by building on the political agreements and technical advances of recent years. There is no way around the fact, however, that addressing the strategic issues of escalation management that arise from this new capability will require political attention to the operational aspects of joint planning, including against the Great Powers China and Russia. In the end, neither summit declarations supporting missile defence nor the development of joint battle management architectures are a substitute for an agreed allied strategy.
