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Missile Defense Versus Deterrence: A Troubling Dichotomy

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Article. This article describes fallacies in contrasting anti-ballistic missile defense with nuclear deterrence as mutually exclusive constructs.

Much of the public discourse on the United States (US) initiatives to deploy some sort of anti-ballistic missile defense--from the limited national to comprehensive international varieties--portrays a dichotomy of defense versus deterrence. In this portrayal, deterrence is constructed as current US strategy (and that of the other nuclear powers) to prevent a nuclear war, while missile defense is constructed as a disruption of business as usual and necessarily mutually exclusive to deterrence. This alleged dichotomy does not stand up to reasoned analysis.

Deterrence is a psychological construct. It denotes that a behavior that otherwise might be engaged in--attacking with nuclear weapons--is not being engaged in. (At times, deterrence denotes that antecedent behaviors causally related to attacking with nuclear weapons or requisite behavioral intentions--or other putative intrapsychic phenomena antecedent and causally related to attacking with nuclear weapons--are not being engaged in.) How is deterrence effected? One way is to develop offensive nuclear weapons capabilities and a concurrent strategic policy delineating when and how these weapons will be used. Such offensive nuclear weapons can include nuclear devices on or within ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, bombs, depth charges, artillery shells, etc. employed from various platforms in the air and/or on sea and land. Such strategic policies can delineate to the minutest detail, in the vaguest way, or even via the most opaque bordering on the unknowable.

Another way deterrence can be effected is through the development of defensive capabilities and a concurrent strategic policy on when and how these capabilities will be used. Defensive capabilities usually include systems of radar, sensors, communications, missiles, other "kill vehicles," and lasers employed in space, in the air, and/or on sea and land. Defensive strategic policies also vary by degree of detail. Unlike offensive capabilities, defensive capabilities are associated with much more dubiousness as to their feasibility by technology, cost, and political implications--including their effects on deterrence.

In any case, defensive capabilities--as offensive ones--are vehicles towards the intentional and/or unintentional influence of deterrence. Specifically, each can be used to strengthen or weaken deterrence. Thus, the setting of missile defense at odds with deterrence is problematic from a logical point of view. As well, this setting at odds conveys a message that missile defense necessarily contributes to the failure of deterrence. Even if this message is logically and technically incorrect, it can change reality as it changes perception--as perception becomes reality--and thus can become correct through the inexorable logic of its illogic and technical insufficiency. As the opponents of missile defense relentlessly make their case, they ensure their argumentative success and, perhaps, help deterrence fail. The ultimate Pyrrhic victory? (See Blight, J.G. (1992). Nuclear crisis psychologies: Still "crazy" (and still irrelevant) after all these years. In P. Suedfeld & P.E. Tetlock (Eds.), *Psychology and social policy* (pp. 83-93). New York, NY, USA: Hemisphere Publishing Corp.; Brown, S. E., & Esbensen, F-A. (1988). Thoughts of deterrence: Evolution of a theoretical perspective. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and*

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