



Forum for American Leadership

How Biden's Missile Defense Review Can Succeed

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Since the [Obama Administration in 2010](#), it has become a practice for each new Administration to put its own stamp on U.S. missile defense policy (as it does on nuclear policy). In its Missile Defense Review (MDR), the Biden Administration should be careful to avoid a repeat of its predecessors' mistakes by issuing a missile defense strategy and policy that can last beyond the next Presidential election and continue policies and programs that will strengthen U.S. national security.

Obama and Trump Administrations' MDRs - The Good and the Bad:

The Obama Administration unhelpfully [cancelled](#) several cutting-edge missile defense technology development programs in development under President Bush – including the Airborne Laser and Multiple Kill Vehicle – and [pulled the rug out from under our Polish and Czech allies](#) by [cancelling the Third Site](#) in order to obtain [favorable consideration from Russia](#) on the successor to the START I agreement, which became known as the New START Treaty. Rather than translating into goodwill with our adversaries, the stalled development of missile defenses coincided with increasing threats around the world during President Obama's tenure.

The [Trump Administration's 2019 MDR](#) provided a sound outline for how strengthened missile defense applies to contemporary security challenges.

- It rightly prioritized the defense of the U.S. homeland with additional planned interceptors, while also outlining an ambitious plan to improve regional active defenses, to support allies abroad against the range of ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic threats.
- It included the need to integrate attack operations into the broader missile defense strategy in case deterrence and diplomacy fail.
- It rejected the notion of negotiating away missile defense for progress on nuclear arms control. This is especially important to make clear when adversaries like Russia and China seek to curtail U.S. missile defenses, while developing and deploying their own.
- It emphasized the importance of space to the U.S. missile defense mission. Sensors in space can provide “birth to death” tracking that is critical against sophisticated missiles that fly at hypersonic speeds and with unpredictable flight patterns.
- And, it wisely commended the study of basing interceptors in outer space, noting that space-basing could provide potential advantages like reducing the number of interceptors required to defeat enemy missiles as well as intercepting enemy missiles over the enemy's territory, which could contribute to deterrence. This would be an important step in the fulfillment of President Reagan's legacy.

Despite its positive attributes, the Trump MDR was both overly ambitious in its aims relative to the political leadership's attention to the missile defense mission, and lacking in specific plans, budgetary resources, and timelines that could have guided the Pentagon and industry. The result was that the MDR did not effectively augment actions to improve the nation's missile defense systems. Without leadership and budget requests commensurate with the MDR's ambitions, the Trump MDR became little more than a statement of policy aspiration after its publication.

Opportunities for the Biden Administration: Avoid the Risks of Partisanship and Ideological Rigidity

The Biden Administration's MDR will need to contend with an unprecedented threat environment. North Korea is continuing to build its arsenal of weapons (nuclear warheads and missiles) to strike the U.S. homeland and those of America's allies. Iran is hugging the line of a nuclear enrichment breakout capability (albeit with an unclear weaponization breakout capability), to blackmail the West for economic sanctions relief, while continuing to advance its long-range ballistic missile capability. Indeed, North Korea and Iran appear to have resumed ballistic missile cooperation, [according to the United Nations](#).

China and Russia are in the midst of an arms race, with China undertaking a "brehtaking" nuclear breakout according to senior U.S. military leadership. Both countries have and are modernizing their vast ballistic missile inventories with weapons of all ranges, and are deploying new hypersonic glide vehicle weapons and cruise missiles launched from ground, air, or sea. And, in August China [demonstrated a type of nuclear weapon not seen since the Soviet Union's arsenal of the Cold War](#).

FAL's Recommendations:

To address the increasingly complex missile threat environment, the Biden Administration, if interested in establishing a lasting consensus on missile defense, should prioritize the following policies in its Missile Defense Review, starting with a fundamental focus on the greatest threats to U.S. and allied national security, the militaries of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation:

- Bury the obsolete Cold War policy of deliberate vulnerability to Russian and Chinese missile threats to the U.S. homeland. A post-Cold War U.S. missile defense policy to address these threats, combined with sufficient funding, can complement the U.S. nuclear arsenal in deterring a limited attack on the homeland while limiting damage if deterrence fails. By prioritizing a peer or near-peer competitor, U.S. missile defenses could continue to outpace the rogue state threat. The Administration must not abandon such pacing in favor of relying on nuclear deterrence alone.
- Reverse the decline in the Missile Defense Agency budget from the [FY2022 budget request](#).
- Rebut and refuse Russian and Chinese claims that U.S. missile defenses are a threat to them – certainly no more than their missile defenses are a threat to the United States. Make clear that the U.S. will not agree to limitations as part of an arms control agreement or otherwise.

- Deploy a layered defense of the homeland, including by deploying the SM-3 IIA interceptor, which has been successfully demonstrated against an ICBM-class target.
- Continue to field modernized capabilities--including the Next Generation Interceptor--for the only homeland defense capability we currently have, the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system.
- Accelerate deployment of space-based sensors that persistently track all types of missiles from birth to death of flight.
- Invest in defense of hypersonic glide vehicles and cruise missiles, whether deployed against the homeland or regional targets (like our allies in Asia or the U.S. territory of Guam). Develop and deploy a Guam Defense System without further delay. Assign responsibility to a lead military service for the defense of key power projection bases, like Kadena Air Base.
- Invest in future technologies, like directed energy, boost phase intercept, and space-based interceptors.
- Maintain current MDA acquisition and requirements authorities which ensure the United States can acquire its missile defenses in time to deter current and future threats.

While Americans are increasingly concerned about domestic political divisions and divisiveness, there continues to be strong bipartisan support for the U.S. military and a strong national defense. There is no reason to make national security or missile defense partisan. By following the recommendations outlined above and learning from the mistakes of President Obama and President Trump alike, the Biden Administration can set U.S. missile defense policy and capabilities on solid footing for the long-term.

Additional Reading:

Heritage Foundation – [How the Upcoming Missile Defense Review can make America Safer](#)

Breaking Defense – [To make up for years of slow policy decisions, MDA needs more cash](#)

DoD Factsheet – [Russian and Chinese Missile Defense](#)

DoD Factsheet – [Layered Homeland Missile Defense](#)

NIPP – [Folly of Limiting U.S. Missile Defenses for Nuclear Arms Control](#)

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