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## US Strategic Culture, Homeland Ballistic Missile Defense, and Mutual Vulnerability


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**US STRATEGIC CULTURE, HOMELAND BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE, AND  
MUTUAL VULNERABILITY**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Jacob Blank

December 2022

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# **US STRATEGIC CULTURE, HOMELAND BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE, AND MUTUAL VULNERABILITY**

Defense and Strategic Studies

Missouri State University, December 2022

Master of Science

Jacob Blank

## **ABSTRACT**

Strategic scholars have long understood the indispensable linkage between culture and security policymaking. By shaping the perceptions through which decision-makers formulate security policy, strategic culture analysis adds vital context to the perilously difficult science of understanding and predicting state security outputs. One area where this analytical framework fails to generate the expected result is American missile defense policy. Salient themes of US strategic culture, including an optimistic and problem-solving mindset, positive role of machines, and ahistorical exceptionalism, are reflected in the American way of war – a technologically driven, leadership casualty averse, moralistic, apolitical, and firepower focused enterprise. These factors would strongly indicate a preference for comprehensive deterrence by denial measures, most prominently homeland ballistic missile defense (BMD), to protect American lives in the case of deterrence failure or catastrophic accident. However, such preferences have failed to consistently materialize over three-quarters of a century of missile defense policymaking. Instead, the US has often settled for a strategy of mutual vulnerability synonymous with the theory of Thomas Schelling’s “balance of terror” and Robert McNamara’s mutually assured destruction (MAD) philosophy. While the US has slowly accepted more expansive attitudes regarding BMD, including decades of bipartisan consensus regarding its necessity vis-à-vis “rogue states,” MAD continues to dominate the approach to Russian and Chinese missile arsenals. Despite the disconnect between culture and security outputs, little scholarship exists to explain this incongruity. This thesis advances three possible theories to fill this research gap, including the requirement of compromise in forming policy in a pluralistic democracy, the lack of ballistic missile threat immediacy to the general American public, and the concerted effort of US adversaries to manipulate the international and domestic perceptions of US missile defense efforts. The enduring influence of MAD on BMD policy in spite of a dearth of cultural support indicates that progress of future missile defense efforts will likely depend upon the ability of policymakers to communicate the utility of damage limitation measures to deterrence and connect the benefits of expanded missile defense to deeply held American values.

**KEYWORDS:** strategic culture, missile defense, mutually assured destruction, deterrence, strategic stability

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture is an indispensable element of strategic policymaking. From Sun Tzu to Carl von Clausewitz, renowned theorists of strategic studies have consistently noted the importance of cultural considerations in the conduct of warfare and the shaping of national security outputs. Clausewitz considered the relationship between the psychological and physical factors facing a state or armed force as “an organic whole which, unlike a metal alloy, is inseparable by chemical processes.”<sup>1</sup> Such insights lacked a dedicated field of study until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Jack Snyder coined the term “strategic culture” in 1977 as part of an effort to explain the differing nuclear behavior between the US and Soviet Union. The roughly fifty years since Snyder’s work has seen continuous scholarship on the influence of strategic culture on the security outputs of a given state.

Despite widespread consensus on salient aspects of American strategic culture, as this thesis will demonstrate below, there is one area of policy that fails to generate the expected result – missile defense. Strong emphases on technological innovation, optimistic and problem-solving mentality, positive approach to machines and engineering, and other elements of American strategic culture point decisively toward comprehensive missile defense, yet, the US has consciously chosen to remain vulnerable to the overwhelming majority of adversary ballistic missiles since the signing of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 1972.<sup>2</sup> The incongruity between US strategic culture and mutual vulnerability required by the mutually assured

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<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1976), 184.

<sup>2</sup> Keith B. Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020), 127–30.



destruction (MAD) approach has failed to eradicate this concept from portions of the defense policymaking community. In the words of Ronald C. Tocci, the lingering specter of MAD “remains the driving intellectual force upon which much of the opposition constructs its several different public arguments as to why missile defense is ‘unworkable’ or ‘dangerous’ or ‘provocative’ or ‘threatening’ or ‘destabilizing’ or ‘wasteful’.”<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, as this thesis will demonstrate, US strategic culture is more consistent with deterrence by denial measures, such as missile defense, than mutual vulnerability typical of an assured destruction approach; however, mutual vulnerability has played a disproportionate role in guiding US security policy since the Cold War.

This thesis will explore the divergence between the expected and actualized outcomes of US missile defense policy through a strategic culture framework, as well as discuss the role of MAD in this process. In doing so, this work will fill a current gap in scholarship on the relationship between US strategic culture and missile defense. Regarding structure, Chapter One provides an overview and background understanding of the strategic culture analytical framework. Chapter Two applies this framework to the US, highlighting salient influences on US strategic culture and discussing their manifestations in national style and preferred American “way of war.” Chapter Three examines the origins of the MAD theory and analyzes its impact on US missile defense policy through a historical survey. Chapter Four explores the disconnect between US strategic culture and missile defense policy, offering several theories for the incongruity. Chapter Five summarizes the findings, offers brief recommendations for future research, and considers implications for US security policymakers.

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<sup>3</sup> “Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century” (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2009), 73, [http://www.space-library.com/0902IFPA\\_IWG2009.pdf](http://www.space-library.com/0902IFPA_IWG2009.pdf).

## CHAPTER ONE

### STRATEGIC CULTURE OVERVIEW

Culture is a pervasive element of human decision-making. While notoriously difficult to pin down in a concise description, nearly all definitions of culture contain an element of shared cognitive perceptions that influence one's interaction with their environment.<sup>4</sup> As foreign policy elites are encultured by their human nature, it is logical to assume that such perceptual preferences shape strategic policymaking as well. Driven by a community's historical experiences, religious influences, geographic location, access to resources, and societal and political structures, strategic culture affects a state's decisions in the preparation and conduct of war.<sup>5</sup> This cultural influence manifests in differing methods of decision-making, threat perceptions, theories of victory and defeat, national identity, perceptions of time, importance of honor, and success in modern styles of warfare, among others.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to its root discipline of culture, decades of scholarship on strategic culture have produced a multitude of definitions to choose from. Jack Snyder's landmark study from 1977 argued that strategic culture constituted the "sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired

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<sup>4</sup> Anand V., "Revisiting the Discourse on Strategic Culture: An Assessment of the Conceptual Debates," *Strategic Analysis* 44, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2020.1787684>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken, "United States Strategic Culture," in *Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum Project: Assessing Strategic Culture as a Methodological Approach to Understanding WMD Decision-Making by States and Non-State Actors*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen (Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, 2006), 3, <https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/us.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Kerry M. Kartchner, "Introduction to Strategic Culture" (PowerPoint, Missouri State University, 2021), 5–7.

through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy.”<sup>7</sup> Colin S. Gray defined the concept as the “modes of thought and action with respect to force... strategic culture provides the milieu within which strategic ideas and defense policy decisions are debated and decided.”<sup>8</sup> Alastair Ian Johnston described strategic culture as the “shared assumptions and decision rules that impose a degree of order on individual and group conceptions of their relationship to their social, organizational or political environment... an ideational milieu which limits behavior choices.” While all of the preceding definitions have merit, this paper will use the following description for strategic culture: “Shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.”<sup>9</sup>

### **History of the Strategic Culture Framework**

While strategic scholars and practitioners have long noted the influence of intangible, psychological elements in the state’s conduct of warfare, strategic culture as an analytical framework is most closely derived from the studies of “national character” during World War Two. In some of the first known social scientific works to measure cultural influences on security outputs, the national character studies “defined the roots of nation’s character, or culture,

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<sup>7</sup> Jack L. Snyder, “The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations” (RAND Corporation, September 1977), 8, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2154.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Nuclear Strategy and National Style” (Washington, D.C.: Defense Nuclear Agency, July 31, 1981), 59–60, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA133216.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Kerry M. Kartchner, “Summary Report of the Comparative Strategic Culture: Phase II Kickoff Workshop” (Washington, D.C.: Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, February 13, 2006).

in language, religion, customs, socialization, and the interpretation of common memories.”<sup>10</sup>

Such efforts were undertaken to better understand the drivers of militarism that befell the societies of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany during the Second World War, however, the methodological rigor of these studies was deficient and racial stereotyping mired potential insights.<sup>11</sup>

Lacking a foundational construct, this discipline received only sporadic attention until the peak of the Cold War in the 1970s. During this time, US theorists were growing concerned that the Soviet Union was harboring ideas about nuclear weapons that sharply contrasted with their Western counterparts. Despite reassurances from many in the defense community about the “universal logic of deterrence,” there were those who argued that *cultural* differences between the US and the Soviet Union could drive each state to very different conclusions on the feasibility of nuclear warfighting. In recognition of this unsettling reality, Jack Snyder published his 1977 study, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, and permanently elevated the strategic culture approach in the discourse of security studies. In opposition to the realist theory of state behavior being purely reflective of its strategic environment, Snyder’s work identified historical, organizational, and political influences as drivers of Soviet decision-making.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Snyder cautioned against the assumption “that Soviet crisis decisionmakers will be willing to tailor their behavior to American notions of strategic rationality” and demonstrated a Soviet preference for “unilateral damage limitation by

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey S. Lantis, “Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism,” in *Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum Project: Assessing Strategic Culture as a Methodological Approach to Understanding WMD Decision-Making by States and Non-State Actors*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen (Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, 2006), 3, <https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/stratcult-claus.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> V., “Revisiting the Discourse on Strategic Culture,” 196.

<sup>12</sup> Snyder, “The Soviet Strategic Culture,” 38.

means of unrestrained counterforce strikes and... passive and active defenses.”<sup>13</sup> These findings posed a direct challenge to the mirror-image laden assumptions about Soviet nuclear strategy that were prevalent throughout the US security apparatus and launched four generations of scholarship to explore this concept in relation to all security outputs, not just nuclear strategy.

The first wave of strategic culture theory can be found in the writings of Snyder, Fritz Ermarth, Colin S. Gray, Ken Booth, and David Jones in the late 1970s and early 80s. This generation generally regarded strategic culture as a “semi-permanent influence on policy shaped by elites and socialized into distinctive modes of thought.”<sup>14</sup> This culture provided the context in which perceptions, attitudes, and ideas influenced the development of state policy.<sup>15</sup> Molded by differences in historical experience, geography, and political culture, the first generation postulated that the strategic cultures of the US and Soviet Union would logically drive each state to different conclusions regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD) policy. Thus, overconfidence in notions of strategic stability based on a Western-centric worldview of nuclear force requirements or arms control was a dangerous undertaking.<sup>16</sup> While the first generation did not believe that culture dominated the decision-making calculus at all times, this variable was too important to be absent from the discussion of state security behavior.

Rejecting the amount of influence ascribed to strategic culture by the first generation, second-wave scholars argued that strategic culture should be best understood as a way for the

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<sup>13</sup> Snyder, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Lantis, “Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism,” 6.

<sup>15</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 54.

<sup>16</sup> Fritz W. Ermarth, “Contrasts in American and Soviet Strategic Thought,” *International Security* 3, no. 2 (1978): 154.

state to legitimize the use of force in pursuit of hegemony.<sup>17</sup> These theorists, such as Bradley S. Klein, postulated that states were not bound by strategic culture into deterministic paths of behavior. Rather, they were free to deceive other states with declaratory strategies that aligned with portrayed elements of their strategic culture that ran counter to true operational plans.<sup>18</sup> To exemplify this dichotomous relationship, Klein argued that American nuclear declaratory policy was presented to the public through a defensive lens, yet, US “action policy” consists of “active counterforce war-fighting.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the second generation’s characterization of strategic culture as a political tool for foreign policy elites removed much of the casual linkage established by the first generation.

The 1990s saw the rise of the third wave of strategic culture scholarship, which attempted to fuse constructivism and culture research into a narrower approach that focused on specific strategic decisions and emphasized methodological rigor and falsifiable results.<sup>20</sup> For third generation theorists, such as Alastair Ian Johnston and Theo Farrell, the first two generations suffered from a few notable shortcomings. Johnston criticized the first generation for “mechanical determinism,” a rejection of instrumentality and malleability of strategic culture by foreign policy elites, and lack of observable boundaries for determining a state’s strategic culture.<sup>21</sup> In response to the work of the second wave, Johnston was unimpressed by the lack of linkage between strategic discourse and state behavior as well as the assumption that elites were

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<sup>17</sup> Bradley S. Klein, “Hegemony and Strategic Culture: American Power Projection and Alliance Defence Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988): 136.

<sup>18</sup> V., “Revisiting the Discourse on Strategic Culture,” 198.

<sup>19</sup> Klein, “Hegemony and Strategic Culture,” 138.

<sup>20</sup> Rashed Uz Zaman, “Strategic Culture: A ‘Cultural’ Understanding of War,” *Comparative Strategy* 28, no. 1 (February 18, 2009): 78–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930802679785>.

<sup>21</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “Thinking about Strategic Culture,” *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995): 37–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119>.

free from the constraints of encultured behavior.<sup>22</sup> To remedy these misconceptions, Johnston attempted to formulate a theory of strategic culture that was “distinguishable from non-strategic culture variables” to demonstrate how the concept provides “decision-makers with a uniquely ordered set of strategic choices from which we can derive predictions about behavior.”<sup>23</sup> In order to apply this methodology, third-generation scholars were forced to separate the variables of culture and behavior, which drew sharp critique from Gray and launched a lengthy scholarly contest between the two theories.

The fourth generation, a product of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, pointed to the influence of strategic sub-cultures in the decision-making process. Scholars such as Jeffrey Lantis and Alan Bloomfield rejected the monolithic interpretations of a given state’s strategic culture common among the previous waves and argued instead that the strategic sub-culture that can best address the challenges of the time will become dominant among the multitude.<sup>24</sup>

### **Why Strategic Culture Analysis is Necessary**

While substantial differences exist between the approaches of the various waves of strategic culture scholarship, the discipline as a whole adds a valuable tool to IR scholarship in a time where previously held assumptions about state behavior are being heavily challenged. One such example is the school of neorealism. Despite its popularity among Western theorists, neorealism has failed to account for significant differences in state behavior despite similar structural factors. Too heavy a reliance on the realist approach, neatly categorizing states as black boxes who simply react in accordance with Western held standards of behavior to the

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<sup>22</sup> Johnston, 40–41.

<sup>23</sup> Johnston, 45.

<sup>24</sup> V., “Revisiting the Discourse on Strategic Culture,” 198.

changing security environment, will lead to surprises. Such was the case in the Yom Kippur War in 1973, where balance of power considerations were rejected in favor of the Thucydidean conception of honor. To this end, Henry Kissinger admitted that “our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of Egypt and Syria starting an unwinnable war to restore self-respect.”<sup>25</sup> The contemporary international environment is rife with actors who value religion, honor, reputation, national pride, prestige, and other factors that simply cannot be accounted for under the realist approach.<sup>26</sup> Thus, strategic culture allows for more nuanced explanation and prediction of state behavior through consideration of a diverse suite of influences.

A culturally conscious form of analysis is made ever more valuable in the complex, increasingly hostile security environment facing American policymakers today. At least some of this antipathy is a result of US ignorance or disregard for differences in context between Western and non-Western societies. This tendency to mirror-image has given rise to growing anti-American sentiment worldwide, posing a direct challenge to US soft power and weakening a critical component of the American global alliance network.<sup>27</sup> The abject failures of nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated that continued US hegemon status will depend, in part, on its ability to wield influence smartly. Brute force attempts to overcome cultural differences are unlikely to yield promising results in the protracted Global War on Terror or coalition building in an era of renewed great power competition. Put simply, “The changing nature of warfare requires a deeper understanding of adversary culture. To defeat non-Western

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Year of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1982), 465; quoted in Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> Kartchner, “Introduction to Strategic Culture,” 3.

<sup>27</sup> “Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication” (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense For Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, September 2004), 15, <https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dsb/commun.pdf>.



opponents... we need to improve our capacity to understand foreign cultures.”<sup>28</sup>

In sum, strategic culture analysis adds vital context to the perilously difficult science of understanding and predicting state security outputs. Treading dangerously close to the hazardous field of common sense: culture matters in decision-making. While it may not be the only factor in play, culture provides the lens through which similar information can be perceived in dramatically different ways. Gray argues, “Culture provides us with the assumptions, largely unspoken and unwritten, that are the foundation for, though not the sole determinants of, our judgments. Culture yields us the truths, small and large, that we know should guide our decisions and actions.”<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that this approach is not necessarily mutually exclusive with other theories of IR, rather, strategic culture analysis may provide the foundational understanding why some societies behave in accordance with a chosen model and others do not.

### **Strategic Culture in Practice**

Despite the appeal to the much-maligned world of common sense, strategic cultural analysis remains a methodologically challenging enterprise. The elusive nature of culture as a variable that escapes isolation makes the cultural scholar’s task difficult. Notwithstanding such apparent obstacles, it is important to heed Gray’s warning about Johnston’s argument and not miss the forest for the trees. Lack of absolute methodological hygiene in a cultural exercise must

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<sup>28</sup> Montgomery McFate, “The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 2005, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Out of the Wilderness: Prime-Time for Strategic Culture,” in *Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum Project: Assessing Strategic Culture as a Methodological Approach to Understanding WMD Decision-Making by States and Non-State Actors*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen (Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, 2006), 12.

not condemn such studies to irrelevancy.<sup>30</sup> Instead, simple roadmaps to guide scholarship in this discipline can yield consistent results without becoming constrained by experimental scrupulousness. Reduced to its most basic form, the strategic culture analytical framework focuses on three primary areas: sources of strategic culture, or inputs, the functional influence of these drivers on a given group, and the manifestations of strategic culture in the form of security outputs.<sup>31</sup>

Strategic culture flows from a diverse set of inputs. William Kincade postulates that a given state's "geo-strategic situation, resources, history and military experience, and political beliefs" are integral to the formation of strategy.<sup>32</sup> Kerry M. Kartchner adds religion and the impact of interacting with other strategic cultures to this list.<sup>33</sup> Taken in concert, these inputs create the context in which decision preferences and psychological perceptions are shaped. The individual value of the various influences will vary to a given society based on its unique experiences throughout history. For example, Germany's military history during the Second World War has played a dominant role in shaping its contemporary strategic culture, whereas Iran derives more significance from its Shia Islamic heritage.

Strategic culture analysis then examines the how the preceding inputs function in the formation of a given state's identity, norms, values, and perceptual lens. Identity defines the group's distinctive characteristics and separates the world between "us" and "them."<sup>34</sup> Norms

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<sup>30</sup> Gray, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Kerry M. Kartchner, "Dr. Kartchner's Model of Strategic Cultural Analysis" (Missouri State University, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> William Kincade, "American National Style and Strategic Culture," in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Kartchner, "Dr. Kartchner's Model of Strategic Cultural Analysis."

<sup>34</sup> Jeannie Johnson and Marilyn Maines, "Cultural Topography Analytic Framework Methodology" (Utah State University and University of Maryland, October 2017), 19.

shape acceptable responses of behavior to a given event.<sup>35</sup> Values determine what is important to a given group, whether material or conceptual, and can be secular or sacred.<sup>36</sup> This distinction is important to note as sacred values are highly resistant to utility-based calculations of loss versus gain and elicit strong negative emotions when compromised by an outside force.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the perceptual lens acts as a filter of information and shapes the conceptualization of an outside group.<sup>38</sup>

Collectively, the identity, norms, values, and perceptual lens of a state are exhibited by various security outputs. These include its preferred method of warfare, negotiating and leadership styles, organization of its national security apparatus, degree of force development and modernization, crisis behavior, and WMD status and doctrine, among others.<sup>39</sup>

A brief word of caution is necessary when applying the strategic culture framework to explain state decision-making. The ambiguity inherent in any cultural analysis can drive different scholars to highly divergent conclusions despite similar circumstances. Keeping with the motif of the prescience of common sense, cultural explanations need not be undertaken unnecessarily when more concrete explanations are forthcoming. To this end, the father of the strategic culture discipline, Jack Snyder, later described his methodology as “an explanation of last resort... to be used only when all else fails.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps this is a pendulum swing a bit too far in the other direction; however, his warning still holds merit. Strategic culture analysis is not a panacea for all problems in the field of IR. Gray reinforces such restraint: “There is a danger

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<sup>35</sup> Johnson and Maines, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Johnson and Maines, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Kartchner, “Introduction to Strategic Culture,” 12.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson and Maines, “Cultural Topography Analytic Framework Methodology,” 22.

<sup>39</sup> Kartchner, “Introduction to Strategic Culture,” 13.

<sup>40</sup> Jack L. Snyder, “The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor,” in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 4.

that Sun Tzu's excellent formula, reinforced by a Jominian spirit, will encourage the fallacious conviction that in understanding culture we have stumbled across the answer to, the correct great principle for, our strategic dilemmas."<sup>41</sup> Keeping these words of caution in mind, this paper will explore an area where alternative forms of explanation fail to sufficiently explain or predict US behavior with any degree of accuracy.

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<sup>41</sup> Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime-Time for Strategic Culture," 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

### US STRATEGIC CULTURE

A deeper understanding of the cultural factors driving American predisposition to certain security outputs is necessary to comprehend the incongruous relationship between such influences and damage mitigation strategies. While this discipline coalesced around early studies of Soviet strategic culture during the Cold War, the following decades saw a rich literature develop on US strategic culture as well. Harkening back to Sun Tzu's formula referenced by Gray, the knowledge of one's own tendencies in the security environment is of equal importance to understanding the propensities of an adversary. Or, as Clausewitz proclaims, "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."<sup>42</sup> What is the American will? Where does it come from? How is it reflected in US societal institutions and military doctrine? The following section will attempt to shed light on these intricate questions by providing a survey of prominent sources of US strategic culture and their subsequent manifestations in national style and conduct of warfare.

#### **Sources of US Strategic Culture**

**Geography and Resources.** The continental isolation enjoyed by the US during its formative years provided a truly distinctive experience from the chaotic history of much of Europe and Asia. Surrounded by neighbors that did not pose a security threat and shielded from the great powers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, US strategic

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<sup>42</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

culture has internalized peace as the “normal” state of life.<sup>43</sup> War is merely an aberration that signals a failure of the natural order of things.

Continental isolation was coupled with an abundance of natural resources. Exploiting these immeasurable reserves of natural wealth across the vastness of the American frontier encouraged a culture of individual action, aspiration, and competition. Those willing to rise to such a daunting challenge were considered deserving of their monetary reward.<sup>44</sup> Through the use of tools to harvest and subjugate the bountiful geography of the North American continent, technological positivism began to take hold as a recurring theme in American decision-making.

**Historical Experience.** The successful revolution of the thirteen colonies against British rule left an immense frontier ripe for exploration and eventual settling. From New York to Florida, the border lines of the nascent American state slowly crept westward. Rugged terrain and hostility with native populations could not assail the indomitability of the settler spirit. By 1912, roughly 130 years after the formation of the United States along the Atlantic seaboard, Arizona was admitted as the 48<sup>th</sup> state to the Union and the taming of the frontier was more or less complete. Settling a landmass of nearly three million square miles over a relatively compressed time period contributed profoundly to three enduring elements of the American psyche: optimism, technological positivism, and exceptionalism. Dima Adamsky maintains, “Conquering the wilderness bred a frontier pragmatism that was translated into an engineering, problem-solving ethos. This approach often regards political conditions as a set of problems, and pushes strategists... to ‘attempt the impossible.’”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” 6.

<sup>44</sup> Kincade, “American National Style and Strategic Culture,” 11.

<sup>45</sup> Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 81.

This period of western expansion would become heavily romanticized in US media, with the notion of the American cowboy becoming synonymous with frontier settlement. While also serving as popular protagonists for storytelling, these characters were idealized for embodying deeper elements of the American spirit. Grigsby describes the allure: “Central to the western sub-culture are ideals of which independence and individualism appear to be paramount. Independence in the rancher’s usage of the terms means self-sufficiency, to do a job according to the dictates of one’s conscience, and to be one’s own boss.”<sup>46</sup> Despite this period ending over a century ago, these concepts are still held in high regard in US culture today.

The success in conquering the natural environment is reciprocated in US military affairs. With the rather glaring example of Vietnam, the US military has been met with defeat on extraordinarily few occasions.<sup>47</sup> Even during its conventionally weakest period during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the US demonstrated a “remarkable pattern of early setbacks, followed by military recovery, perseverance, and ultimate victory.”<sup>48</sup> Despite squaring off with the traditional powers of the Old World and numerically superior Native American tribes, by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the US had achieved “complete victory, in all essentials, against enemies of the Republic, and consolidation of a secure base for repetition of the same, if need be.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the optimistic tendency to pursue maximal victory, and by extension military security, over more limited aims was internalized in US military culture from an early period. Decisive victories over Mexico, Spain (Cuba), Native Americans, and even fellow Americans during the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas L. Grigsby, “Today’s Riders of the Purple Sage: Symbols, Values, and the Cowboy Myth,” *Rangelands* 2, no. 3 (June 1980): 95.

<sup>47</sup> Gray, “Nuclear Strategy and National Style,” 67.

<sup>48</sup> John Shy, “The American Military Experience: History and Learning,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1, no. 2 (1971): 215, <https://doi.org/10.2307/202641>.

<sup>49</sup> Colin S. Gray, “National Style in Strategy: The American Example,” *International Security* 6, no. 2 (1981): 27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538645>.

century only reinforced this concept. What would seem to be a death knell to the optimistic employment of military force, the Civil War, only served to harden the perception of American military power. Shy writes that the only perceived mistake of this period “was that of underestimating the fighting qualities of other Americans.”<sup>50</sup> Twin victories during the First and Second World Wars reinvigorated the notions that the US was capable of accomplishing any military mission it set its collective mind to. This military success has come at a relatively mild cost in American lives. For example, the US suffered roughly 418,500 military and civilian deaths in World War Two compared to the Soviet Union’s 24 million.<sup>51</sup>

Triumph in interstate warfare has also affected the US homeland in unprecedentedly limited fashion. The continental United States has not been touched by the industrial scale of modern conflict since the end of the Civil War in 1865. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was the only instance of significant damage to the US homeland during a period of two successive world wars that devastated immense swaths of Europe and Asia. Without a security threat from any state in its hemisphere, US culture has embraced the notion of free security and rejected the European model of power politics.<sup>52</sup> Compared to the bleak history of constant fights for national survival present in many other states, “the relative absence of such [security] anxieties in the past has helped... to make optimism a natural philosophy in America.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Shy, “The American Military Experience,” 218.

<sup>51</sup> “Research Starters: Worldwide Deaths in World War II,” The National WWII Museum, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>.

<sup>52</sup> Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” 6.

<sup>53</sup> C. Vann Woodward, “The Age of Reinterpretation,” *American Historical Review* 66 (October 1960): 6; quoted in Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” 6.



This period of unmolested industrial development during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed substantially to America's rise to preeminence in the postwar period. As the only member of the Allies left untouched by the scourge of World War Two, the US was uniquely positioned to take a leading role in shaping the new world order. Instead of retreating into isolationism, as was the case after the First World War, the US accepted this new responsibility and leveraged its enormous industrial and technological potential to compete with the Soviet Union for international dominance. The eventual victory of democracy and free-market capitalism over Soviet authoritarianism and central planning can be considered the pinnacle of an impossibly prolonged series of triumphs for the American system. The power of the American position during the post-Cold War period strongly reinforced concepts of American exceptionalism, optimism, ahistorical uniqueness, and universal supremacy of liberal democratic values. Henry Kissinger captured the essence of this period remarkably:

At the dawn of the new millennium, the United States is enjoying a preeminence unrivalled by even the greatest empires of the past. From weaponry to entrepreneurship, from science to technology, from higher education to popular culture, America exercises an unparalleled ascendancy around the globe. During the last decade of the twentieth century, America's preponderant position rendered it the indispensable component of international stability.<sup>54</sup>

While this position is being challenged by a resurgence of great power competition with Russia and China, the impact of this period of unquestioned superiority remains a prominent influence on American geopolitical conceptualization.

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<sup>54</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, 1st Touchstone ed (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 17; quoted in Colin S. Gray, *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 6.

**Societal and Political Structures.** American preference toward ahistorical exceptionalism can be traced to the foundational documents of American society. In this context, ahistorical refers to the uniquely American intellectual notion of being unbounded by the constraints of previous societal maladies rather than mere counterfactual ignorance. Early colonists sought to create a system opposed to the monarchies of Europe, with strong deference granted to the rule of law and individual liberty. The Declaration of Independence highlighted these grievances in addition to codifying the American fondness for universally held liberal democratic values and the role of government in safeguarding American life. Arguably the most famous passage in the entire document makes this case:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

The Constitution that followed was “unequivocally exceptional” in its time thanks to its inclusion of a written bill of rights, legal supremacy as the highest law in the land, insulation against repeal by conventional legislative vote, and enforcement through judicial review.<sup>55</sup> While many states now enshrine similar provisions in their respective jurisprudence, the trailblazing nature of both documents played a role in operationalizing the concept of a moral high ground from which the US prefers to operate on the international stage.

The Constitution also served as a codification of early immigrants’ distrust of central authority. The checks and balances system avoided consolidation of power in an omnipotent

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Gardbaum, “The Myth and the Reality of American Constitutional Exceptionalism,” *Michigan Law Review* 107 (December 2008): 393.

monarch and represented a dramatic departure from the governmental style of that age. Accordingly, “Old norms and systems were rejected in efforts to create a society that would be an exception to centuries of human history and misery.”<sup>56</sup> The resulting governmental architecture emphasized the diffusion of power among competing branches, with a strong deference to bottom-up decision-making.

As many of the early colonists and subsequent waves of immigrants came to America in search of religious liberty, fundamentalist Christian values have also played a formative role in the development of American strategic culture. The most prominent among these is the “shining city upon a hill” concept from early Puritanism, where America is seen as the moralistic arbiter for the Old World to emulate.<sup>57</sup> This ideal, closely linked with the idea of the exceptionalism of the American experience, was most prominently articulated by Ronald Reagan: “there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.”<sup>58</sup> By viewing the world through a moral lens, religious influences have contributed to the tendency to cast American adversaries as evil entities that require crusades to eradicate.<sup>59</sup>

## **Social Manifestations of US Strategic Culture**

**Optimism and Problem-Solving Mentality.** Born out of the unimaginable string of environmental, political, and military successes, the American psyche is uniquely optimistic

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<sup>56</sup> Kincaide, “American National Style and Strategic Culture,” 12.

<sup>57</sup> David Jones, review of *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture and Strategic Choices*, by Robert Booth Fowler and Allen D. Hertzke, *Journal of International Affairs* 50, no. 1 (1996): 312.

<sup>58</sup> Abram Van Engen, “How America Became ‘A City Upon a Hill,’” *HUMANITIES* 41, no. 1 (2020), <https://www.neh.gov/article/how-america-became-city-upon-hill>.

<sup>59</sup> Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” 7.

about challenges both domestic and international. Insulated almost entirely from the perverse suffering typical of the interstate wars that ravaged Europe over the same time period, the American experience lacked such pessimistic reminders of the worst of the human condition. Instead, the grand political experiment of a new beginning, grounded in pragmatic deference to the supremacy of the individual, reinforced a common understanding that all problems, social, natural, security, etc., can be solved.<sup>60</sup> In his famous treatise on American society from 1832, Alexis de Tocqueville acknowledged the comprehensive spread of this positive temperament: “They have all a lively faith in the perfectibility of man... they all consider society as a body in a state of improvement, humanity as a changing scene, in which nothing is, or ought to be, permanent; and they admit that what appears to them to be good today may be superseded by something better tomorrow.”<sup>61</sup> This mindset appears to have weathered the tests of the nearly 200 years since Tocqueville’s writings were first published. A series of surveys conducted over a 14-year period from 2008-2022 by the Yale School of Medicine and the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center shows “remarkable consistency in people’s belief that their own lives will be better in five years than at the time of the survey.”<sup>62</sup>

The sanguine approach to the complex issues of the human experience reinforces a problem-solving mentality diffused across all layers of American society. With success as the expected outcome, an unassailable problem cannot exist. Incontestable structural conditions are often misread as problems that are capable of being “solved” under this framework, leading to

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<sup>60</sup> Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 81.

<sup>61</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Project Gutenberg, 2022), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Bill Hathaway, “From Recession to Pandemic, American Optimism Survives,” YaleNews, February 23, 2022, <https://news.yale.edu/2022/02/23/recession-pandemic-american-optimism-survives>.

surprise when efforts fall short of expectations.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the can-do outlook persists as a trait of high esteem in American society. Jeannie L. Johnson notes, “Problem-solving is key to American identity—being a problem-solver is both a requirement for most occupations and an admired personal trait. For Americans, it is also perceived to be the primary purpose of human activity.”<sup>64</sup>

**Logical-Analytical Cognitive Style.** Through a pioneering study of revolutions in military affairs (RMAs), Dima Adamsky connected the field of cognitive psychology with strategic culture analysis. Adamsky theorized that a driving factor behind a state’s ability to conceptualize and implement an RMA was its cognitive style – the “preferred collection of strategies to perceive, organize, and process information.”<sup>65</sup> Drawing upon research from psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, Adamsky found that American culture prefers a logical-analytical approach, characterized by focalism on the salient object of study “independent from the context in which it is embedded.”<sup>66</sup> In contrast with the holistic-dialectical style, this framework sacrifices broad understanding of a given problem set in favor of more in-depth knowledge of the most prioritized challenge. Moreover, the logical-analytical style offers a pathway to operationalizing the problem-solving mentality as “it is based inter alia on the optimistic belief that there is an objective essence that can be reached through the linear process of discovery.”<sup>67</sup> Given the propensity for solution-based thought in American culture, it should

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<sup>63</sup> Colin S. Gray, “The American Way of War,” in *Rethinking the Principles of War*, ed. Anthony D. McIvor (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>64</sup> Jeannie L. Johnson, “Fit for Future Conflict? American Strategic Culture in the Context of Great Power Competition,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 193.

<sup>65</sup> Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Adamsky, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Adamsky, 76.

come as little surprise that the cognitive style offering the most efficient route to tackling the immediate issue remains the dominant approach.

This linear intellectual style places a strong emphasis on empirical analysis. That which cannot be quantified is perceived as outside of one's control and thus cannot be "solved." To compensate, empirical measures are often applied to intangible problems, irrespective of whether the chosen measure has any relevance to the objective sought.<sup>68</sup>

**Positive Role of Machines.** The subjugation of the vast American frontier and rise to industrial and military preeminence did not take place by sheer force of human will. American culture, in seeking a solution to all problems, has readily embraced machines to aid in its various natural and social conquests. The cotton gin, transcontinental railroad, interstate highway system, Hoover Dam, Erie Canal, Apollo moon landings, Internet, and countless other extraordinary feats of engineering are revered as symbols of American innovation and a general refusal to abide by perceived constraints. Technology is thus approached as a "liberating force that improves quality of life."<sup>69</sup> The repeated ability of US engineers and inventors to rise to this challenge has created "a romantic engineering creed that viewed social and security problems as essentially mechanical in nature and... consistent with the logic of man-made machines."<sup>70</sup> While this mentality has produced astounding levels of technological improvement, it has also internalized a potentially dangerous assumption that the US engineering base has the capacity to

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<sup>68</sup> Johnson, "Fit for Future Conflict? American Strategic Culture in the Context of Great Power Competition," 196.

<sup>69</sup> Kincaide, "American National Style and Strategic Culture," 26.

<sup>70</sup> Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 81.

catch up with any other state's advances given the requisite prioritization.<sup>71</sup>

**Universality and Supremacy of the Democratic Model.** Building off of the guidance put forth in the Declaration of Independence, American strategic culture demonstrates a strong tendency to view democracy as the pillar of human governance sought by all peoples. Driven by the enormous successes of the American system, US strategic culture seeks opportunities to spread the virtues of individualism, equal opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness across the globe.<sup>72</sup> Despite its domestic support, there were few opportunities to expand this ideology prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Twice having to decide between isolation or intervention in the World Wars, the defense of global democracy served as the decisive factor for its entrance. In his 1917 speech before Congress, President Woodrow Wilson asked for a declaration of war on the grounds that “the world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty.”<sup>73</sup> Similar logic was echoed 24 years later by President Roosevelt to justify expanded lend-lease: “We must be the great arsenal of democracy... to meet the threat to our democratic faith.”<sup>74</sup> Explicit desire to transform the international order in pursuit of this goal can be seen in virtually every administration since FDR. President Biden's 2021 Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal continues this longstanding tradition,

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<sup>71</sup> Miriam D. Becker, “Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense: Russia and the United States” (Master's, Monterey, CA, Naval Postgraduate School, 1993), 54, [https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/39769/93Jun\\_Becker\\_M\\_D.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/39769/93Jun_Becker_M_D.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

<sup>72</sup> Johnson, “Fit for Future Conflict? American Strategic Culture in the Context of Great Power Competition,” 198.

<sup>73</sup> “Wilson Before Congress,” Transcript, Library of Congress, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/world-war-i-american-experiences/about-this-exhibition/arguing-over-war/for-or-against-war/wilson-before-congress/>.

<sup>74</sup> “Arsenal of Democracy Speech” (Washington, D.C., December 29, 1940), <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/WorldWar2/arsenal.htm>.

providing international assistance to “strengthen democracy and advance respect for human rights.”<sup>75</sup>

The perceived universality of these sentiments has unfortunately led to surprises in American foreign policy. The most prominent example can be found in the collapse of the Afghan government following the US withdrawal from the country in 2021. Using the model of Japan and West Germany, coalition forces embarked on a multi-decade nation-building effort that attempted to transform a tribal, illiberal society into an example of Muslim democracy. Yet, the desired “political reform was not congruent with the aspirations of many Afghans. The occupiers’ ideological and cultural package for Afghanistan clashed with the mores of the land, and its lofty objectives underwent a process of attenuation and degradation.”<sup>76</sup> Despite the certainty by which US culture regards the inevitability of democracy in the political evolution of all states, the Afghanistan experiment failed spectacularly. Consequently, the “End of History” and decisive triumph of Western liberalism over all systematic challengers has not arrived in spite of American efforts to the contrary.<sup>77</sup>

**Ahistorical Exceptionalism.** The uniqueness of the American experience and its subsequent impact on the American psyche cannot be understated. The structural, social, and geographic conditions present during the formation of the American state have mutually reinforced the concept that this “great experiment” represented a profoundly new and better beginning of the nation-state system. In lieu of any existential challenges to the pattern of

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<sup>75</sup> “Fact Sheet: Announcing the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal,” The White House, December 9, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/09/fact-sheet-announcing-the-presidential-initiative-for-democratic-renewal/>.

<sup>76</sup> Cora Sol Goldstein, “The Afghanistan Experience: Democratization by Force,” *Parameters* 42, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 26, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3054>.

<sup>77</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3.



uninterrupted success, Pew Research Center polling from 2021 finds that roughly 75% of Americans still believe that the US “stands above all other countries in the world” or is “one of the greatest countries, along with some others.”<sup>78</sup> Harboring such a distinctive view of its place in the world, American culture tends to ascribe its values as the global standard, driving a counter-productive cycle of mirror-imaging.

Strongly influenced by the salient political ideologies of “political and moral uniqueness, manifest destiny, [and] divine mission,” the moniker of the “city upon a hill” lives on in American strategic culture.<sup>79</sup> As the occupier of the metaphorical “moral high ground,” US foreign policy discourse at the public level is filtered through a lens of inherent positivity. During the Cold War, this concept manifested through the tendency to cast the Soviet Union as an inherently evil, criminal, and morally repugnant enterprise whose actions demanded response from the defender of the virtuous republic: the US.<sup>80</sup> Foreign policy flowing from this narrative is viewed as a zero-sum game, where the evil must lose at the expense of the good and vice versa.<sup>81</sup>

The same conditions that drive a sense of exceptionalism associated with US strategic culture simultaneously discourage a fulsome consideration of historical context to domestic and foreign policy challenges. While often attributed to mere arrogance, the foundational constructs of American governance and that system’s subsequent rise to global preeminence are genuinely

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<sup>78</sup> Hannah Hartig, “Younger Americans Still More Likely than Older Adults to Say There Are Other Countries Better than the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, December 16, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/12/16/younger-americans-still-more-likely-than-older-adults-to-say-there-are-other-countries-better-than-the-u-s/>.

<sup>79</sup> Gray, “The American Way of War,” 29.

<sup>80</sup> Ken Booth, “US Perceptions of Soviet Threat: Prudence and Paranoia,” in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 58.

<sup>81</sup> Booth, 67.

ahistorical experiences in their own right. Very little of the survival of the fledgling American state demanded a comprehensive knowledge of Old World history.<sup>82</sup> Thus, it is not surprising to observe that American cognition tends to focus on achieving swift results in the immediate present, unencumbered by the constraints of the “irrational past.”<sup>83</sup> Henry Ford summarized this heuristic in a 1916 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*: “History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s dam is the history we make today.”<sup>84</sup> In addition to obfuscating the lessons of the past, the relatively young age of the US as a state on the global stage and pronounced emphasis on the immediate present often clouds assessments of the distant future. A results-driven mindset encourages prioritization of near-term progress over long-term objectives.

### **Military Manifestations: The American Way of War**

**Technologically Driven.** The American method of warfighting leverages significant qualitative advantages in technology to overmatch any potential adversary. Born out of the necessity of machines to dominate the vast frontier, techno-centric warfare makes liberal use of the concept that all challenges can be overcome through the proper mechanical input. As Mahnken observes, “No nation in recent history has placed greater emphasis upon the role of technology in planning and waging war than the United States.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Johnson, “Fit for Future Conflict? American Strategic Culture in the Context of Great Power Competition,” 191.

<sup>83</sup> Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 82.

<sup>84</sup> Roger Butterfield, “Henry Ford, the Wayside Inn, and the Problem of ‘History Is Bunk,’” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 77 (1965): 54.

<sup>85</sup> Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” 12.

Drawing upon unique structural incentives to technologically progress, the US has demonstrated repeated ability to innovate new military technology or adapt civilian advances for military benefit as early as the Civil War.<sup>86</sup> Gholz and Sapolsky break these structural factors into “hard” and “soft” capabilities in their study of US military innovation compared to great power rivals in China and Russia. Hard factors, such as research and development (R&D) facilities, access to foreign technology, human capital, and sheer quantity of monetary investment in developing defense technology, far outpace any rival efforts.<sup>87</sup> Put in solely fiscal terms, the annual US defense R&D budget is greater than the yearly total defense expenditures of every other state in the world except China.<sup>88</sup> Soft factors further contribute to a technological emphasis, including the use of technology to avoid American casualties, inter-service competition among the branches of the military, and the willing embrace of immigrants and their ideas.<sup>89</sup> Additional contributions are made by the private sector, where the immense monetary rewards of the American financial system drive constant technological progress. The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* acknowledges that maintaining this lucrative pipeline of commercial technological innovation is of top priority for the US military today.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this industrial-scale innovation was the Manhattan Project: the development of the atomic bomb during World War Two. Faced with the unsavory prospect of German engineers winning the “race for the bomb,” Brigadier General Leslie R.

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<sup>86</sup> Kincaide, “American National Style and Strategic Culture,” 26.

<sup>87</sup> Eugene Gholz and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “The Defense Innovation Machine: Why the U.S. Will Remain on the Cutting Edge,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 6 (September 19, 2021): 855, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2021.1917392>.

<sup>88</sup> Gholz and Sapolsky, 858.

<sup>89</sup> Gholz and Sapolsky, 862.

<sup>90</sup> “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy” (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), 3, [https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2018\\_NDS.pdf](https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2018_NDS.pdf).

Groves was given a virtual blank check of resources and manpower to conduct the crash program.<sup>91</sup> Harnessing the brightest military and civilian minds, the US leveraged this groundbreaking scientific advancement to overcome the daunting challenge of invading the heavily militarized home islands of Japan. Several of the most influential scientists on the Manhattan Project were immigrants providing support for Ghloz and Sapolsky’s theory of soft factors of innovation, including Leo Szilard, Hans Bethe, and Enrico Fermi among others.

During the Cold War, the technological edge of US forces attempted to counterbalance the vast numerical superiority of the Warsaw Pact forces arrayed against them.<sup>92</sup> US leadership understood that the quantitative overmatch of Soviet forces would never be replicated by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), prompting emphasis on advanced technology to offer a qualitative edge. Drawing roots from World War Two, American strategic thinking coalesced around high-technology air power for battlefield advantage during this time period. To date, the “United States has come to treat air superiority as a necessity, and built such capable air forces that no enemy aircraft has killed US ground troops since 1953.”<sup>93</sup>

The immense benefit offered by several technological breakthroughs of the Cold War, including precision-guided munitions (PGMs), GPS and satellite communications, and comprehensive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, was profoundly demonstrated by the lopsided engagements of the First Gulf War. In a little over 100 hours, the overwhelming advantage of space-enabled employment of the Air-Land Battle doctrine led to the destruction of 3,300 Iraqi tanks, 2,220 artillery pieces, and 1,400 armored personnel carriers at

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<sup>91</sup> Alex Wellerstein, “Manhattan Project,” *Encyclopedia of the History of Science*, October 10, 2019, 14, <https://doi.org/10.34758/9aaa-ne35>.

<sup>92</sup> Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” 12.

<sup>93</sup> “Defense Primer: United States Airpower” (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, October 26, 2021), 1, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF10546.pdf>.

the cost of 96 US soldiers killed in action.<sup>94</sup> This impressive performance in Iraq during 1991 only further solidified the need for technological overmatch in the collective US military consciousness.

**Leadership Averse to Casualties.** The creation of high-technological warfighting capabilities is strongly correlated with the desire of US military and civilian leadership to minimize US casualties during combat operations. Building from the liberal democratic belief of the salience of the individual and all-volunteer force structure of the American military, this attitude seems highly logical. Consequently, American military and civilian elites have repeatedly noted their desire to minimize US loss when engaged in confrontation. Speaking about Operation Joint Endeavor, the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia, Major General Nash observed, “It’s obvious that there’s a political agenda to have low casualties, although nobody’s overtly pressuring me to have low casualties... If my Achilles heel is the low tolerance of the American people for casualties, then I have to recognize that my success or failure in this mission is directly affected by that.”<sup>95</sup> Lieutenant General Abrams echoed these concerns: “In peace enforcement operations, there is a high expectation for a low number of casualties.... It’s clear that we have to deal with this expectation – that’s part of the environment.”<sup>96</sup> The massive investments in US airpower, stand-off PGMs, and other forms of weaponry that reduce exposure of US personnel all flow from the reluctance of American leadership to absorb high-volume loss. Contemporary prioritization of drone warfare in the Global War on Terror can be thought of as the maximal evolution of this model.

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<sup>94</sup> “Operation DESERT STORM,” U.S. Army Center of Military History, accessed June 28, 2022, <https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/desert-storm/index.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Mark A. Viney, *United States Cavalry Peacekeepers in Bosnia: An Inside Account of Operation Joint Endeavor, 1996* (McFarland, 2012), 108.

<sup>96</sup> Viney, 108.

Collapse of US domestic support for the Vietnam War after an endless stream of US casualties is often cited as the foundation of the casualty-averse attitude, with further validation drawn from the twin US withdrawals from Lebanon and Somalia in 1984 and 1993 respectively.<sup>97</sup> The notion that US strategic culture is unwilling to accept loss has become so pervasive on the international arena that adversarial leaders are willing to bet US non-intervention on their ability to inflict casualties on its forces. Such was the mindset of Saddam Hussein in 1991, Slobodan Milosevic in 1999, and Osama bin Laden in 2001, who all concocted strategy around the core belief that the US “lacked the moral courage to face a deadly military confrontation.”<sup>98</sup> Today, these perceptions can be found throughout statements by officials from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) regarding the US commitment to defend Taiwan.<sup>99</sup>

What is most striking about this element of US strategic culture is that there appears to be distinct incongruity between elites and the general public. Polling by Feaver and Gelpi demonstrated that military and civilian elites offer significantly smaller numbers of “acceptable casualties” than the general public for a given military operation.<sup>100</sup> Further research has indicated that “believing the war was the right thing to do combines with expectations of success to determine an individual’s tolerance for the human costs of war,” with expectation of success being the more salient of the two variables.<sup>101</sup> In lieu of convincing evidence to the contrary, it

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<sup>97</sup> Theo Farrell, “Strategic Culture and American Empire,” *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 2 (2005): 8.

<sup>98</sup> Richard A. Lacquement Jr., “The Casualty-Aversion Myth,” *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 1 (2004): 10.

<sup>99</sup> Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 129, 147–48.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, “How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer,” *The Washington Post*, November 7, 1999, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/WPcap/1999-11/07/061r-110799-idx.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Jason Reifler, Christopher Gelpi, and Peter Feaver, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *Political Science Faculty Publications*, 2006, 45; Eric V. Larson,

appears that US strategic culture disproportionately constrains leadership decision-making in this domain.

**Overwhelming Firepower and Direct Engagement.** A country rich in wealth and material resources, the US military has embraced the use of overwhelming firepower to destroy its adversary in direct confrontation. Concurrent with leadership's desire to avoid casualties, the "American way in warfare [is] to send metal in harm's way in place of vulnerable flesh."<sup>102</sup> This philosophy has prompted enormous investment in standoff weapons systems that are capable of delivering unprecedented amounts of firepower to virtually any location on Earth with a high degree of expediency and accuracy. Capitalizing on comparative advantages in material and natural resources, the "strategy of attrition and annihilating the enemy with firepower was the best way to transform the nation's material superiority into battlefield effectiveness."<sup>103</sup>

The use of firepower to overmatch any potential adversary is enabled by the American industrial approach to war.<sup>104</sup> Employing the substantial capacity of domestic manufacturing to produce war material, the US is able to leverage its strength in economic potential to overwhelm an adversary with machines and warfighting equipment. The landmark example of this philosophy is World War Two, where US munitions production by 1944 roughly equaled the combined total of all belligerents in the conflict.<sup>105</sup> The Arsenal of Democracy moniker was not a misnomer. While the two decades of counterterror operations have not demanded the resumption of this level of production, it is highly likely that a conflict with a near-peer

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*Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996), xv.

<sup>102</sup> Gray, "The American Way of War," 30.

<sup>103</sup> Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 78.

<sup>104</sup> Mahnken, "United States Strategic Culture," 10.

<sup>105</sup> Alan L Gropman, *Mobilizing U.S. Industry World War II*, McNair Papers (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1996), 1.

adversary would prompt a return to a comparable level of industrial output for modern capabilities.

The ability to out-produce and conventionally overwhelm all adversaries with concentrated firepower has resulted in a proclivity for astrategic military thinking. This is understandable to a large degree, as the advantages of relative isolation from security threats and immense economic and industrial potential has precluded the need for US planners to “out-think” adversaries. As Gray argues, the necessity for clever stratagems never took hold in US strategic culture because of the rich reserves of men, machines, and logistical power.<sup>106</sup> Instead, direct confrontation is preferred in the hopes of initiating a decisive battle that will swiftly bring about the enemy’s destruction. This doctrine is one of the most prominent examples of the influence of Clausewitz on US military thought. Writing about the purpose of battle, Clausewitz articulates the following objectives:

1. Destruction of the enemy forces is the overriding principle of war, and, so far as positive action is concerned, the principal way to achieve our object.
2. Such destruction of forces can usually be accomplished only by fighting.
3. Only major engagements involving all forces lead to major success.
4. The greatest successes are obtained where all engagements coalesce into one great battle.<sup>107</sup>

Operating under this conceptual framework, the difficulties that plagued the US military in executing asymmetric, counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are highly logical. Overwhelming firepower is mitigated by the dispersal of insurgent targets among civilian areas, and the guerilla warfare practiced by al-Qaeda is not conducive to decisive battle. Consequently, enormous advantages in technology, war material, and logistical support could not

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<sup>106</sup> Gray, “Nuclear Strategy and National Style,” 75.

<sup>107</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 258.



be brought to bear in an efficient manner. These same issues afflicted US efforts at fighting a “limited war” in Vietnam nearly forty years earlier and led to remarkably similar outcomes.<sup>108</sup>

**Moralistic and Apolitical.** Drawing ideological basis from the Puritan spirit of the first colonists, American strategic culture exhibits a tendency to perceive wars in the manner of crusades. As the occupier of the moral high ground, America’s adversary represents an inherently evil entity that demands complete eradication from the world in order to restore justice. This approach is not satisfied by waging limited war; an enemy that represents true evil must be exterminated vis-à-vis Sodom and Gomorrah. The zero-sum attitude of the moralistic approach drives US military and civilian leadership to pursue wars of maximal political aims – unconditional surrender of the adversary.<sup>109</sup> Such intolerance for anything below complete domination was present even when fighting fellow Americans during the Civil War. Union general and future president Ulysses S. Grant became famous for a quip based off of his leading initials that embodied this philosophy: “Unconditional Surrender Grant.”<sup>110</sup>

The just war principle flowing from moralism in American foreign policy rejects the connection between political objectives and the employment of war. Or, to quote Clausewitz’s famous formulation: “war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.... The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”<sup>111</sup> Instead of “politics by other means,” the onset of war is perceived by American

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<sup>108</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory” (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2002), 16–17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11333>.

<sup>109</sup> Kenneth W. Thompson, “Moral Reasoning in American Thought on War and Peace,” *The Review of Politics* 39, no. 3 (1977): 397.

<sup>110</sup> “Ulysses S. Grant’s Letter from Fort Donelson,” National Museum of American History, accessed June 29, 2022, [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_439659](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_439659).

<sup>111</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

strategic culture as a political failure, where violence is required to restore the natural order of peaceful relations between states.

While by no means an exhaustive description of the complexities of US strategic culture, this chapter is intended to provide a survey of the most salient influences and their subsequent manifestations in the social and military domains. Drivers of US strategic culture highlighted here include the continental isolation of a resource rich North America, unparalleled series of historical successes in warfare and frontier subjugation, constitutional exceptionalism and universality of the founding documents, and fundamentalist Christianity. These inputs shape foreign and domestic policy outputs, creating a distinctly American approach to society and warfare. Socially, American strategic culture tends to be optimistic and problem-solving, processes information through a logical-analytical cognitive style, perceives a positive role for machines, believes in the universality and supremacy of the democratic model, and harbors a profound sense of ahistorical exceptionalism. The American way of warfare is characterized by a high emphasis on technology, leadership with aversion to casualties, employment of overwhelming firepower, desire for direct engagement, and moralistic and apolitical motivations.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE MAD CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND CORRESPONDING EFFECTS ON US MISSILE DEFENSE DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY**

Armed with a deeper understanding of the cultural factors driving US security policymaking, an examination of the history of US approach to damage limitation will demonstrate the perplexing incongruity between expected and actualized outputs in this domain. The roots of the MAD conceptual framework will be examined first, followed by a discussion of its chief architect, Robert McNamara, and his time as Secretary of Defense. Finally, a survey of US missile defense development will highlight the persistent influence that this theory has wielded in spite of its divergence from US strategic culture.

#### **The Origins of MAD**

The concepts behind the MAD philosophy flow from one of the earliest deterrence debates in American strategic thought during the Cold War. The successful completion of the Manhattan Project and subsequent employment of nuclear weaponry against the Imperial Japanese in 1945 ushered in a new era in international relations. This new capability offered such terrifying levels of destruction that the very threat of its employment may prevent a potential adversary from taking aggressive action. Despite the strategic level implications of this technology, the US did not articulate a formal theory of deterrence or nuclear strategy in the time period immediately following the Second World War. However, the detonation of a Soviet nuclear weapon in 1949 and development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of striking American soil less than ten years later broke the perception of invulnerability. No

longer in sole possession of “the bomb,” American defense practitioners were faced with the quandary of deterring the Soviet Union from launching a nuclear strike on US forces in Europe or the homeland itself. Several important questions required answers. What are the requirements for deterrence? Is there such a concept as “strategic stability?” What constitutes a credible threat? Do damage mitigation measures, such as missile and civil air defense, assist or detract from threat credibility and “strategic stability?” Is the language of deterrence universal among different states and leaders?

The answers to these questions sorted US deterrence theorists into two broad categories, described by Keith Payne as the “easy or difficult” deterrence narratives.<sup>112</sup> Easy deterrence thinkers, such as Thomas Schelling, Kenneth Waltz, Bernard Brodie, and Robert Jervis, argued that the instability of the US-Soviet nuclear relationship was centered around the overwhelming advantage to strike first in a strategic level exchange. Consequently, the key to establishing stability was survivable second-strike forces. If neither side was able to decisively destroy the response capacity of the adversary, they would enter a “stable balance of terror” and deterrence would function with a high degree of confidence. To the easy school of deterrence thought:

The essential requirements for stable mutual deterrence are not difficult to understand or meet and, correspondingly, that the functioning of mutual deterrence can be considered largely predictable. Those deterrence requirements are: rational, ‘sensible’ leadership decision-making... and properly controlled and safeguarded capabilities for strategic nuclear retaliation even after suffering an attack.<sup>113</sup>

Cultural and leadership differences are more or less immaterial to the easy deterrence narrative, as the unprecedented destructive power of nuclear weapons provides a universally understood

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<sup>112</sup> Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, 63.

<sup>113</sup> Payne, 65.

“dialogue” for interstate relations. Rational consideration of the punishment one would inevitably receive was presumed to lead all heads of state to the same conclusions about the horrors of a thermonuclear exchange.

Crucial to stability under this framework was the concept of mutual vulnerability, where US and Soviet cities would be left completely undefended to be held hostage by the adversary’s ICBMs. Damage limitation measures, such as ballistic missile defenses, air defense, and counterforce nuclear targeting, were flatly rejected by the easy deterrence philosophy as destabilizing to the “stable balance of terror.” To Schelling, “schemes to avert surprise attack have as their most immediate objective the safety of weapons rather than the safety of people.... A weapon that can hurt only people, and cannot possibly damage the other side’s striking force, is profoundly defensive.”<sup>114</sup> He develops this argument further by comparing mutual vulnerability to WMD as the contemporary version of hostage taking: “As long as each side has the manifest power to destroy a nation and its population in response to an attack by the other, the ‘balance of terror’ amounts to a tacit understanding backed by a total exchange of all conceivable hostages.”<sup>115</sup> Waltz echoes this logic and adds the element of strategic defenses to the formulation: “In a nuclear world defense systems are predictably destabilizing. It would be folly to move from a condition of stable deterrence to one of unstable defense.”<sup>116</sup> These twin pillars of the easy deterrence narrative, mutual vulnerability to retaliatory strikes ensuring a stable balance of terror and the destabilizing nature of strategic defenses, would lay the

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), 233.

<sup>115</sup> Schelling, 239.

<sup>116</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” *The American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (1990): 743, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962764>.

foundation for the MAD philosophy and remain enduring elements of US security discourse.<sup>117</sup>

By contrast, the difficult deterrence school retained a much lower confidence in the universality of the nuclear deterrence dialogue and cautioned against assumptions of the predictability of deterrence. Theorists in this camp, including Herman Kahn, Albert Wohlsetter, and Colin S. Gray, believed that nuclear deterrence was challenging to achieve and even more difficult to sustain due to substantial differences in adversary decision-making, perception of value, tolerance of risk, and other unpredictable factors.<sup>118</sup> Thus, the contextual nature of deterrence is not necessarily satisfied by arbitrary proclamations of sufficient destruction that fail to take adversary attitudes and perceptions into account. Reduced confidence about its predictability also prompted some practitioners of the difficult deterrence philosophy to be much more receptive to damage limitation measures as a method of enhancing threat credibility for extended deterrence. As the extended nuclear umbrella is only as effective as other states' belief in the reliability of US nuclear employment on their behalf, damage limitation measures could enhance assurance and prevent the president from choosing between, in JFK's lexicon, "inglorious retreat or unlimited retaliation."<sup>119</sup> Finally, difficult deterrence theorists were gravely concerned with the possibility of deterrence failure and the lack of protection offered to the US homeland by the easy deterrence philosophy. Gray implores, "Nuclear war is possible, and the US government owes it to generations of Americans – past, present, and future – to make

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<sup>117</sup> Michael S. Gerson, "The Origins of Strategic Stability: The United States and the Threat of Surprise Attack," in *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations*: (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, 2013), 34, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA572928>.

<sup>118</sup> Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, 97–99.

<sup>119</sup> Peter Grier, "In the Shadow of MAD," *Air Force Magazine*, November 1, 2001, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/1101mad/>.

prudent defense preparations to limit damage to domestic American values to the extent feasible in the event of nuclear war.”<sup>120</sup>

### **From Theory to Policy: The McNamara Years**

Robert McNamara assumed the role of Secretary of Defense in January 1961 as part of the incoming Kennedy administration. The nuclear plans that he inherited from President Eisenhower horrified him. The Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) from 1960 was the sole nuclear option for the US president, which called for a single, massive retaliatory strike on the Soviet Union and other allies that was estimated to kill between 360 and 425 million people.<sup>121</sup> This “spasm war” was to be initiated at the first example of any Soviet aggression, precluding any possibility of graduated response options or escalation control. In a now famous speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan, McNamara publicly rejected the massive retaliation doctrine of the Eisenhower Administration and revealed a new emphasis on counterforce nuclear targeting: “Nuclear war should be approached in much the same way that more conventional military operations have been regarded in the past. That is to say, principal military objectives, in the event of a nuclear war stemming from a major attack on the Alliance, should be the destruction of the enemy's forces, not of his civilian population.”<sup>122</sup> This approach was conducive to President Kennedy’s shift to a nuclear strategy of Flexible Response, where expansive

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<sup>120</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning*, Philadelphia Policy Papers (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1984), 8; quoted in Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, 126.

<sup>121</sup> Philip Bobbitt, Lawrence Freedman, and Gregory F. Treverton, eds., “From No Cities to Stable Vulnerability,” in *US Nuclear Strategy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 191, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19791-0\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19791-0_14).

<sup>122</sup> Robert McNamara, “No Cities” (Speech, Ann Arbor, MI, July 9, 1962), <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/deterrence/no-cities-speech.html>.

conventional and nuclear capabilities would offer graduated response options to match and deter the Soviets at every level.

While the counterforce theory was more agreeable to McNamara's conscience, the force structure demanded by this approach quickly became a concern. In theory, the list of targets under this new strategy would essentially be endless, given the ever-constant quantitative improvements of Soviet conventional and nuclear forces. Further worsening the problem, the poor accuracy of American ICBMs at this time required between four to fourteen missiles allocated to each Soviet missile silo.<sup>123</sup> As an example of the daunting scale of these necessary force requirements, the Air Force via Strategic Air Command (SAC) implored McNamara to build roughly 10,000 new Minuteman ICBMs.<sup>124</sup> Thus, rather than force reductions, McNamara quickly realized that this approach was almost certainly going to result in force buildups.

To circumvent the unfathomably expensive force increases demanded by the counterforce approach articulated at the University of Michigan, McNamara backpedaled on the no cities concept. By 1963, with the help of RAND staffers from the Systems Analysis Office at the Pentagon, McNamara settled on a new strategy that he referred to as assured destruction: "The ability to destroy in retaliation 20-25 percent of the Soviet population and 50 percent of its industrial capacity."<sup>125</sup> Despite its striking similarity to the countervalue targeting of population centers consistent with the Eisenhower approach, McNamara was convinced that he had found

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<sup>123</sup> Charles H. Fairbanks Jr., "MAD and U.S. Strategy," in *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice*, ed. Henry D. Sokolski (Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 143, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=450469>.

<sup>124</sup> Grier, "In the Shadow of MAD."

<sup>125</sup> John T. Correll, "The Making of MAD," *Air Force Magazine*, July 27, 2018, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/the-making-of-mad/>.



the answer to reducing US fiscal commitments and creating a universally understood language of deterrence. In a 1967 speech, McNamara proclaimed:

No sane citizen, political leader or nation wants thermonuclear war.... We must understand the differences among actions which increase its risks, those which reduce them and those which, while costly, have little influence one way or another.... It is important to understand that assured destruction is the very essence of the whole deterrence concept.... The conclusion, then, is clear: if the United States is to deter a nuclear attack on itself or its allies, it must possess an actual and a credible assured-destruction capability.<sup>126</sup>

Such sentiments were repeated in a 1968 speech before Congress:

To put it bluntly, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States can now attack the other, even by complete surprise, without suffering massive damage in retaliation.... It is precisely this mutual capability to destroy one another, and, conversely, our respective inability to prevent such destruction, that provides both of us with the strongest possible motive to avoid a strategic nuclear war.<sup>127</sup>

Appalled by this system that held millions of innocent civilians at risk in the name of stability, Donald G. Brennan of the Hudson Institute added the word “mutual” before assured destruction to create a derisive acronym for McNamara’s theory that has endured ever since – MAD.

As McNamara alluded to before Congress, MAD held little regard for the utility of damage limitation measures, such as ballistic missile and civil defenses. Concurrent with the easy deterrence narrative described by Payne, the assured destruction framework only required survivable second-strike forces to sufficiently damage an adversary’s population and industrial

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<sup>126</sup> Robert McNamara, “Mutual Deterrence” (San Francisco, September 18, 1967), <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/deterrence/mcnamara-deterrence.html>.

<sup>127</sup> “Department of Defense Appropriations for 1969: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 143.

base. Ballistic missile defenses would only serve to destabilize the US-Soviet relationship and could be overcome with much reduced investment in offensive systems.<sup>128</sup> McNamara codified this philosophy with his rejection of the deployment of the NIKE-X ballistic missile defense program in 1966, designed to protect large urban areas from Soviet attack.<sup>129</sup>

The rejection of damage limitation efforts revealed one fatal weakness of the MAD concept, the ethnocentric assumption that the Soviet Union would accept this Western formulation for “stability.” This was not a condition unique to McNamara, mirror-imaging was pervasive among US defense theorists and practitioners at this time. Hypotheses that the Soviets would be satisfied with strategic parity and similarly pursue mutual vulnerability to enhance stability had no basis in reality. Rather, all available evidence pointed to Soviet rejection of the stability centric approach as limiting principle of strategic behavior and the belief in a “winnable,” or at the very least survivable, nuclear exchange despite the enormous implicit costs.<sup>130</sup> Vulnerability was not a condition that the Soviet Union saw as desirable, likely derived from the horrors of Nazi invasion, and the military uncertainties of nuclear war precluded the guarantee of a retaliatory strike capable of unacceptable damage.<sup>131</sup>

Despite the significant implications of this misperception, these warnings generally failed to overcome the dominant position enjoyed by mutual vulnerability in defense discourse and National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Concurrent with the origins of the strategic culture movement, the mid to late 1970s started to see an erosion of

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<sup>128</sup> Donald R. Baucom, *The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 26.

<sup>129</sup> Baucom, 26.

<sup>130</sup> Ermarth, “Contrasts in American and Soviet Strategic Thought,” 144–46.

<sup>131</sup> John A. Battilega, “Soviet Views of Nuclear Warfare: The Post-Cold War Interviews,” in *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice*, ed. Henry D. Sokolski (Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 160, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=450469>.

confidence in the universality of this framework. A 1976 competitive analysis experiment by a group of government and non-government experts on Soviet affairs sharply challenged the status quo findings of previous NIEs. Led by Richard Pipes, this “Team B” opposition group concluded:

Soviet leaders are determined to achieve the maximum attainable measure of strategic superiority over the US... which is measured not in Western assured destruction terms but rather in terms of war-fighting objectives of achieving post-war dominance and limiting damage to the maximum extent possible. We believe that Soviet leaders... place a high priority on attainment of a superiority that would deny the U.S. effective retaliatory options against a nuclear attack.<sup>132</sup>

The warnings of Team B would be realized by the Soviet Union’s attainment of superiority in the number of ICBMs, total number of warheads, and cumulative megatonnage during this time.<sup>133</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the MAD philosophy was its lack of implementation in US nuclear planning. Despite significant emphasis from civilian leadership, defense theorists, and academics during the McNamara years, it is highly probable that the targeting component of MAD was *never* actualized by SAC. Gen. Russel E. Dougherty, a former commander in chief of SAC, maintained that limited numbers of warheads and missile accuracy early in the Cold War may have brought about an end-game similar to MAD, but cities were never targeted directly and US planners never “went out to destroy Soviet society.”<sup>134</sup> For

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<sup>132</sup> “Intelligence Community Experiment in Competitive Analysis: Soviet Strategic Objectives An Alternative View” (Washington, D.C.: Director of Central Intelligence, December 1976), 46, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB139/nitze10.pdf>.

<sup>133</sup> Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, “Nuclear U.S. and Soviet/Russian Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, 1959-2008,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 65, no. 1 (January 2009): 63, <https://doi.org/10.2968/065001008>.

<sup>134</sup> Grier, “In the Shadow of MAD.”

whatever reason, McNamara never changed the SIOP to execute his assured destruction plan, instead, “actual targets of US forces remained overwhelmingly programmed for counterforce.”<sup>135</sup>

### **Effect of MAD on US Missile Defense Development and Policy**

**Postwar Period.** US missile defense efforts long predate McNamara’s MAD formula. The advent and use of the V-2 ballistic missile by Nazi Germany during World War Two convinced the US military that a defense against such weapons must be found. During the next two decades, the Air Force, through Projects WIZARD and THUMPER, and Army, through NIKE-ZEUS, would race to develop the first ABM system to counteract the growing Soviet missile threat.<sup>136</sup> Little consideration was given to the effects of ABM development on the geostrategic relationship between the US-Soviet Union during the 1940s-50s. Instead, this research was treated as one of many new and innovative military capabilities emerging during a technological golden era. While political debates emerged surrounding cost and effectiveness, strategic stability did not play a factor.

These attitudes began to shift dramatically with the swearing in of the Kennedy administration in 1960. Early after entering office, McNamara recommended against the deployment of the NIKE-ZEUS system due to high costs and the belief that it would cause the Soviets to increase ICBM forces.<sup>137</sup> This hostility to missile defense systems would continue throughout his time as Secretary of Defense. After McNamara completed his shift from counterforce to assured destruction, missile defenses designed to protect large urban areas from Soviet attack became detrimental to his theory of stability. Even when faced with increased

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<sup>135</sup> Correll, “The Making of MAD.”

<sup>136</sup> Becker, “Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense: Russia and the United States,” 6.

<sup>137</sup> Baucom, *The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983*, 17.

political pressure to deploy some sort of defensive ABM architecture after the Soviet installation of the GALOSH system in 1966, McNamara convinced President Johnson to tie continued funding for ABM to the success or failure of arms control negotiation with the Soviets.<sup>138</sup> The explosion of a Chinese hydrogen bomb in 1967 was finally able to overcome McNamara's opposition to the deployment of a "thin" US ABM system, SENTINEL, but only after extensive reassurances were offered to the Soviets about the target of this new system and the futility of defensive efforts in general.<sup>139</sup> Despite SENTINEL precluding the "balance of terror" with China, none of the doomsday predictions regarding first-strike instability ever materialized with the US-China relationship.<sup>140</sup>

The consistent ballistic missile defense (BMD) opposition of McNamara was joined by an increasing contingent of the scientific community. In response to the announcement of the SENTINEL deployment in 1967, scientists across the country began a concerted lobbying effort within the federal government and wider American populace to stir up disapproval of the program. Skillful use of the press advanced a number of arguments against US ABM, such as the proximity to urban areas making these cities a target, the possibility of accidental interceptor detonation, prohibitive costs associated with nationwide deployment, and the increasing potential for arms races.<sup>141</sup> How such commentators reconciled MAD's wholesale inability to defend the same cities that may become targets if an ABM interceptor was based in proximity is one of this era's great mysteries. Nonetheless, the negative press and public opinion caused by this

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<sup>138</sup> Baucom, 30–32.

<sup>139</sup> Baucom, 36–37.

<sup>140</sup> Thérèse Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Cold War for a New Era of Strategic Piracy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), 44.

<sup>141</sup> Joel Primack and Frank Von Hippel, "Stopping Sentinel," in *Advice and Dissent: Scientists in the Political Arena* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1974), 189–92, <https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2019-10/Advice-and-Dissent-Chapter13.pdf>.

campaign played a significant role in the Nixon administration's transformation of SENTINEL into SAFEGUARD, designed to only protect Minuteman ICBM silo fields in Montana and North Dakota.<sup>142</sup>

**The ABM Treaty and the “Codification of MAD.”** The most prominent influence of the MAD philosophy on missile defense efforts in the US would follow shortly after the brief deployment of SAFEGUARD: the ABM Treaty of 1972. As part of the larger Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) agreements, President Nixon and Secretary of Defense Henry Kissinger believed that strategic arms control was a potential avenue to moderate Soviet behavior. The parity of nuclear warheads and delivery systems achieved during this time by the Soviets was approached in a positive manner, where the US and Soviet Union could engage one another as equals at the negotiating table and reshape the competition of the Cold War. Thus, in 1972 the US and Soviet Union agreed to severely restrict the deployment of ABM systems. Under this treaty, two ABM locations were allowed per state, one for the capital and one for an ICBM silo field, while development of air, sea, space, or mobile land-based launchers or ABM capabilities for non-designated interceptors, was prevented.<sup>143</sup> Both parties agreed that these measures “would be a substantial factor in curbing the race in strategic offensive arms and would lead to a decrease in the risk of outbreak of war involving nuclear weapons.”<sup>144</sup>

Attributing the buildup of offensive arms to defensive developments represented an explicit endorsement of the MAD concept of the “action-reaction” cycle: increased defensive developments would drive further offensive improvements and a perpetual arms race would be

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<sup>142</sup> Baucom, *The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983*, 41.

<sup>143</sup> “Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty),” U.S. Department of State, 1972, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/101888.htm#text>.

<sup>144</sup> “Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty).”

the only result. By forcing an “inaction-inaction” cycle instead, the ABM Treaty hoped to remove the incentive for quantitative and qualitative improvements of offensive capabilities. Proponents of arms control, and by extension the easy deterrence narrative, celebrated this move as a codification of the MAD philosophy and acceptance of strategic stability by the Soviets. One such example from the Arms Control Association argued the following: “Mutual assured destruction... is not a chosen policy, but a grim and unavoidable reality.... It is that unchanging reality that is the fundamental basis for the ABM Treaty.”<sup>145</sup> John Newhouse echoed these sentiments: “The ABM Treaty had at last been signed, with each side renouncing the defense of its society and territory against the other’s nuclear weapons. That is the treaty’s historic essence.”<sup>146</sup> Combined with the SALT limits on ICBMs, the wholesale renouncement of ABM capabilities meant that the US and Soviets lacked any compelling reason to add further delivery systems or develop increased accuracy for counterforce missile strikes in a truly MAD-centric relationship.

Unfortunately, there were several immediate red flags that the Soviet Union did not share similar thoughts on the “codification of MAD.” The most glaring of these warnings was the substantial quantitative and qualitative improvement in Soviet strategic forces that took place *after* the signing of SALT I and the ABM Treaty. In 1970, the Soviets had roughly 1,500 available warheads; by 1980 that number had risen to almost 6,000 and surpassed the US stockpile by roughly 4,000 warheads.<sup>147</sup> Contrary to the predictions of the inaction-inaction

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<sup>145</sup> Matthew Bunn, *Foundation for the Future: The ABM Treaty and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: Arms Control Association, 1990), 5, [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/matthew\\_bunn/files/abm\\_searchable.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/matthew_bunn/files/abm_searchable.pdf).

<sup>146</sup> John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT* (Washington : Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1989), 260, <http://archive.org/details/colddawnstoryofs0000newh>.

<sup>147</sup> Norris and Kristensen, “Nuclear U.S. and Soviet/Russian Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, 1959-2008,” 63.

model, “In the absence of U.S. missile defense, the Soviet Union pursued the greatest buildup of strategic offensive missile capabilities in history.”<sup>148</sup> The new missiles deployed during this time period, such as the SS-17, SS-18, and SS-19, were capable of mounting multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) and enjoyed dramatically lower circular error probable (CEP), a measurement of precision, than their predecessors.<sup>149</sup> Reducing CEP is a critical element for effective targeting of small, hardened targets, most prominently the adversary’s missile silos, but is relatively unnecessary for large urban areas. These new developments became such a concern that Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger issued a statement of warning and disappointment in the Soviet pursuit of “major counterforce capabilities.”<sup>150</sup>

These ICBM improvements were coupled with continued investment in strategic air defense and passive civil defense measures to limit damage in the event of a nuclear war. Though the ABM Treaty explicitly prohibited nationwide BMD systems, no similar limits existed on air defenses. Faced with the new threat of Western nuclear-armed strategic bombers in the late 1940s, the Soviet Union established a separate service for strategic air defense: *Voiska Protivovozdushnoi oborony strany* (PVO).<sup>151</sup> By the 1980s, the DoD estimated that this force consisted of over 12,000 surface-to-air missile (SAM) launchers buttressed by 10,000 early warning or intercept radars, substantially mitigating the ability for US retaliation via strategic bombers and cruise missiles.<sup>152</sup> The PVO was backstopped by the Soviet passive civil defense

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<sup>148</sup> Keith B. Payne, “Action-reaction Metaphysics and Negligence,” *The Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016366001317149228>.

<sup>149</sup> Norris and Kristensen, “Nuclear U.S. and Soviet/Russian Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, 1959-2008,” 67.

<sup>150</sup> Baucom, *The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983*, 78.

<sup>151</sup> David R. Jones, “Soviet Strategic and Civil Defence,” in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 217.

<sup>152</sup> Jones, 218.



system: the *grazhdanskaia oborona* (GO). Declassified CIA estimates from the late 1970s reveal that the extensive civil defense measures pursued by the GO were designed to “assure the survival of the homeland and to leave the USSR in a stronger postwar position than its adversaries.”<sup>153</sup> In addition to an extensive network of hardened shelters designed to protect virtually all of Soviet leadership and anywhere from 10-30% of its population, substantial preparation was made to protect medical personnel and supplies to facilitate faster recovery in the postwar period.<sup>154</sup> At worst, this preparation to limit damage could be considered destabilizing in the same fashion as missile defense under the MAD school of nuclear deterrence.

Of final concern to the Soviet rejection of MAD was its own doctrine, which consistently placed great value on the role of strategic defense of the homeland. Russian strategic culture has deeply internalized feelings of outside threat, resulting from numerous invasions by various powers over the course of its long military history.<sup>155</sup> Drawing harsh lessons from 1941, the “principle of strategic defense of the homeland, comprised of layers of active and passive defenses, had become and would remain, an essential part of its approach to strategic security and warfare.”<sup>156</sup> Soviet Premier Kosygin exemplified this approach during an exchange with McNamara over the validity of MAD’s prohibition on defensive systems, exclaiming, “Defense is moral, offense is immoral!”<sup>157</sup> Under this framework, the “hostage exchange” with a

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<sup>153</sup> “Soviet Civil Defense” (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, July 1978), 1, [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000420176.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000420176.pdf).

<sup>154</sup> “Soviet Civil Defense,” 2; “Soviet Civil Defense: Medical Planning for Postattack Recovery” (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, July 1984), iii, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB439/docs/UndergroundFacilities.pdf>.

<sup>155</sup> David R. Jones, “Soviet Strategic Culture,” in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 38.

<sup>156</sup> Peppino DeBiasco, “Russia and Missile Defense: Toward An Integrated Approach,” *National Institute for Public Policy Information Series*, no. 512 (January 18, 2022): 3.

<sup>157</sup> Baucom, *The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983*, 34.

perceived hostile power required by MAD would be wholly undesirable and avoided at all hazard.

Given the Soviets previous deployment of an ABM system around Moscow and the doctrinal emphasis on strategic defenses, it is most likely that Brezhnev agreed to the ABM Treaty to mitigate the effect of US technological superiority in the domain of BMD and prevent any threat to Soviet offensive capabilities.<sup>158</sup> Contrary to the opinion of many in the easy deterrence camp, the convergence of outcomes between the MAD-centric US and the Soviet Union of the early 1970s does not necessarily mean convergence of motivation. As post-Cold War interviews with high-ranking members of the Soviet General Staff demonstrate, “even though concepts of assured retaliation eventually became a part of Soviet doctrine, these concepts did not stem from a deliberate shift to MAD. Rather, they came from what the Soviets saw as the inherent difficulty of successful military counters to a U.S. first strike.”<sup>159</sup> This sober assessment of operational challenges associated with prosecuting a nuclear war did not completely prevent Soviet thought on the possibility of nuclear victory. True believers of Marxism-Leninism had to endorse some potential for victory, as the “objective laws of history” could not be derailed by the “technological works of man and the caprice of a historically doomed opponent.”<sup>160</sup> The theory of MAD gives no such prescription to the possibility of nuclear warfighting and victory – the only winnable nuclear war is the one not fought out of fear of retaliation.

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<sup>158</sup> Robert Arnett, “Soviet Thinking on Nuclear War,” in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 376.

<sup>159</sup> Battilega, “Soviet Views of Nuclear Warfare: The Post-Cold War Interviews,” 164.

<sup>160</sup> Arnett, “Soviet Thinking on Nuclear War,” 376; Ermarth, “Contrasts in American and Soviet Strategic Thought,” 144.

**The Dawn of SDI.** By the late 1970s, many in the defense community began to realize that the Soviet Union was not conforming to the rules of the American game. The action-reaction cycle proposed by McNamara was failing to stop Soviet nuclear force buildup that had reached equivalence with the US and was threatening to approach superiority. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown summarized this quandary before the Senate in 1979: “Soviet spending has shown no response to US restraint – when we build, they build; when we cut, they build.”<sup>161</sup> The lone site allowed by the ABM Treaty, SAFEGUARD, was terminated in 1976 after less than a year of service. Faced with these grim realities, President Carter enacted a “countervailing” strategy of nuclear deterrence via Presidential Directive 59 that acknowledged the Soviet equivalence in strategic forces and directed primarily counterforce nuclear targeting.<sup>162</sup> However, the beginning of the shift away from MAD-centric thinking on nuclear deterrence did not accompany a similar transition in BMD.

The perceptual shift to a positive role for ABM in the Cold War security environment was ushered in by the Reagan administration. President Reagan’s wholesale rejection of the MAD premise of mutual vulnerability began during his tenure as governor of California. As early as 1968, Reagan “challenged the role of MAD” and attempted to leverage his governorship to defend the American people against a rising threat of Soviet ballistic missiles.<sup>163</sup> Such attitudes remained central to Reagan’s presidency roughly 15 years later. According to then President Reagan, “to look down to an endless future with both us sitting here with these horrible

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<sup>161</sup> “First Concurrent Resolution on the Budget, Fiscal Year 1980: The Federal Budget for 1980” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 18, 1979), 140, [https://books.google.com/books?id=euraquLEMWUC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=euraquLEMWUC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>162</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Presidential Directive/NSC-59” (Washington, D.C.: The White House, July 25, 1980), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb390/docs/7-25-80%20PD%2059.pdf>.

<sup>163</sup> “Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century,” appendix J: 75.

missiles aimed at each other and the only thing preventing a holocaust is just so long as no one pulls the trigger – this is unthinkable.”<sup>164</sup>

Rather than provocative and destabilizing, Reagan saw missile defense as a way out of the trap of increasing vulnerability to Soviet capabilities. In a 1983 speech announcing the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), Reagan attempted to sell the American public on his new path for BMD in US national security: “What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?”<sup>165</sup> Reagan was convinced that the US technological and scientific base could be leveraged to offset the possibility of massive Soviet ballistic missile attack and eliminate the insidious danger of nuclear Armageddon present throughout the Cold War. Thus, while remaining under the auspices of the ABM Treaty, a substantial R&D program was launched by the newly formed Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO). By the end of the decade, over \$20.9 billion would be devoted to R&D on multiple promising avenues of BMD technology, including space and airborne-based sensors as well as space and ground-based interceptors.<sup>166</sup> Though blocked from deployment by the ABM Treaty at the time, many of the technological advancements made during this period would form the foundation of missile defense technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>164</sup> Robert Jervis, “The Dustbin of History: Mutual Assured Destruction,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 133 (2002): 41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3183553>.

<sup>165</sup> Ronald Reagan, “SDI Speech,” <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/missile-defense/sdi-speech.html>.

<sup>166</sup> “A Look at Lessons Learned During SDIO’s First 7 Years” (Washington, D.C.: United States General Accounting Office, May 16, 1991), 1, 3, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/t-nsiad-91-33.pdf>.

The decision to pursue SDI in response to ever growing Soviet strategic force buildups generated substantial domestic and international controversy. In a major departure from the fiscal hostility of the previous two decades, the response of the legislature was uncharacteristically positive. Due in no small part to Reagan's personal dynamism, Congress appropriated 70-80 percent of the President's requested total budget for SDI from 1984-1988.<sup>167</sup> Legislative compliance would be short-lived, however, as attempts to test emerging technologies outside of the traditional interpretation of the ABM Treaty was blocked by Congressional mandate in 1986.<sup>168</sup>

Facilitated by the unwavering belief in the easy deterrence narrative of mutual vulnerability and sanctity of the ABM Treaty, the reaction of the scientific community and arms control advocate lobbies was intense. Despite Reagan's proposal to share the defensive technology with the Soviet Union, over 6,500 professors and graduate students signed a pledge to not be a part of the SDI program in 1986.<sup>169</sup> In addition to familiar criticisms of cost, technical infeasibility, and destabilization of the US-Soviet relationship, SDI was accused of being the death knell for future arms control agreements and the peaceful use of space.<sup>170</sup> Driven by the MAD logic of action-reaction, this narrative refused to treat the Soviet Union as anything

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<sup>167</sup> James A Abrahamson and Henry F Cooper, "What Did We Get For Our \$30-Billion Investment in SDI/BMD" (Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Public Policy, September 1993), 1, [http://highfrontier.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/What-for-30B\\_.pdf](http://highfrontier.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/What-for-30B_.pdf).

<sup>168</sup> Bunn, *Foundation for the Future: The ABM Treaty and National Security*, 19.

<sup>169</sup> David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, "The 'Action-Reaction' Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities," *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 6 (November 2, 2021): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2021.1983336>.

<sup>170</sup> Sidney D. Drell, Philip J. Farley, and David Holloway, "Preserving the ABM Treaty: A Critique of the Reagan Strategic Defense Initiative," *International Security* 9, no. 2 (1984): 84–89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538668>; Bunn, *Foundation for the Future: The ABM Treaty and National Security*, 18–19.

other than a “benign cog caught in a mechanistic US-led arms race dynamic.”<sup>171</sup> As such, critics dubbed SDI efforts as the sole roadblock to progress on the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START I) and the initiator of a vast expansion of the strategic arms race. McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, former Secretary of Defense McNamara, and Gerrard C. Smith codified this philosophy in a *Foreign Affairs* article imploring President Reagan to set aside his plans for “Star Wars” to bring the Soviets back to the negotiating table: “It is possible to reach good agreements, or possible to insist on the Star Wars program as it stands, but wholly impossible to do both.”<sup>172</sup> The proponents of this narrative went as far as to hail Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev’s decision to not attempt reciprocal SDI development as an act of courageous “restraint.”<sup>173</sup>

Ultimately, the doomsday predictions by the plethora of SDI critics failed to materialize. The nuclear force improvements initiated by the Soviets long before SDI was announced continued at a similar pace throughout the 1980s, unaffected by reductions in scope of the SDI program in the latter part of the decade.<sup>174</sup> On the arms control front, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was signed in 1987, followed by START I in 1991. Despite predictably oppositional declaratory policy, Reagan’s commitment to SDI convinced many Soviet officials of the inability of the Soviet Union to compete in this domain. Former Soviet Chief of Staff Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, former Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh, former Gorbachev aide Anatoly Chernyaev, former Russian Deputy Foreign

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<sup>171</sup> Trachtenberg, Dodge, and Payne, “The ‘Action-Reaction’ Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities,” 43.

<sup>172</sup> McGeorge Bundy et al., “The President’s Choice: Star Wars or Arms Control,” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1984, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1984-12-01/presidents-choice-star-wars-or-arms-control>.

<sup>173</sup> David E. Hoffman, “Mutually Assured Misperception on SDI,” *Arms Control Today* 40, no. 8 (October 2010): 52–56.

<sup>174</sup> Trachtenberg, Dodge, and Payne, “The ‘Action-Reaction’ Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities,” 44.

Minister Grigoriy Berdennikov, and former Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Foreign Relations Committee Vladimir Lukin unanimously agreed that Reagan's refusal to negotiate away SDI was decisive to Soviet "economic and political calculations" that hastened the end of the Cold War.<sup>175</sup> Thus, the Soviet/Russian objection to missile defense is demonstrably multi-dimensional and has more to do with an expansion of US military power than destabilization.

**Post-Cold War Period.** Though Reagan's expansive vision was never fully actualized, the perceptual shift initiated by SDI toward a more positive role for missile defense gathered increased momentum in the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union appeared to usher in a new era in US-Russian relations and render concerns of strategic stability between the superpowers obsolete. Russian President Boris Yeltsin even proposed working with the US on global missile defense, "replacing Mutual Assured Destruction with Mutual Assured Survival."<sup>176</sup> Instead of bipolar competition between titanic military-political blocs of East and West, the new security environment of the immediate post-Cold War period was dominated by smaller threats from regional adversaries. Washington's inexperience with these new regional actors, such as Iraq, Iran, Libya, and North Korea, fostered an increasing reluctance to engage in a MAD-centric relationship with such unfamiliar regimes.<sup>177</sup> To further complicate matters, this era saw dramatic proliferation in dual-capable ballistic missiles and related technologies, especially amongst the aforementioned cadre of "rogue states." Consequently, previously held paradigms of the sanctity of deterrence by punishment required reexamination.

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<sup>175</sup> Abrahamson and Cooper, "What Did We Get For Our \$30-Billion Investment in SDI/BMD," 3.

<sup>176</sup> "Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century," 58.

<sup>177</sup> "Statement of the Honorable Douglas J. Feith Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Senate Armed Services Hearing on the Nuclear Posture Review" (Senate Armed Services Committee, February 14, 2002), 2, [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2002\\_hr/feith0214.pdf](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2002_hr/feith0214.pdf).

The First Gulf War provided the first example of the unreliability of the easy deterrence narrative in this new security environment. Despite overwhelming conventional superiority of the coalition arrayed against him, Saddam Hussein's arrogance and overestimation of Iraqi capabilities led to a disastrous miscalculation for the Iraqi military.<sup>178</sup> Threats of retaliation, built on the foundation of Cold War deterrence, fell on deaf ears in Baghdad after the invasion and occupation of Kuwait. This failure to deter an unfamiliar actor resulted in the first battlefield uses of ballistic missiles in both a tactical and strategic role, with Saddam launching Scud ballistic missiles against coalition forces and civilian targets in Israel to draw them into the war and fracture coalition support.<sup>179</sup> In response, Patriot terminal missile defense batteries were deployed to Israel in one of the first uses of missile defense to assure US partners of security commitments and forestall their entry into the war.<sup>180</sup> While successful, the coercive, geopolitical implications of these conventional strikes were observed the world over. The Gulf War also demonstrated the immense difficulty of destroying adversary ballistic missiles before they are launched, often referred to as "left-of-launch." Despite unquestioned coalition air supremacy and constant combat air patrols tasked with finding and terminating Scud launchers, air power was not able to destroy a single mobile launcher during the entirety of Desert Storm.<sup>181</sup>

In recognition of the difficulty of deterrence in this new era and the coercive utility of ballistic missile attacks, the George H. W. Bush administration restructured SDI to Global

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<sup>178</sup> Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, 55.

<sup>179</sup> Rick Atkinson and Dan Balz, "Scud Hits Tel Aviv, Leaving 3 Dead, 96 Hurt," *Washington Post*, January 23, 1991, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/fogofwar/archive/post012291.htm>.

<sup>180</sup> Missile Defense Project, "Patriot," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 24, 2022, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/system/patriot/>.

<sup>181</sup> Colonel Mark E Kipphut, "Crossbow and Gulf War Counter-Scud Efforts: Lessons From History," *The Counterproliferation Papers*, Future Warfare, no. 15 (February 2003): 18–19.



Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS). DoD justification for this shift reinforced the worries of difficult deterrence theorists:

The use of Iraqi Scuds in the Persian Gulf War illustrates the risks of a deterrence strategy based solely on the threat of retaliation. Our inability to deter the use of Iraqi Scuds, or destroy them all before they were launched, validates the need for missile defenses against both short-range theater ballistic missiles, and the follow-on systems that eventually could reach our shores.<sup>182</sup>

Though substantially scaled down from SDI, GPALS sought to defeat a force of less than 200 incoming missiles through ground and space-based interceptors, as well as continue development of theater missile defenses for deployed forces abroad.<sup>183</sup> Part of the reason for this emphasis on theater defense was the Missile Defense Act of 1991, which hamstrung development efforts by mandating compliance with the ABM Treaty.<sup>184</sup> Regarding arms control, the Bush administration signed the START II Treaty in 1993, reducing US and Russian nuclear stockpiles by over 50 percent to 3000-3500 deployed warheads.<sup>185</sup>

While the Clinton administration would end up cancelling the GPALS program, the rejection of MAD in this new environment among a growing coalition of government and civilian groups would persist. Nuclear threats made by the PRC during the Third Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996 helped catalyze the Alaskan state legislature to explicitly petition the federal

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<sup>182</sup> “The President’s New Focus for SDI: Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS)” (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, June 6, 1991), 3, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA338966.pdf>.

<sup>183</sup> “The President’s New Focus for SDI: Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS),” 2.

<sup>184</sup> Steve Lambakis, *The Future of Homeland Missile Defenses* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2014), 10, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Future-of-Homeland-Missile-Defenses.pdf>.

<sup>185</sup> “Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II (START II),” U.S. Department of State, January 3, 1993, [//2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102887.htm](https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102887.htm).

government for ballistic missile defense.<sup>186</sup> The findings of the Rumsfeld Commission in 1998 would add further fuel to this fire, codifying the diverse suite of threats in the new security environment and casting significant doubt on the intelligence community's ability to anticipate the ballistic missile capabilities of regional powers.<sup>187</sup> These growing sentiments acknowledging the dangerous implications of foregoing missile defense in a new era culminated in the Missile Defense Act of 1999. This legislation committed America "to deploy as soon as is technologically possible an effective National Missile Defense system capable of defending the territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack."<sup>188</sup> Yet again, no relief was sought from the obligations of the ABM Treaty.

The election of President George W. Bush the following year would usher in a golden age of missile defense policy and strategy. This administration had to address two primary issues: the expansive proliferation of missiles and WMD technology and the new strategic relationship with Russia. While continuing the emphasis on limited BMD of his predecessors, the Bush administration articulated a substantially expanded role for missile defense in US declaratory policy. As part of the New Triad, composed of conventional and nuclear offensive systems, active and passive defenses, and a "revitalized defense infrastructure," missile defenses were officially acknowledged as contributing to deterrence by increasing complexity and uncertainty in the attacker's calculus.<sup>189</sup> Thus, deterrence by denial had officially found its place

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<sup>186</sup> "Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century," 64.

<sup>187</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, "Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States," Executive Summary (Washington, D.C.: 104th Congress, July 15, 1998), <https://irp.fas.org/threat/bm-threat.htm>.

<sup>188</sup> "National Missile Defense Act," Pub. L. No. 106-38, H.R. 4 (1999), <https://www.congress.gov/106/plaws/publ38/PLAW-106publ38.pdf>.

<sup>189</sup> "Excerpts of Classified Nuclear Posture Review" (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, January 8, 2002), 1-3, <https://uploads.fas.org/media/Excerpts-of-Classified-Nuclear-Posture-Review.pdf>.

in the lexicon of US declaratory policy. This New Triad had four broad goals, which have endured relatively unchanged to the present day: “deter coercion or attack, . . . assure allies and friends of U.S. security commitments, dissuade adversaries from competing militarily with the United States, and, if deterrence fails, decisively defeat an enemy while defending against its attacks on the United States, our friends, and our allies.”<sup>190</sup> To facilitate these goals, President Bush pledged to evaluate promising technologies and develop missile defense testing that would evolve with new operational concepts. Only one obstacle remained: the ABM Treaty.

In the early 2000s, the US and Russia shared many of the same security concerns. Violent religious extremism had struck the US on 9/11, concentrating global focus on Islamic terrorism. Russia would not be immune from these incidents, facing mass casualty attacks from Chechen terrorists in 2002, the Moscow theater hostage crisis, and again in 2004, the Beslan school siege. In these lamentably unifying circumstances, the Bush administration sought new channels for dialogue on political and military measures to counter proliferation and address the new security environment writ large. To this end, Presidents Bush and Vladimir Putin issued a joint declaration of cooperation in 2002 on various political, economic, proliferation, and missile defense initiatives. Reliance on MAD seemed no longer an appropriate basis for this new strategic relationship, with this joint statement proclaiming, “The era in which the United States and Russia saw each other as an enemy or strategic threat has ended. We are partners and we will cooperate to advance stability, security, and economic integration, and to jointly counter global challenges and to help resolve regional conflicts.”<sup>191</sup> Despite these warming sentiments and

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<sup>190</sup> “Statement of the Honorable Douglas J. Feith Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Senate Armed Services Hearing on the Nuclear Posture Review,” 4.

<sup>191</sup> “Joint Declaration by President George W. Bush and President Vladimir V. Putin on the New Strategic Relationship Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation,” The

repeated dialogue between high-level, strategic advisory groups, the US and Russia could not agree on a framework for bilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Ultimately, President Bush's desire to implement missile defense testing and architectures to counter rogue states and terrorist threats superseded the obligations of the treaty, and the US officially withdrew in June of 2002.

The abject transformation of the global landscape and emergence of a new security relationship with Russia did not stop vociferous criticism of the US withdrawal from the treaty. The same familiar arguments were rolled out by easy deterrence theorists – the destruction of strategic stability between the US and Russia, the inevitability of arms races, and the dissolution of future arms control agreements. The architect of the MAD doctrine, Robert McNamara, wrote that it was “crazy” for President Bush to consider the possibility of future reductions in offensive arms with the possibility of expanded defenses – “The other side will never go for it.”<sup>192</sup> Then Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joe Biden argued that this move would initiate arms buildups in Russia, Pakistan, and India among claims that “the thing we remain least vulnerable to is an ICBM attack from another nation.”<sup>193</sup> He went on to claim that “unilaterally abandoning the ABM Treaty would be a serious mistake... the [Bush] Administration has not offered any convincing rationale for why any missile defense test it may need to conduct would require walking away from a treaty that has helped keep the peace for the last 30 years.”<sup>194</sup>

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American Presidency Project, May 24, 2002, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/joint-declaration-president-george-w-bush-and-president-vladimir-v-putin-the-new-strategic>.

<sup>192</sup> Robert McNamara, “MAD Is Not Bad,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (2000): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0893-7850.00282>.

<sup>193</sup> Manuel Perez-Rivas, “U.S. Quits ABM Treaty,” *CNN*, December 14, 2001, <https://www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/12/13/rec.bush.abm/>.

<sup>194</sup> Bryce Farabaugh and Deverrick Holmes, “Did Abandoning the ABM Treaty Make America Safer?,” Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, June 27, 2019, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/did-abandoning-the-abm-treaty-make-america-safer/>.

Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State under President Clinton asserted that US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty would be seen “as an unwelcome indicator” by US allies in Europe of resurgent American unilateralism.<sup>195</sup> Over 30 members of the House of Representatives went so far as to sue President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to stop the US withdrawal.<sup>196</sup> Even the United Methodist Church issued a lengthy treatise about the “illusory, unnecessary, and wasteful” prospect of national missile defense and its “dangerously destabilizing impact of the loss of nuclear disarmament treaties.”<sup>197</sup>

Despite such protests, the action-reaction cycle theorized by critics again failed to materialize. The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), reducing deployed strategic nuclear forces to 1,700-2,200 warheads, was signed by Presidents Bush and Putin after the US announced its intention to withdraw from the ABM Treaty.<sup>198</sup> Rather than eliminating the possibility of arms control, the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and subsequent announcement of a national missile defense system occurred concurrently with the largest numerical reductions of nuclear arms in history.<sup>199</sup> The international outrage purported by critics was also largely absent. US allies in Europe did not reconsider US commitment to the continent,

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<sup>195</sup> Steven Mufson and Sharon LaFraniere, “ABM Withdrawal A Turning Point In Arms Control,” *Washington Post*, December 13, 2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/12/13/abm-withdrawal-a-turning-point-in-arms-control/0ba2144c-1bbc-4ccd-ae82-46eb30fd1c22/>.

<sup>196</sup> Wade Bose, “U.S. Withdraws From ABM Treaty; Global Response Muted,” *Arms Control Today*, July 2002, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-07/news/us-withdraws-abm-treaty-global-response-muted>.

<sup>197</sup> “Church’s Leaders Oppose U.S. Missile Defense Plan,” United Methodist News Service, May 4, 2001, [http://archives.umc.org/umns/news\\_archive2001.asp?ptid=2&story={885897A9-E880-4EB9-8814-71B05C43BBB0}&mid=3365](http://archives.umc.org/umns/news_archive2001.asp?ptid=2&story={885897A9-E880-4EB9-8814-71B05C43BBB0}&mid=3365).

<sup>198</sup> Daryl Kimball, “The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) At a Glance,” Arms Control Association, September 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/sort-glance>.

<sup>199</sup> Trachtenberg, Dodge, and Payne, “The ‘Action-Reaction’ Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities,” 48.

Chinese officials issued minor statements of opposition, and Vladimir Putin stated in a television broadcast that the US withdrawal “presents no threat to the security of the Russian Federation.”<sup>200</sup> Rather than hapless cogs caught in a mechanistic, US-driven wheel, it became clear that international opposition to US BMD development was a multi-dimensional calculation with political, military, and economic considerations.

**National Missile Defense and Beyond.** With the significant obstacle of the ABM Treaty gone, the Bush administration moved forward with plans for a national missile defense architecture. NSPD-23 was issued in 2002, which committed to the deployment of national missile defense capabilities by 2004, though the focus remained limited to hostile, regional actors and terrorists.<sup>201</sup> This Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMDS) was conceptualized as a layered defense, with overlapping capabilities fielded as technology matured to offer the greatest chance of intercept in multiple phases of missile flight.<sup>202</sup> Accordingly, the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system was first declared operational in 2004, consisting of a global network of sensors, fire control radars, and communication systems feeding information to five Ground-based Interceptors (GBIs) in Fort Greely, Alaska. President Bush’s plan called for the deployment of 40 more GBIs between Fort Greely and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, as well as a “Third Site” of 10 GBIs and an X-band midcourse radar in Poland and the Czech Republic respectively.<sup>203</sup> Basing interceptors in Europe would provide multiple engagement opportunities for ICBMs coming from the Middle East. While limited in number, the US-based

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<sup>200</sup> Perez-Rivas, “U.S. Quits ABM Treaty.”

<sup>201</sup> George W. Bush, “NSPD-23: National Policy on Ballistic Missile Defense,” Federation of American Scientists, December 16, 2002, <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nspd/nspd-23.htm>.

<sup>202</sup> Lambakis, *The Future of Homeland Missile Defenses*, 13.

<sup>203</sup> “Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) System,” CSIS Missile Defense Project, July 26, 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/system/gmd/>.

interceptors were deemed sufficient to counter the nascent missile programs of rogue states at the time, such as North Korea and Iran, while still satisfying the directive of the 1999 National Missile Defense Act. Moreover, Bush envisioned continued evolution of the homeland missile defense architecture as technology matured and fiscal barriers to more comprehensive systems eroded.

The arrival of the Obama administration in 2008 saw relative continuity of supportive rhetoric for missile defense against limited ballistic missile threats. The 2010 *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report* (BMDR) acknowledged the importance of missile defense to “project power abroad, to prevent and deter conflicts, and to prevail should deterrence fail.”<sup>204</sup> However, such contributions to deterrence remained only applicable to limited threats, as the BMDR reiterated the focus of US BMD was not Russian or Chinese arsenals.<sup>205</sup> Instead, the 2010 BMDR focused on dialogue with Russia and China to help build confidence in the value of limited missile defenses. In a break from Bush-era policy, Obama canceled the Third Site in favor of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) and slashed the number of planned GBIs from 44 to 30. This system refocused defense efforts in Europe on defeating the threat of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles from Iran with integrated theater and regional systems of NATO countries.

While the Obama administration insisted the decision was not influenced by Russia, Moscow vociferously opposed the project that they insisted was aimed at Russia’s nuclear deterrent. Claiming that the GBI base was “one of the instruments in an extremely dangerous

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<sup>204</sup> “Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report” (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, February 2010), i, [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/BMDR/BMDR\\_as\\_of\\_26JAN10\\_0630\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/BMDR/BMDR_as_of_26JAN10_0630_for_web.pdf).

<sup>205</sup> “Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report,” 4–5.

bundle of American military projects involving the one-sided development of a global missile shield system” Russia, and even some US allies in Western Europe, hailed the cancellation as a precursor for future arms control agreements and greater regional stability.<sup>206</sup> This linkage reinvigorated the familiar argument of the action-reaction cycle that had failed to materialize so many times before. Moscow would later express great concern with the later stages of the EPAA that planned for SM-3 interceptors in Poland, despite the fact that the SM-3s would need to be traveling at speeds in excess of 5.0km/sec. to be able to intercept Russian ICBMs and SLBMs.<sup>207</sup> By the end of Obama’s time in office, the decision to cut the remaining 14 GBIs from the GMD arsenal had been reversed due to advancements in North Korean and Iranian ICBM technology.<sup>208</sup>

While maintaining significant continuity from the Bush and Obama approaches, the Trump administration initiated several perceptual shifts that challenged core assumptions of the MAD-centric relationship between the US and Russia and China. First, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 repealed section two of the 1999 National Missile Defense Act and removed the codification for limited scope BMD. This new policy dictated that a “robust, layered missile defense system” is necessary to defend the US against “the developing and increasingly complex ballistic missile threat.”<sup>209</sup> The removal of this institutional barrier

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<sup>206</sup> Tomek Rolski and Jonathan Karl, “Russia Makes New Threats Over U.S.-Poland Missile Deal,” ABC News, August 20, 2008, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=5617271&page=1>; Luke Harding and Ian Traynor, “Obama Abandons Missile Defence Shield in Europe,” *The Guardian*, September 17, 2009, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/17/missile-defence-shield-barack-obama>.

<sup>207</sup> Dean A. Wilkening, “Does Missile Defence in Europe Threaten Russia?,” *Survival* 54, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2012.657531>.

<sup>208</sup> Lambakis, *The Future of Homeland Missile Defenses*, 16.

<sup>209</sup> “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017,” Pub. L. No. 114–328, § 1681 (2016), <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ328/PLAW-114publ328.pdf>.



would theoretically allow for comprehensive missile defense efforts directed against large-scale attacks from Russia or China. Such sentiments were reinforced by President Trump’s statements about the objective of US missile defense concurrent with the release of the 2019 *Missile Defense Review* (MDR): “Our goal is simple: to ensure that we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States — anywhere, anytime, anyplace.”<sup>210</sup> Whether or not such rhetoric was purely bluster is difficult to discern, as the MDR explicitly reiterates the US reliance on deterrence against Russian or Chinese missile attacks on the homeland.<sup>211</sup> Regardless, the Trump administration initiated the expansion of the GBI stockpile from 44 to 64, incorporated SM-3 Block IIA interceptors on Aegis ships into the layered homeland defense architecture against ICBMs, and reopened the discussion of space-based interceptors reminiscent of Brilliant Pebbles from the Reagan era. All of these measures in combination suggest a more expansive approach to BMD than just regional threats or accidental launches.

Second, a direct linkage between the responsibility of the US government to ensure the safety of the American people and missile defense was codified by the 2019 MDR. Building from the 2017 *National Security Strategy’s* (NSS) assertion that “our fundamental responsibility is to protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life,” the 2019 MDR describes missile defense as an “essential component” of that mission.<sup>212</sup> It is difficult to maintain arguments for mutual vulnerability under this conceptual framework, further pointing to an expanded role of BMD under Trump’s plan.

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<sup>210</sup> “Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review,” The White House, January 17, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-announcing-missile-defense-review/>.

<sup>211</sup> “2019 Missile Defense Review,” Executive Summary (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2019), III, [https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Interactive/2018/11-2019-Missile-Defense-Review/The%202019%20MDR\\_Executive%20Summary.pdf](https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Interactive/2018/11-2019-Missile-Defense-Review/The%202019%20MDR_Executive%20Summary.pdf).

<sup>212</sup> “2019 Missile Defense Review,” I.

The lack of an updated, unclassified MDR from President Biden leaves the future of US missile defense policy in the dark. While it is certainly possible that his views on missile defense have changed in the previous two decades, Biden was a particularly vocal critic of the Bush administration's decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty in 2002. Furthermore, the brief fact sheet for the classified NPR and MDR that was released to Congress in March 2022 emphasizes the role of arms control agreements to enhance strategic stability and avoid arms races.<sup>213</sup> Accordingly, it is unlikely that Biden will take as expansive a view as the Trump administration did in word or action. Whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine has catalyzed the need for greater damage limitation measures in the event of deterrence failure remains to be seen.

### **Continuity of MAD Today**

While US missile defense policy has slowly accepted comprehensive BMD directed at rogue states and substate actors, elements of the MAD framework linger on. With the notable exception of President Trump's accompanying statements regarding the 2019 MDR, every official communique since the 1999 National Missile Defense Act goes to great lengths to guarantee that the Russian and Chinese missile arsenals are not the targets of US homeland missile defense. By contrast, regional missile defenses are frequently discussed in the context of defeating *all* adversary missiles, with the issue of strategic stability notably absent.<sup>214</sup> In fact, in the contexts of regional and limited homeland defense systems, explicit acknowledgment is

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<sup>213</sup> "Fact Sheet: 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review" (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, March 28, 2022).

<sup>214</sup> Brad Roberts, "Missile Defense: Fit for What Purpose in 2030?," in *Fit for Purpose? The U.S. Strategic Posture in 2030 and Beyond*, ed. Brad Roberts (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Center for Global Security Research, 2020), 39, <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/The-US-Strategic-Posture-in-2030-and-Beyond.pdf>.

given to the *stabilizing* effect of missile defenses.<sup>215</sup> Yet, the dominant discourse of great power relations continues to emphasize mutual vulnerability to Russian and Chinese ICBMs as the only viable option for ensuring strategic stability. The guidance issued by the 2013 release of the Nuclear Employment Strategy encapsulates this view:

The United States seeks to maintain strategic stability with Russia. Consistent with the objective of maintaining an effective deterrent posture, the United States seeks to improve strategic stability by demonstrating that it is not our intent to negate Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent, or to destabilize the strategic military relationship with Russia.<sup>216</sup>

Similar statements are routinely issued to China as well, applying the Cold War era framework to a radically different, multipolar security environment. This desire to pursue mutual vulnerability with China is undertaken without regard for “political, cultural, geographical, and other differences that could make the acceptance of rough parity with China dangerous for the United States and its allies.”<sup>217</sup>

Proponents of continued mutual vulnerability also repeatedly advance the argument that damage mitigation measures are the most influential causal factor in quantitative and qualitative increases in Russian and Chinese nuclear arsenals. Despite the consistent failure of the action-reaction cycle to materialize across a diverse suite of historical examples, familiar arguments of damage limitation measures driving adversary behavior are consistently advanced by leading

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<sup>215</sup> “2019 Missile Defense Review,” VI.

<sup>216</sup> Department of Defense, “Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.” (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, June 2013), 3, [https://uploads.fas.org/2013/06/NukeEmploymentGuidance\\_DODbrief061213.pdf](https://uploads.fas.org/2013/06/NukeEmploymentGuidance_DODbrief061213.pdf).

<sup>217</sup> David S. Yost, *Strategic Stability in the Cold War: Lessons for Continuing Challenges*, Proliferation Papers (Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Departement des Etudes de Securites, 2011), 36, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp36yost.pdf>.

policymakers and arms control advocates.<sup>218</sup> In reaction to the 2019 MDR, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith remarked, “We must avoid missile defense policies that will fuel a nuclear arms race. Strategic stability is an essential component of U.S. national security, and it does not serve our long-term interest to take steps that incentivize Russia and China to increase the number and capability of their nuclear weapons.”<sup>219</sup> Regarding the qualitative increases in Russian and Chinese delivery systems discussed in the 2019 MDR, Laura Grego of the Union of Concerned Scientists lamented, “This action-reaction cycle is the very dynamic the 1972 ABM Treaty was designed to prevent. Indeed, without any intervening arms control, a cyclical, costly, and dangerous buildup of offense and defense seems all but guaranteed.”<sup>220</sup> Matt Korda of the Federation of American Scientists echoed these same concerns: “Further enlargement of U.S. missile defense... would likely prompt both countries to look for ways to circumvent these defenses by deploying new, destabilizing weapon systems. It would certainly kick the arms race up another notch.”<sup>221</sup> These statements are but a few of the broad spectrum of voices making identical arguments.

To circumvent the lack of empirical evidence for the action-reaction cycle, mutual vulnerability advocates take the justifications provided by foreign leaders for nuclear

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<sup>218</sup> Henry Obering and Rebecca L. Heinrichs, “Missile Defense for Great Power Conflict: Outmaneuvering the China Threat,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (2019): 53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26815045>.

<sup>219</sup> Adam Smith, “Smith Statement on Trump Missile Defense Review,” House Armed Services Committee, January 17, 2019, <https://armedservices.house.gov/2019/1/smith-statement-on-trump-missile-defense-review>.

<sup>220</sup> Laura Grego, “Mixed Messages on Missile Defense,” *Arms Control Today*, Assessing the 2019 Missile Defense Review, March 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-03/features/assessing-2019-missile-defense-review>.

<sup>221</sup> Matt Korda, “Joining the U.S. Missile Defence Program Would Be a Big Mistake,” *The Toronto Star*, May 20, 2022, sec. Contributors, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2022/05/20/joining-the-us-missile-defence-program-would-be-a-big-mistake.html>.

modernization and future arms control possibilities at face value. Despite possessing more nuclear-tipped ABM interceptors around Moscow than the maximum planned total number of GBIs for the entire US homeland, Russia repeatedly links the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty to force modernization efforts. Such was the case in 2018, when Putin unveiled several new delivery systems for nuclear weapons allegedly developed in response to US missile defense improvements.<sup>222</sup> Similar rhetoric was employed in a 2022 joint statement issued by Putin and Xi Jinping just weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where both states expressed “concern over the advancement of US plans to develop global missile defense” and its subsequent effects on “regional security and stability.”<sup>223</sup> Naturally, extensive Russian research and deployment of layered missile defense systems designed to mitigate the US ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic missile threat were not considered a threat to “regional security and stability.”<sup>224</sup>

In response to these statements, there are those in the arms control community that call for a return of the ABM Treaty or similar restrictions on interceptors to offer Russia and China “assurance that their strategic ballistic missiles would not require build-up.”<sup>225</sup> Again, this cadre

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<sup>222</sup> Andrew Roth, “Putin Threatens US Arms Race with New Missiles Declaration,” *The Guardian*, March 1, 2018, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/01/vladimir-putin-threatens-arms-race-with-new-missiles-announcement>.

<sup>223</sup> “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” Air Force Air University, February 4, 2022, 7, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-02-04%20China%20Russia%20joint%20statement%20International%20Relations%20Entering%20a%20New%20Era.pdf>.

<sup>224</sup> DeBiaso, “Russia and Missile Defense: Toward An Integrated Approach,” 4–5.

<sup>225</sup> Steven Pifer, “The Biden Nuclear Posture Review: Defense, Offense, and Avoiding Arms Races,” Arms Control Association, February 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-01/features/biden-nuclear-posture-review-defense-offense-avoiding-arms-races>; Jaganath Sankaran and Steve Fetter, “Defending the United States: Revisiting National Missile Defense against North Korea,” *International Security* 46, no. 3 (February 25, 2022): 86, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00426](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00426).

treats both actors as mechanistic cogs in a US-driven machine, where US funding for missile defense throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century has forced their hand and solely instigated delivery system improvements.<sup>226</sup> Such arguments dispel any notion that saber-rattling rhetoric serves a domestic, political purpose for authoritarian regimes, where a highly visible boogeyman provides a unifying basis for coalition building. In this context, leaders are much more inclined to cast nuclear modernization or procurement decisions as “reasons of state” despite its intended domestic audience and political purpose.<sup>227</sup> In addition to the domestic utility of these types of statements, the “information confrontation strategies” of both Russia and China designed to manipulate international security perceptions of US and allied force postures cannot be discounted.<sup>228</sup> By casting the US as the aggressor who seeks a missile shield in order to wield unassailable supremacy, Russia and China are able to mold the narrative of their own force buildups as self-defense measures on the international stage.

Ultimately, it is clear that the terms “nuclear deterrence” and its corresponding “strategic stability” have been systematically co-opted to become synonymous with a strategy of mutual vulnerability. Any efforts to mitigate damage under this framework are inherently destabilizing to great power relations and must be avoided. Despite decades of bipartisan consensus regarding the difficulty of deterring challengers with highly divergent strategic cultures and worldviews, the enduring specter of MAD continues to resonate with leading members of the defense and academic communities. These theorists believe “that the U.S. deterrence posture can be well-

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<sup>226</sup> James M. Acton, “The U.S. Exit From the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty Has Fueled a New Arms Race,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 13, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/13/u.s.-exit-from-anti-ballistic-missile-treaty-has-fueled-new-arms-race-pub-85977>.

<sup>227</sup> Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 46.

<sup>228</sup> Roberts, “Missile Defense: Fit for What Purpose in 2030?,” 45.

served by a single type of deterrent threat, i.e., to destroy some number of an opponent's cities—as if it is self-evident that such a capability somehow equates to a universally-credible deterrent.”<sup>229</sup> Despite its lack of cultural basis in the US, this perception has stunted the potential growth of national US missile defense for the greater part of the previous half-century and will continue to raise obstacles to research and development of the homeland BMD architecture for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>229</sup> Dr Keith B Payne, “Deterrence Is Not Rocket Science: It Is More Difficult,” *National Institute for Public Policy Information Series*, no. 527 (July 6, 2022): 7.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN US STRATEGIC CULTURE AND MISSILE DEFENSE**  
**POLICY OUTPUTS**

US strategic culture, in both social manifestations and the US way of war, appears highly congruous with a comprehensive approach to missile defense and a rejection of the MAD premise of mutual vulnerability. However, with the exception of SDI, expansive perspectives regarding missile defense of the homeland have failed to materialize at the national policy level. Even the recent shift toward limited homeland BMD against rogue states and a complementary role for regional missile defense in deterring other great power adversaries falls short of the expected output. Moreover, the lingering philosophy of MAD continues to hold sway over influential groups in the security policymaking process, generating significant hostility to missile defense efforts in spite of MAD's stark contrast to many of the salient aspects of US strategic culture. How has this Cold War approach that was likely never operationalized persisted in the face of such deep-rooted cultural influences against mutual vulnerability? Does this incongruity demand a reconsideration of widely held notions of US strategic culture? Taking a broader perspective, what insights can this disconnect reveal about the analytical framework more generally? To explore these questions in detail, this section will examine the expected outputs of US missile defense policy flowing from the most influential pillars of its strategic culture and advance several theories for the incongruity between the expected and actual policy approaches.



## Expected Outputs

Taken in isolation and in combination, nearly all facets of US strategic culture point decisively toward a missile defense policy similar to the statement of President Trump in 2019 – able to defeat any missile fired at the US homeland from anywhere on the planet. More than a simple political or military consideration, Michael Rühle went so far as to describe US pursuit of missile defense as a “firm part of its national ‘strategic culture.’”<sup>230</sup> This linkage can be found in both overarching categories of US strategic culture, the collective social attitudes regarding security outputs and their manifestations in the American way of war.

Socially, all elements of the American national style discussed in chapter two contribute to broad support for the pursuit of comprehensive damage limitation architectures and rejection of MAD. An unwavering, collective optimism and a problem-solving ethos seem to reject the notion that the challenge of defeating a large-scale missile attack is outside of American technological feasibility. Accepting the premise that mutual vulnerability is a predetermined, unassailable structural condition for the deterrence of other great powers is highly incongruous with the US approach to nearly all other security problems. This confident mentality is reinforced by the logical-analytical cognitive style of the US approach, where the “linear process of discovery” fuels continued optimism in the ability to solve all problems with sequential thought.<sup>231</sup> The positive role of machines further supports an engineering approach to the existential threat of missile attack on the US homeland, harnessing the vast industrial potential of America to overcome a geopolitical hurdle through the consistent logic of man-made machinery. Finally, the ahistoric exceptionalism that is pervasive in American strategic thought appears to

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<sup>230</sup> Michael Rühle, “U.S. Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense,” *National Institute for Public Policy Information Series*, no. 466 (September 3, 2020): 2.

<sup>231</sup> Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 76.

reject the constraint that offense in the missile age is inherently superior. The history of US missile defense development has been rife with deterministic criticism about the technological hurdles and economic infeasibility precluding any hope of change. Owing to the uniqueness of the US geopolitical experience, American strategic culture is usually hostile to such claims of indisputable historical constraint. As a nation that has yet to taste interstate security failure, it is logical for these attitudes to extend to missile defense as well.

The American way of war is also highly congruous with broad-scope missile defense efforts. Obviously, the emphasis on technological overmatch precludes any perception of vulnerability to adversary capabilities as a desirable state of being. In virtually every other warfighting domain, the US has invested enormous sums into maintaining technical dominance through defense innovation.<sup>232</sup> Speaking to a virtual defense conference, Heidi Shyu, the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, exemplified this approach: “We cannot afford a leveling of technology advantage.... We must leverage the incredible amount of technology innovation across our nation to give our leap-ahead capabilities to solve tough operational challenges.”<sup>233</sup> While the technological challenge of homeland BMD is undoubtedly significant, this barrier has proven insufficient for previous military pursuits of technological superiority, including national-scale endeavors such as the Manhattan Project. What makes the

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<sup>232</sup> Cheryl Pellerin, “DOD Embracing Innovation to Fuel Military Overmatch against Adversaries,” U.S. Army, May 4, 2017, [https://www.army.mil/article/187213/work\\_dod\\_embracing\\_innovation\\_to\\_fuel\\_military\\_overmatch\\_against\\_adversaries](https://www.army.mil/article/187213/work_dod_embracing_innovation_to_fuel_military_overmatch_against_adversaries).

<sup>233</sup> David Vergun, “DOD in Search of Disruptive Technologies That Will Enable the Warfighter,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 8, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2959378/dod-in-search-of-disruptive-technologies-that-will-enable-the-warfighter/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FNews-Stories%2FArticle%2FArticle%2F2959378%2Fdod-in-search-of-disruptive-technologies-that-will-enable-the-warfighter%2F>.

case of missile defense even more unique is that innovation has been subject to political, rather than technical, considerations as the primary driver behind development.<sup>234</sup> This backwards logic to technological development has prevented the use of the vast American research base for asymmetric advantage, a distinctly un-American approach to war.

Coupled with the desire to maintain a substantial technological edge in the US approach to war is a leadership aversion to heavy casualties. The US military has spent considerable sums in order to prosecute warfare with minimal risk to the warfighter, including an enduring emphasis on airpower, UAVs, long-range PGMs, theater missile defense, and more. While there are unquestioned tactical and strategic benefits to all of these innovations, official statements regarding such technology almost always include reference to its value in ensuring safe return of deployed personnel.<sup>235</sup> In the case of homeland BMD, the amount of potential military and civilian casualties associated with a deterrence failure is staggering. The utility of damage limitation measures in reducing US loss of life in the instance of a deterrence failure has been acknowledged in declaratory policy by two decades worth of presidential administrations; however, the targets of those messages were limited to rogue states and theater use of ballistic missiles by Russia and China. The complexity of the modern security environment significantly increases the likelihood of such a failure, lending further credence to a pursuit of more expansive BMD. The demonstrated efforts of US military and civilian leadership to minimize casualties in combat operations would appear to justify bearing the immense financial cost necessary to ensure the safety of the entirety of the American public. Thus, it is striking that the “hostage

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<sup>234</sup> “Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century,” 52.

<sup>235</sup> Mark A. Welsh III, “Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power for America: The World’s Greatest Air Force--Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation,” *Air & Space Power Journal*, March 2014, 6–7.

exchange” of American citizens consistent with mutual vulnerability ever took hold in a culturally hostile environment.

Broad homeland missile defense would further allow for the employment of the American style of overwhelming firepower through direct engagement and leveraging of its industrial and material superiority. Previous conflicts have seen wholesale inability of US adversaries to hold any domestic infrastructure or power projection targets at risk. The missile age has shattered this perceived sanctity of the American homeland and further complicated the geographic isolation of North America. Similar to the World Wars, in a contemporary wartime scenario in Europe, “over 90% of the combat power, the cargo, that gets from the United States over to the theater of operations is taken by sealift.”<sup>236</sup> Targeted missile strikes against several key US ports on the eastern seaboard would, at the very least, delay the ability of US ground forces to respond to aggression against NATO allies in Europe. Obstructing the deployment of these forces would prevent the leveraging of the full weight of US conventional firepower superiority in a given battlespace. Negating this advantage has been repeatedly demonstrated as an Achilles heel of US military operations and a pathway to victory against US forces, seen most notably in Vietnam and the counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, more comprehensive homeland US missile defense would potentially deny an adversary the confidence in limited missile strikes designed to limit the safe movement of US or allied forces to a battlefield.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Megan Eckstein, “Navy Drills Atlantic Convoy Ops for First Time Since Cold War in Defender-Europe 20,” United States Naval Institute, February 28, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/02/28/navy-drills-atlantic-convoy-ops-for-first-time-since-cold-war-in-defender-europe-20>.

<sup>237</sup> Jonathan Trexel, “Denying North Korea,” in *Deterrence by Denial: Theory and Practice*, ed. Andreas Wegner and Alex S. Wilner (New York: Cambria Press, 2021), 149.

Finally, the US emphasis on moralism in the conduct of warfare lies in stark contrast to mutual vulnerability. Echoing the words of former Soviet Premier Kosygin, defensive measures designed to limit the damage to civilians and critical national infrastructure hold inherent moral superiority over their offensive counterparts. Creating the ability to defend oneself against aggression cannot be considered aggression by its own right, despite the claims of expansionist-minded autocrats. Furthermore, given the US tendency to cast adversaries as evil that demand nothing short of a crusade, it is highly dissonant to seek a condition by which national survival is guaranteed only by mutual hostage taking and trust in these same reprehensible entities. Instead, it would be expected that all conceivable measures would be taken to insulate the occupants of the “city on the hill” from potential attack by those who may wish to disturb the natural order of peace perceived by US strategic culture.

### **Exploring the Disconnect**

The clash between US strategic culture and its missile defense policies necessitates further examination. Nearly all salient pillars of American strategic culture decisively point to comprehensive homeland BMD and a rejection of mutual vulnerability required by the philosophy of MAD. Rühle echoes this theory when examining EU attitudes of US missile defense efforts: “Against this background [US strategic culture], European advice to the United States to remain in a permanent state of calculated—“stabilizing”—vulnerability is likely to fall on deaf ears.”<sup>238</sup> Nevertheless, neither unlimited homeland BMD nor a wholesale rejection of mutual vulnerability has been uniformly met across three-quarters of a century of missile defense policymaking. Of course, it is unrealistic to assume that a “big idea,” to borrow a term from

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<sup>238</sup> Rühle, “U.S. Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense,” 4.

Collin Gray, such as strategic culture will be a panacea for predicting state behavior in all circumstances.<sup>239</sup> Humans have yet to assemble a theory of security decision-making that forecasts with absolute precision. Still, the consistency of the disconnect between US strategic culture and the enduring length of time it has managed to persist merit a deeper dive to improve the discipline as a whole.

**Policy is Derived From Compromise.** Despite the immense financial resources of the American system, the federal government operates under a condition of scarcity. There exists a finite amount of resources, including money, personnel, and time, that can be allocated to a myriad of agencies and projects. Consequently, goals that align perfectly with a given state's strategic culture may not be actualized due to the constant need to balance hundreds of other simultaneous priorities. Gray describes this condition as a "negotiated outcome" where the "pure flame of strategic culture is certain to be dimmed by the constraints imposed by scarce resources and competing agencies."<sup>240</sup> In a pluralistic democracy like the US, it is rare to discuss a national-level problem and propose a solution that raises zero opposition from political parties, interest groups, elites, or any other organized group. While there is significantly more bipartisan consensus today, the history of US missile defense policy has suffered from consistent politicization and strongly divergent preferences within the government system and from outside interest groups. Under these limits, a "security community can behave in ways massively contrary to the strategic preferences implied by its dominant strategic culture."<sup>241</sup>

This approach emphasizing the constraints of the pluralistic system finds support from other areas of IR theory, including Etel Solingen's domestic model of political survival for

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<sup>239</sup> Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime-Time for Strategic Culture," 22.

<sup>240</sup> Gray, 25.

<sup>241</sup> Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context," 64.

explaining nuclear proliferation decisions in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Solingen's theory highlights the need for all leaders, democratic or autocratic, to balance the attitudes of their respective citizenry and elites to form effective ruling coalitions in support of security decisions.<sup>242</sup> Thus, collective, cultural aspirations of state behavior undergo a filter of domestic circumstances before they can be unilaterally actualized by a leader or administration.

Applying this framework to the case of US missile defense policy, it is clear that the need to compromise between cultural goals and influential elites has significantly mitigated the influence of strategic culture. While public opinion polling on this issue is severely lacking in the past two decades, the time period around the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty saw many such endeavors, with fairly consistent, albeit modest, support for national missile defense.<sup>243</sup> However, these polls repeatedly showcased the general lack of knowledge that the American public possessed regarding missile defense, including 58% of respondents in July of 2000 believing that a BMD system was already in place.<sup>244</sup> By contrast, elites and interest groups have taken a very active role in the development of US BMD. The scientific community, arms control advocates, and certain members of the executive and legislative branches have consistently lobbied against missile defense development at the national and civilian level.<sup>245</sup> Despite Pew polling showing that the arguments for a national missile defense system were more

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<sup>242</sup> Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, 40–47.

<sup>243</sup> David W. Moore, "Public Supports Concept of Missile Defense," Gallup.com, May 7, 2001, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1555/Public-Supports-Concept-Missile-Defense.aspx>; "Modest Support for Missile Defense, No Panic on China: Other Important Findings and Analyses," Pew Research Center, June 11, 2001, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2001/06/11/other-important-findings-and-analyses-10/>.

<sup>244</sup> "Complete Results," The New York Times, July 25, 2000, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/national/091300poll-results.html>.

<sup>245</sup> Becker, "Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense: Russia and the United States," 67–68.

compelling than their counterparts, a greater percentage of Americans had heard the arguments *against* such a system.<sup>246</sup> The lack of an informed populace on this matter increases the utility of these efforts, as the way information is presented will play a disproportionate role in swaying public support.

Given the nature of the pluralistic system, Congress has most often opted for a compromise to satisfy both camps – a limited enough system to assuage the fears of destabilization that can still be claimed as “progress” by the general public by protecting against rogue states and accidental launches.<sup>247</sup> By elevating the political concern of satisfying the small cadre of easy deterrence elites above the technical consideration, the aspirations of US strategic culture are superseded by the “negotiated reality” of legislation. Accordingly, such compromises have repeatedly hamstrung national missile defense development by precluding any concerted effort to innovate beyond the limited or regional level.

**Lack of Threat Immediacy.** The geographic isolation of North America has shielded American citizens from the nightmares of interstate warfare. Since 1865, American conflicts have always taken place elsewhere in the world, giving rise to the colloquial expression for deployment to combat operations – “serve overseas.” Despite the advent of long-range missiles removing the barriers of the twin oceans, these threats remain highly conceptual. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and period of unquestioned American hyperpower that followed likely removed the possibility of nuclear ICBM attack from the collective American psyche. Hence, it is most plausible that the true gravity of this hazard will remain a distant concern in the minds of most Americans, until such time as the threat materializes on US soil. Such was the case with

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<sup>246</sup> “Modest Support for Missile Defense, No Panic on China: Other Important Findings and Analyses.”

<sup>247</sup> “Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century,” 68–69.



Islamic terrorism, a subsidiary concern at best until the 9/11 attacks brought a new security danger directly to the US doorstep. In the case of ballistic missiles, Miriam Becker observed as early as 1993 that the “American perception of distant security dangers has allowed the United States to forego the deployment of a national missile defense (NMD) system until such time as such defenses are deemed necessary, i.e., a new immediate threat.”<sup>248</sup> The rogue state phenomenon of the Bush era catalyzed limited homeland BMD development, but such attitudes have largely failed to carry over to the larger arsenals of the Russians and Chinese. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has reignited national attention on the threat of the Russian nuclear force posture, this threat is still “far away” and difficult to internalize as a serious probability.

At the macro level, this issue can be explained by one of the most consistent findings of cognitive psychology: the inability for humans to assess risk accurately. Overconfidence in the positive outcome, known as the optimistic bias, is described by Nobel Prize winning economist Daniel Kahneman as the “most significant of the cognitive biases” thanks to the risks it poses to informed decision-making.<sup>249</sup> In the case of the Russian and Chinese nuclear threats, some elements of the familiarity bias may work to decrease the probability that the concept will ever materialize. This bias refers to the “comfort, affiliation, or some other type of cognitive bond” that occurs with topics or entities that an individual has repeated exposure to, such as the threat of Soviet nuclear attack during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>250</sup> While there were numerous instances of close calls during the Cold War, the ability of deterrence to hold in all previous circumstances may

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<sup>248</sup> Becker, “Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense: Russia and the United States,” 80.

<sup>249</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2011), 255, [https://archive.org/details/thinkingfastslow0000kahn\\_b1q8](https://archive.org/details/thinkingfastslow0000kahn_b1q8).

<sup>250</sup> Casey L Smith, “The Effects of Familiarity and Persuasion on Risk Assessment” (Doctoral Dissertation, Daytona Beach, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 2012), 36, <https://commons.erau.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1130&context=edt>.

have built a powerful connection between mutual vulnerability and the “success” of nuclear deterrence.

Several elements of US strategic culture may also reinforce the inability of most to accurately assess the dangers posed by adversary missile arsenals. Enduring American norms of optimism and ethnocentrism possibly encourage overconfidence in the universality of the US approach to nuclear war and the ability of deterrence to hold. This issue has plagued US foreign policy since the Cold War, where decision-makers “declined to appreciate the Soviet Union as a culturally, historically unique adversary unlikely to prove responsive to American political-military desiderata – no matter how eloquently, or persistently, expressed.”<sup>251</sup> Working in tandem with the notion of ahistorical exceptionalism, the systemic issue of interstate competition leading to eventual warfare may be regarded as a relic of previous international systems, deemed irrelevant by the US-dominated international order of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As idealistic as that notion may seem, the “hubris regarding our master of nuclear deterrence ‘stability’... built on the demonstrably false assumption that Washington’s interpretation of what is rational and sensible also will be the basis of our opponents’ behavior” remains in some elements of the defense community today.<sup>252</sup> These influences of US strategic culture could therefore be considered “dysfunctional” with regard to missile defense – disproportionately reinforcing suboptimal outcomes rather than what is most congruous with the strategic culture as a whole.<sup>253</sup>

**Image Perception and Manipulation.** The United States occupies a unique place in the nuclear states’ club as the only member to have employed the bomb in the course of interstate conflict. Since the detonations over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, no state has deployed a

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<sup>251</sup> Gray, “Nuclear Strategy and National Style,” 68.

<sup>252</sup> Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, xiii.

<sup>253</sup> Gray, “Out of the Wilderness: Prime-Time for Strategic Culture,” 65–66.

nuclear device in anger – despite numerous close calls during the Cold War. While the legitimacy of nuclear use against Imperial Japan in WWII is not in question, the legacy of that decision continues to influence US deterrence policy today by amplifying domestic and international criticism against policies that make nuclear warfighting allegedly more possible.

During the Cold War, the foundational debate about the requirements of superpower deterrence between Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn revealed deeply held American reservations regarding any measures that could enable further nuclear employment in war. Kahn’s approach, emphasizing the need for damage limitation capabilities to make the threat of nuclear use more credible to the Soviets, was sharply criticized as being “cavalier” or “jocular” about the prospect of nuclear war.<sup>254</sup> Schelling’s recommendation of mutual vulnerability through a “balance of terror” did not receive the same criticism, despite the wholesale rejection of any defensive abilities for the American public and implicit targeting of Soviet noncombatants. Similar events unfolded during the consideration of SDI, where American commentators once again denied the possibility of protecting the American public on moralistic grounds. In *Morality, the SDI, and Limited Nuclear War*, Steven Lee writes:

Nor does the damage-limitation capacity of SDI defenses provide a sufficient moral argument in their favor given the increase in the likelihood of war that would result. SDI defenses should not be deployed in conjunction with our current policy of nuclear deterrence. Practicing such a policy without SDI defenses is morally preferable to practicing it with SDI defenses.<sup>255</sup>

The dissonance here could possibly be explained by longstanding guilt in the US psyche regarding its past nuclear employment. If theorists could somehow craft a universally

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<sup>254</sup> Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), 36–39.

<sup>255</sup> Steven Lee, “Morality, the SDI, and Limited Nuclear War,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1988): 43.

understood deterrence posture that rejected tailored offensive and defensive nuclear options, then perhaps the moral high ground could be regained, even if such a strategy demanded the lives of Americans must be gambled in the hands of a foreign leader.

With this domestic base laid, international criticism became even more poignant. Soviet protests over US ABM efforts consistently argued that the defensive shield was merely a pretext to launch a first strike and retain the ability to survive retaliation. Ignoring the Soviet damage limitation efforts, which exceeded those of the US during the Cold War, easy deterrence theorists took such statements at face value and amplified the concerns that missile defense would undermine strategic stability and legitimize nuclear warfighting. The collapse of the Soviet Union has not stopped this process. Despite unquestioned American ascendancy in all aspects of national power in the post-Cold War era, the US went to great lengths to act in multilateral fashion to legitimize its place as the “sheriff” of the new world order.<sup>256</sup> With the notable exception of Iraq (2003), interventions in Somalia, East Timor, Liberia, Libya, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq (1991) were conducted with broad coalition backing, including UN or NATO sanction. Despite the superiority of the US military precluding the need for coalition support during this time period, the emphasis on multilateralism represents a clear manifestation of the US desire for moral high ground in the conduct of war. Accordingly, US adversaries have latched onto this international sensitivity of image, repeatedly advancing claims that US missile defense efforts are a means to grant the US military freedom of unilateral action and enable further “imperialism.” Such assertions are often accompanied by proclamations that the US “missile shield” is solely designed to enable “a surprise missile-nuclear strike in any region of

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<sup>256</sup> Gray, *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order*, 142–45.

the world, with no punishment” in a manner reminiscent to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>257</sup>

In light of recent revelations regarding the scale of Russian hybrid warfare efforts, including liberal use of disinformation campaigns to undermine US domestic and international standing, the “information domain” is one to be taken seriously. The *2022 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* describes Russia’s global influence operations as a multi-domain enterprise designed to “divide Western alliances, and increase its sway around the world, while attempting to undermine US global standing, amplify discord inside the United States, and influence US voters and decisionmaking.”<sup>258</sup> Such efforts almost certainly extend to missile defense, where previous friction between US and EU policy may be exploited to drive a wedge into the NATO alliance structure.

In 1869, author Isa Blagden captured a fundamental truth of international affairs in one of the most widely misattributed statements of all time: “If a lie is only printed often enough, it becomes a quasi-truth, and if such a truth is repeated often enough, it becomes an article of belief, a dogma, and men will die for it.”<sup>259</sup> Regarding US homeland BMD, the following are but a few of the many great lies advanced by adversarial opposition to further US missile defense development. Russian and Chinese desire to prevent a more expansive missile shield flows from

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<sup>257</sup> “Russian General: US Needs Missile Shield for Military Supremacy over Russia, China,” TASS, October 11, 2016, <https://tass.com/politics/905572>.

<sup>258</sup> “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community” (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 2022), 12, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2022/item/2279-2022-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>.

<sup>259</sup> Isa Blagden, *The Crown of a Life*, vol. 3 (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1869), 155, <https://books.google.com/books?id=EtoBAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA155&dq=lie%20repeated%20often%20enough%20becomes%20truth&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwikxMuju-HMAhWJXh4KHZfbCn8Q6AEINzAF#v=onepage&q=lie%20repeated%20often%20enough%20becomes%20truth&f=false>.

an aspiration to maintain an international environment that is safer from the perils of unchecked US aggression. US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and deployment of 64 GBIs for limited homeland defense forces Russia and China to aggressively modernize their nuclear arsenals and delivery systems. If only US BMD efforts would cease, then an enlightened global understanding would naturally lead to further nuclear arms control between the US and Russia and China, bringing the vision of disarmament one step closer.

Despite all empirical evidence to the contrary, these same narratives have been tirelessly leveled against US missile defense research and development for decades. Talking points of revisionist regimes have been accepted as gospel by a certain cadre of defense theorists, wholly discounting the possibility that adversarial objection to these programs may be a multi-dimensional calculation with domestic and military components. Former Director of the Office of Missile Defense Policy Dr. Peppino DeBiaso argues, “Russia employs the concept of stability to deny the United States advantages stemming from missile defense that Russia seeks for itself... while working to constrain comparable U.S. capabilities.”<sup>260</sup> Similar attitudes have been amplified at the domestic level and may have been a factor in preventing the actualization of US strategic culture in this domain. Consequently, of all the lessons to draw from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, two of the most important for US BMD is the need for increased scrutiny of declaratory policy from Russia and China and further study on the true drivers of their respective nuclear modernization efforts.

The clash between US strategic culture and missile defense policy is a perplexing issue with significant ramifications for the discipline as a whole. While strategic culture analysis is not a panacea in the study of security behavior, it is expected to be useful as an explanatory tool

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<sup>260</sup> DeBiaso, “Russia and Missile Defense: Toward An Integrated Approach,” 5.

in an increasingly complex and diverse threat environment. The divergence of expected and actual outcomes highlighted in this chapter raise important questions about further dimensions of US strategic culture that current scholarship may not have teased out and the ability for outside actors to shape domestic strategic cultures.

## CONCLUSION

There is a striking incongruity between US strategic culture and its missile defense policy. The American national style is characterized by an optimistic and problem-solving mindset, logical-analytical cognitive style, positive role of machines, belief in the universality of the democratic model, and ahistorical exceptionalism. These concepts are reflected in the American way of war, which is technologically driven, casualty averse at the leadership level, moralistic, apolitical, and firepower-focused with an emphasis on direct engagement over stratagem. Taken at face value, these factors would strongly indicate a preference for comprehensive deterrence by denial measures, most prominently homeland BMD, to protect American lives in the case of deterrence failure or catastrophic accident. However, such preferences have failed to consistently materialize over three-quarters of a century of missile defense policymaking. Instead, the US has often settled for a strategy of mutual vulnerability synonymous with the theory of Thomas Schelling's "balance of terror" and Robert McNamara's MAD philosophy. While the US has slowly accepted more expansive attitudes regarding BMD and "rogue states," MAD continues to dominate the approach to Russian and Chinese missile arsenals. This can be found most prominently in US declaratory policy regarding the targets of the GMD system, claims of destabilization or negative effects on "strategic stability," and action-reaction cycle-based theories of Russian and Chinese nuclear modernization as a direct result of US missile defense despite all empirical evidence to the contrary.

Despite little cultural support for the MAD approach and its corresponding emphasis on mutual vulnerability, this concept has disproportionately guided US damage limitation policy and its corresponding discourse in many corners of the defense community. Three possible



explanations for this incongruity were advanced by this monograph, including the requirement of compromise in forming policy in a pluralistic democracy, the lack of ballistic missile threat immediacy to the general American public, and the concerted effort of US adversaries to manipulate the international and domestic perceptions of US missile defense efforts. Future study should examine further reasons for this disconnect, potentially even offering new insight into American strategic culture to remedy the incongruity.

US policymakers must be aware of the pervasiveness of MAD-centric attitudes when crafting future damage limitation policy. Decades of bipartisan consensus regarding the utility of missile defense have failed to eradicate MAD concepts from great power competition discourse with Russia and China, indicating that such theories will endure for the immediate future. The lack of an informed public in this domain exacerbates this issue, with many associating the terms “nuclear deterrence” and “strategic stability” with mutual vulnerability. Consequently, the progress of future missile defense efforts will likely depend upon the ability to communicate the utility of damage limitation measures to deterrence and overcome the vocal opposition of MAD advocates. Hopefully, a Pearl Harbor-level event will not be necessary to catalyze public support for defensive measures, as has been the case for many security issues in US history. Perhaps strategic culture provides an answer to this challenge, offering several avenues of messaging that appeal directly to deeply held American values and perceptions.

The continuity of mutual vulnerability despite its inherent conflict with US strategic culture is nothing short of extraordinary. While the US has slowly expanded the targets of homeland BMD to a limited selection of regional actors, the specter of MAD continues to dissuade policymakers from adopting a more expansive role. Discarding Cold War-era theories of strategic stability and bringing US missile defense policy to a state of harmony with its

strategic culture will keep America safer in an ever more unpredictable international security environment.

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