

The U.S. Missile Defense Shield and Global Security Destabilization: An Inconclusive Link

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Abstract : Missile proliferation and global stability are intrinsically linked. Missile threats continually appear at the forefront of global security issues. North Korea's recently demonstrated nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities, for the first time since the Cold War, renewed public interest in strategic missile defense capabilities. To protect from limited ICBM attacks from so-called rogue actors, the United States developed the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system. This study examines if the GMD missile defense shield has contributed to a safer world or triggered a new arms race. Based upon increased missile-related developments and the lack of adherence to international missile treaties, it is generally perceived that the GMD system is a destabilizing factor for global security. By examining the current state of arms control treaties as well as existing missile arsenals and ongoing efforts in technologies to overcome U.S. missile defenses, this study seeks to analyze the contribution of GMD to global stability. A thorough investigation cannot ignore that, through the establishment of this limited capability, the U.S. violated longstanding, successful weapons treaties and caused concern among states that possess ICBMs. GMD capability contributes to the perception that ICBM arsenals could become ineffective, creating an imbalance in favor of the United States, leading to increased global instability and tension. While blame for the deterioration of global stability and non-adherence to arms control treaties is often placed on U.S. missile defense, the facts do not necessarily support this view. The notion of a renewed arms race due to GMD is supported neither by current missile arsenals nor by the inevitable development of new and enhanced missile technology, to include multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles (MIRVs), maneuverable reentry vehicles (MaRVs), and hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs). The methodology in this study encapsulates a period of time, pre- and post-GMD introduction, while analyzing international treaty adherence, missile counts and types, and research in new missile technologies. The decline in international treaty adherence, coupled with a measurable increase in the number and types of missiles or research in new missile technologies during the period after the introduction of GMD, could be perceived as a clear indicator of GMD contributing to global instability. However, research into improved technology (MIRV, MaRV and HGV) prior to GMD, as well as a decline of various global missile inventories and testing of systems during this same period, would seem to invalidate this theory. U.S. adversaries have exploited the perception of the U.S. missile defense shield as a destabilizing factor as a pretext to strengthen and modernize their militaries and justify their policies. As a result, it can be concluded that global stability has not significantly decreased due to GMD; but rather, the natural progression of technological and missile development would inherently include innovative and dynamic approaches to target engagement, deterrence, and national defense.

Keywords : arms control, arms race, global security, GMD, ICBM, missile defense, proliferation

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