IN THE 1980S, COMMENTATORS PREDICTED THAT CONVENTIONAL PRECISION-STRIKE SYSTEMS WOULD BECOME CAPABLE OF STRATEGIC EFFECTS THAT FORMERLY ONLY NUCLEAR WEAPONS COULD DO. Despite efforts to curtail their proliferation, the spread of delivery system technologies has instead produced a kind of “missile renaissance.”

Recent technological, commercial, and geopolitical trends have contributed to a surge in the global supply and demand for unmanned, high-precision, and high-velocity delivery systems—and the means to defend against them.
Increased interest in missile-based delivery systems spans a broad spectrum, including more advanced guided rockets, artillery, and mortars (RAM), increasingly effective air defenses, antiship missiles, new ballistic and cruise missile developments, unmanned aerial vehicles, missile-boosted hypersonic boost-glide vehicles, even antisatellite weapons.

These trends also contribute to a growing sense that defenses contribute to deterrence rather than undermine it. Whereas during the Cold War we accepted mutual vulnerability to missiles for the sake of stability, today there are simply too many missiles and too much uncertainty to forego defenses against them.

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States like North Korea, for instance, may have a different disposition to both conventional escalation and even nuclear employment.

Even imperfect defenses can serve a stabilizing role by managing and mitigating that risk. Given the speed of missile raids and potential for saturation, defenses may deny an aggressor’s objectives, but may also buy decision time, allow for offensive responses, or find other means of controlling escalation.

Both an outgrowth and a response to this larger missile renaissance, missile defenses now represent an established component of international security. Hit-to-kill technology has advanced considerably, with demonstrated successes across all four families of systems currently deployed by the United States today: Patriot, Aegis, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD). Kinetic intercept will likely remain a critical part of missile defense for the foreseeable future, but nonkinetic means such as directed energy will become increasingly in demand.

The future of missile defense, however, is likely to take on a very different cast. For years the missile defense mission has been defined almost exclusively as ballistic missile defense, or BMD. The future challenge of missile defense will be characterized by the larger spectrum of integrated air and missile defense, or IAMD—a wide range of missiles and unmanned systems coming from all directions.

This will be challenging. States such as China, Russia, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran have increased their reliance on conventional systems that are characterized by increased accuracy, mobility, speed, range, countermeasures, and penetration.

The perception of the changing relation between defenses and deterrence is not unique to the United States. From Europe to the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific, states are investing significant levels of resources to defend from missile attacks that they may not be able to deter. Japan, South Korea, India, Israel, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners—and yes, Russia and China—are all devoting significant resources to the problem of detecting, tracking, discriminating, intercepting, and even preempting missile threats.

Missile defenses are now proliferating worldwide, but integrating them with deterrence requires sustained attention. Despite President Reagan’s wish, nuclear deterrence is far from becoming impotent or obsolete. Missile defense is also here to stay. □