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Strategic Missile Defense & Nuclear Deterrence

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The United States has pursued defenses against nuclear-armed long-range ballistic missiles since at least the 1950s. At the same time, concerns that missile defenses could undermine nuclear deterrence and potentially spark an arms race led the United States and Soviet Union to negotiate limits on these systems. The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty constrained strategic missile defenses for thirty years. After abandoning the treaty in 2002, President George W. Bush began fielding the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) homeland missile defense system on an extremely aggressive schedule, nominally to respond to threats from North Korea and Iran.

Today, nearly fifteen years after its initial deployment, the potential and the limits of this homeland missile defense are apparent. Its test record is poor and it has no demonstrated ability to stop an incoming missile under real-world conditions. No credible strategy is in place to solve the issue of discriminating countermeasures. Insufficient oversight has not only exacerbated the GMD systems problems, but has obscured their full extent, which could encourage politicians and military leaders to make decisions that actually increase the risk of a missile attack against the United States.

These are not the only costs. Both Russia and China have repeatedly expressed concerns that U.S. missile defenses adversely affect their own strategic capabilities and interests, particularly taken in light of the substantial US nuclear forces. This in turn affects these countries nuclear modernization priorities.

This talk will provide a technical overview of the US strategic missile defense system, and how it relates to deterrence against non-peer adversaries as well as how it affects deterrence with Russia and China and the long-term prospects for nuclear reductions