



Royal United Services Institute  
for Defence and Security Studies

Conference Report

# RUSI Missile Defence Conference 2018

Peter Roberts and Sidharth Kaushal



# RUSI Missile Defence Conference 2018

Peter Roberts and Sidharth Kaushal

RUSI Conference Report, July 2018



**Royal United Services Institute**  
for Defence and Security Studies

### **187 years of independent thinking on defence and security**

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) is the world's oldest and the UK's leading defence and security think tank. Its mission is to inform, influence and enhance public debate on a safer and more stable world. RUSI is a research-led institute, producing independent, practical and innovative analysis to address today's complex challenges.

Since its foundation in 1831, RUSI has relied on its members to support its activities. Together with revenue from research, publications and conferences, RUSI has sustained its political independence for 187 years.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of RUSI or any other institution.

Published in 2018 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No-Derivatives 4.0 International Licence. For more information, see <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>>.

RUSI Conference Report, July 2018

**Royal United Services Institute**  
for Defence and Security Studies  
Whitehall  
London SW1A 2ET  
United Kingdom  
+44 (0)20 7747 2600  
[www.rusi.org](http://www.rusi.org)

RUSI is a registered charity (No. 210639)

# RUSI Missile Defence Conference 2018

**I**N MAY 2018, RUSI held its annual Missile Defence Conference, the most recent instalment in almost two decades of such conferences that have served as a forum for policymakers, industry leaders and academics to discuss the pressing issues surrounding missile defence. This year's conference provided many insightful discussions, which touched on key issues surrounding missile defence. The most salient themes around which the conference revolved were:

- The relationship between missile defence and strategic stability.
- The integration of missile defences with the broader operational architecture of integrated air and missile defence (IAMD).
- The role of missile defences in a changing strategic environment.

## Missile Defence and Strategic Stability

When assessing the impact of missile defences on strategic stability, a recurring theme was that stability is as much a matter of perceptions as it is of material. Differing operational concepts produce radically different understandings of how missile defence impacts strategic stability across nations.

The conference heard that the deployment of Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) in Eastern Europe remains a fractious issue, in part because Russian and Western observers have divergent views on both the concept of deterrence and the efficacy of missile defences. Russian observers view missile defence not in isolation, but rather in the context of broader shifts in the strategic environment. A concern voiced by figures such as General Valery Gerasimov is the notion that improvements in information-processing capabilities and the development of a global strike capacity by the US could readily facilitate a counterforce doctrine vis-à-vis Russia. More to the point, a pervasive concern about the various 'colour revolutions' has produced a concept of strategy in which the fragility of an opposing state is part of the balance of deterrent capabilities.

Effectively, the war envisioned by Gerasimov starts with a colour revolution and quickly transitions to conventional warfare as external support for a favoured party develops, which commences with a rapid first strike by precision-guided weaponry. Within this context, missile defence serves not as a tool of deterrence, but a passive support for a counterforce policy, mopping up the remnants of an opponent's strategic deterrent after a crippling first strike.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Andrew Monaghan, 'The "War" in Russia's "Hybrid Warfare"', *Parameters* (Vol. 45, No. 4, Winter 2015–16).

Moreover, Russian and Western observers diverge sharply on their views regarding the technical feasibility of missile defence, with Russian observers anticipating technical shifts that will imbue the West with capabilities that it does not presently have, such as sea-based interceptors capable of flying at ten kilometres per second.

There appears to be a divergence between a Russian ‘whole-of-state’ approach to strategic stability, which views missile defences as part of a larger complex of technological developments (the Revolution in Military Affairs) and a blurring of the line between war and peace, and that of the West, which views deterrence as being more narrowly defined to a specific domain (missile and anti-missile interactions). Russia, then, is not likely to be placated by a specific concession, such as shifting the emphasis of BMD to shipborne Aegis interceptors, insofar as missile defence is merely a symptom of a wider and, in its view, adverse strategic shift rather than a standalone issue.

A more muted response to the prospect of missile defence might be seen in the Asia-Pacific. Chinese strategists objected vociferously to the deployment of US THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence) installations in South Korea. Like Russia’s view on Aegis ashore in Poland and Romania, it appears that China views the arrival of US BMD systems in Asia as a precursor to a regional missile defence system. However, unlike their Russian counterparts, China’s People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force has retained its ‘no-first-use’ policy, preferring instead to rely on networks of underground circuits to ensure the survivability of its minimal deterrent force. Perhaps more vexing, from a Chinese perspective, is the risk posed by BMD to its conventional rocket force – a point made in many contemporary publications that stress the ‘use it or lose it’ dilemma that China’s conventional missiles would face, in part due to BMD, in a wartime scenario.

A secondary question posed at the conference was how missile defence impacts the prospects for arms control. With regard to Eastern Europe, one view regarding how the deployment of missile defence might be combined with arms control was that missile defences should effectively be token rather than operational. In this view, BMD would constitute a modern-day tripwire force. Alternatively, the prospects for successful missile defence against North Korean missiles by the US might make a nuclear settlement short of denuclearisation (for example a nuclear freeze) compatible with US and allied security in the region. Such discussions are not simply invalid, given the outcomes of the Trump–Kim summit in Singapore.

## The Integration of Missile and Air Defences

The second theme from the conference was the question of whether it is reasonable to view BMD as a viable standalone tool. Crucially, this concept of missile defence leaves a missile defence system vulnerable to a number of disruptions in its rather fragile kill chain. A combination of stove-piping, single points of failure and sectorised radar defence combine to create systems that are extremely vulnerable to disruption by means such as airpower, cruise missiles and drones in advance of a ballistic missile salvo. An exemplar of this was an incident where a North Korean drone was discovered after having crashed near a THAAD site in South Korea. Had the drone

been armed, it might well have been able to disrupt one of the few radar sites on which THAAD depends: something that would certainly be attempted by multiple armed drones in wartime.

It was suggested, then, that rather than viewing BMD in isolation, it should be conceived as part of a broader IAMD concept that allows for greater operational integration and flexibility. Critical components of such a system would be:

- **Networking missile and air defence to allow a ‘first-sensor, best-shooter’ concept to prevail.** Making air and missile defences interoperable increases the layers of redundancy available within each system.
- **Investing in multi-mission shooters and offence defence launchers.** Integrating offensive and defensive capabilities would lend the operators of a missile defence system the capacity to pre-empt certain types of threats that might compromise the integrity of the system, while multi-mission launchers might allow the system a degree of robustness against air and cruise missile threats.
- **Dispersion and concealment.** In principle, containerised launchers could be placed aboard a vast variety of platforms, including cargo ships, lending the system a degree of resilience against a first strike by complicating an opponent’s targeting options.
- **Passive defence shell games.** The use of decoys might further complicate an opponent’s options.

Effectively, then, it was generally agreed that the integration of missile defence with other capabilities such as air defence and counter-battery fire might lend the system a degree of resilience against a concerted attack that it currently lacks.

## Missile Defence and the Changing Character of War

A key question that emerged over the course of the conference was how missile defence could be situated within the context of the changing character of war. While contributors diverged on the issue of whether missile defence had a substantial role to play in future warfare, they agreed on certain salient features of modern wars, namely that:

1. War would take on an increasingly hybrid character, with tools such as subversion, financial disruption and limited uses of force. Rather than representing a discrete phase in which politics receives the ‘admixture of other means’, war represents a point on a spectrum of contestation that both precedes it and continues after it subsides.
2. The capacity for new domains of war, such as cyberspace, to produce disruptive changes in the strategic environment.
3. The capacity for countries to transition rapidly to a high-intensity conflict, in a manner first noted by figures such as Nikolai Ogarkov and Gerasimov.

The salient question, then, was where does missile defence fit into this framework? One argument was that the narrow focus of missile defence on ballistic missile threats made it inapposite for an environment in which low-intensity challenges were the dominant mode of conflict, and changes in the cyber, electronic and space domains made a narrow focus on missile defence increasingly redundant.

By contrast, other contributors saw a competent IAMD system as the *sine qua non* for ensuring the safety of rapid deployment and expeditionary forces against cruise missile and short-range ballistic missile threats in the event of a contingency that required them to counter hybrid warfare.

## Major Takeaways

- There has been a strategic deficit in conceptualising the relationship between missile defence and other military tools. Specifically, where does BMD fit in a hybrid war context? Instead, the 'rogue state' focus has resulted in thinking about missile defence occurring too often in a vacuum.
- Within the context of complex deterrence, there needs to be a greater emphasis on integration if missile defence is to play a meaningful strategic role.
- In some regions, powers face a complex trade-off between operationally effective missile defence and other public goods, such as arms control.
- Thinking on missile defence and deterrence more generally is filtered through the prism of strategic culture. Perhaps one should heed Jack Snyder, who argued that deterrence is not a general-purpose theory, but a culturally specific construct not necessarily shared by actors whose experience of warfare differs from that of the West.<sup>2</sup>

*Peter Roberts is Director of Military Sciences at RUSI.*

*Sidharth Kaushal is a research fellow for Sea Power and Missile Defence at RUSI.*

---

2. Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1977).