The Eternal Promise of Missile Defense

Why do states continue to invest in military technologies that are ineffective or simply do not work? Despite nearly 70 years of research and development in the United States, missile defense continues to face high, if not insurmountable, technological challenges, is financially burdensome, and has resulted in negative outcomes for strategic stability. Hence, this paper asks: What explains the continued and widespread support for missile defense among Americans policymakers? Contrary to common arguments about American cultural features, public appeal, and organizational politics, I contend that the persistence of missile defense can be explained by two conditions: technological malleability and a framework of ignorance. In a context of deep uncertainty and high complexity, technology is malleable, meaning that policymakers can envision it to serve many different purposes and thus have some benefit for everyone. At the same time, discussions about technology take place under a framework of ignorance, which enables policymakers to overlook, downplay, and deny the costs associated with missile defense. This creates the illusion that investment in the technology is relatively cost-free. Using original interview and archival evidence, I contrast two crucial cases: the entrenchment of national missile defense during the Obama Administration (2008-2016) with the decision to limit the development and deployment of missile defense under the ABM Treaty during the Nixon Administration (1969-1972). Not only does this paper introduce two novel concepts—technological malleability and ignorance—into the study of international relations, but it has also important implications for other emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and cyber technology, that are bound to shape warfare in critical ways.

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