

# **Draft – Not for Quotation**

## **Aircraft Carrier or Ballistic Missile Defense: Signaling Commitment in a Situation of Uncertainty**

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Strategically, the US is in a period of transition characterized by uncertainty and diverse threats. Ending two wars becomes background noise in the larger context of US recalibration of its role in the world. US power is perceived as either declining or being reoriented. Balancing off commitments previously made with new ones becomes a critical and difficult task. The core problem becomes signaling commitment without deploying major forces to a particular location. Rather one is putting others on notice that further actions will be taken if necessary. This type of symbolic behavior occurs frequently between states especially those in conflict either overtly or rhetorically over some issue. Aircraft carriers have long been important symbolic instruments signaling US interest in a particular issue. Those vessels are the linear descendants of battleships formerly the symbolic instrument of British power globally. Such deployments however are limited by being a ship especially disputes distant from the sea. BMD has come to occupy that symbolic role in signaling American commitment to allies or a state threatened by another. This can come as part of an alliance such as NATO's commitment of Patriot PAC-3 units to Turkey; the units drawn from three different militaries including the US.

### **Introduction**

Ballistic missile defense (BMD) has undergone dramatic changes over time but in recent years, an interesting conceptual shift is occurring as a result of technology maturation and diversification. Here, the focus is on BMD as another tool states can employ to signal commitment without necessarily making a large scale force commitment. Signaling commitment is a difficult objective for states because the uncertainties inherent in verbal statements make their reality difficult to judge. How really committed is a state to come to the aid of another? You saw this play out in the skirmishes over West Berlin in the early 1960s when President John Kennedy mobilized military reservists as a token of American commitment to a free West Berlin deep in East Germany. More dramatically, this signaling question arose in October 1962 in the Cuban Missile Crisis when the major issue was how does the US signal the Soviet Union that nuclear tipped missile forces were totally unacceptable in Cuba as they say "ninety miles from the US."<sup>1</sup> That situation was resolved after a confrontation thought to bring the world to the brink of nuclear war. States prefer less dramatic situations given the likely outcomes.

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For governments, the goal becomes signaling a commitment without necessarily threatening military action of such intensity. In 2013, President Barack Obama stated that Syria's use of chemical weapons crossed a "red line" implying a military response. That threat was not carried out, creating a situation of some confusion, only resolved by an agreement sponsored by Russia for Syria to dismantle its known chemical weapons stockpiles.<sup>2</sup> States do not wish to be placed in such a situation so seek other means to convey seriousness of intent. BMD deployments have become one readily available option.

### **The Dilemma**

The issue at hand becomes how you do signal such commitment in a world of multiple potential threats and finite resources to respond to those threats. The question addressed is what signals constitute serious commitment at relatively minimal cost. States pursue many diverse and often conflicting interests and obligations with some clearly ranking as higher priority. These more critical priorities are clearly when states pursue clarity as to their commitment to respond to another's actions. If the commitment is signaled properly, the state is spared a possible confrontation otherwise unavoidable.

There exist situations when states prefer ambiguity as to their actual intentions often because the national leadership has not decided the value assigned to a particular commitment, they seek a placeholder as it were. The other situation when ambiguity is preferred can occur when a weaker state attempts to bluff their antagonist. The weaker state lacks the ability to defeat or expel the adversary if they invade or inflict other damage. The weaker state is suggesting that the cost extracted to accomplish their goal is more than the adversary is willing to invest. Unfortunately, bluffs may be called which explains why clarity is normally preferred.

Making such a commitment means the state announces that it will take a certain level of response if the other party takes specific actions or fails to act (such as withdrawal or a suspended movement of forces).<sup>3</sup> Such commitments vary in their seriousness but generally committing national military forces ranks higher than other forms of coercion/persuasion such as diplomatic protests, severing of diplomatic relations, imposition of sanctions economic and otherwise, or even an embargo against

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a state such as the US position relative to North Korea. Their effectiveness depends upon the receiving party correctly understanding the message being sent.

This hierarchy played out in the US, NATO and European Union (EU) responses or nonresponses to the situation in the Ukraine in 2014. The element of national prestige becomes higher and the reaction more visceral in terms of the state reactions when responding to loss of military personnel's lives or some level of military engagement. Although that response varies depending on the issue's importance, military losses in some circumstances are effectively written off due to other considerations. For example, a number of air crews were lost during the Cold War as both sides tested the other's defenses; the arrival of Earth orbiting satellites reduced such incidents. In another context, Korean Air 007 was shot down when it apparently strayed into Soviet air space despite its clear markings as a civilian aircraft. Among the casualties was a US congressman but the US did not threaten or otherwise react to the incident. Instead, President Reagan announced that the new US GPS system would be made available to air traffic in order to prevent further incidents. The Reagan administration was criticized for a weak response. The Soviets never acknowledged any errors in their operations.<sup>4</sup>

In the globalized world of today, overcoming the noise level within the international community makes this process of commitment even more difficult to accomplish.<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed, the proliferation of ballistic missiles (BMs) across the globe creates pressures on major states to respond in a meaningful manner to protect their deployed forces and their allies. Their allies are especially critical because now homelands become available to missile threats whether nuclear or not.

### **Signaling commitment**

Signaling commitment is a fraught process with many opportunities to fail given the fact that the message is being transmitted often across different cultures and ideologies plus individual leaders' idiosyncrasies can make recognition of the signal and its intent difficult to decipher. So, the signal being sent must be clear and unambiguous which is difficult because the individuals operate in an environment with loud noise from domestic politics and the international community. Leaders may seize upon simple answers to complex problems and seize upon that because in their judgment it brings

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clarity to the situation. Miscommunication is often the result with unfortunate consequences for the players as a situation spirals out of control.

Deploying significant military forces to a specific threat situation historically has signaled serious commitment by the state in question. Such a deployment indicates that intention by their closeness to the crisis point but does not necessarily mean immediate actual combat. Rather in a deterrence sense, the state is indicating the possibility of combat if the other side attacks. What is also involved is the state's extending its protection to its ally or the threatened state if not a formal ally. Such involvement is what makes alliances "real." The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for example was long premised on the central concept that "an attack on one was considered an attack on all."<sup>6</sup> In practice, this commitment translated into the US using its nuclear weapons to stop Soviet aggression. France under President Charles de Gaulle challenged that understanding and moved to create an independent nuclear capable force for both defending France and forcing US engagement.<sup>7</sup>

US efforts to build an antiballistic missile system (ABM) now BMD system was defined by some Europeans including President de Gaulle as an effort to place a moat around the US while leaving its ostensible allies outside the ring of protection. That scenario was denied by US policymakers but the opinion persisted because early BMD work of necessity focused strictly on US homeland defense. The technologies are extraordinarily difficult to implement successfully and in the early days the technologies were physically cumbersome and immobile due to the weight and size of the technologies. For example, main frame computers were required to calculate tracking and targeting of the incoming missiles possibly with multiple warheads never mind decoys. The Soviets clearly argued that was the intent despite the fact that they were pursuing an equivalent system. Their more cogent argument was that the ABM system did not work. US leaders generally have rejected that sweeping assessment over the past sixty years – a position at times considered problematic based on testing results. Their support however has helped expand to BMD against short range or intermediate range missiles. This latter was an outgrowth of existing antiaircraft operations which were now expanded to handle a more diverse threat environment. For example, the Patriot batteries deployed in Iraq in 1991 arrived as part of the umbrella protecting

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Coalition forces from air attacks since the Iraqis had an air force of some size. The original ABM system grew out of the Nike anti-aircraft batteries surrounding large cities and other targets in the 1950s. So, the original ABM systems had the name Nike Zeus and later Nike-X before shifting to Safeguard from Sentinel feeling the former had a more positive sound to civilians who were generally apprehensive about missiles in their backyard (an example of NIMBY).

### **Ballistic Missiles as New Global Threat**

In a world where ballistic missiles (BMs) are proliferating across the globe, intense efforts have been made to limit their spread. For example the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) was established in 1987 to control the dissemination of the technologies to states that did not already possess those capabilities. Several states such as North Korea actively foster the proliferation of BM technologies in their quest for hard currency and other forms of payment in order to alleviate their economic distress. Other states are considering use BM proliferation as a method for alliance construction, the reverse of the US which long restricted access to its BM technologies although that has partially shifted. Possessing such ballistic missiles (BMs) constitute a threat that can be particularly credible given the vulnerability of civilian populations to such attacks. Since World War 2, such attacks have been considered unstoppable and effective terror weapons even in the absence of actual damage as was seen in China's missiles striking near Taiwan in 1996 or when used against populations in Iraq and Iran in the 1980s in the "war of the cities."<sup>8</sup> By the 1950s, efforts to intercept BMs during flight began to take shape in both the Soviet Union and the US but their initial systems were cumbersome and marginal in their capability to actually intercept a missile in flight. Theoretically, it was possible but in practice proved extremely difficult to accomplish even once. The threat posed by BMs whether conventional or nuclear warheads was long thought of as unstoppable but BMD offers an alternative solution of more BMs.<sup>9</sup> If in principle, BMD could be made to work against short and medium range missiles, then the effectiveness of BMs as a threat will decline and the potential for international conflict will decline.<sup>10</sup>

Efforts to build successful BMD systems expanded to include what were labeled theater missile defense (TMD) symbolized by the first deployment of the Patriot system

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to Kuwait in 1991 during the Gulf War. The actual effectiveness of the Patriot was disputed but the political message was clear: it was now possible to defend American and allied forces deployed in combat against BM attack.<sup>11</sup> Beginning with further upgrades of the Patriot to handle longer range BMs; a number of TMD systems were initiated including the Medium Extended Air Defense System (MEADS), Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), the Aegis shipboard system (originally both high and low), and the Airborne Laser. Development and deployment proved a lengthier process than originally envisioned for technical and budgetary reasons. The war on terror after 2001 diverted attention and budget, slowing development which is only now reaching fruition. The Airborne Laser was delayed due to testing and cost issues and has been suspended, it represented the most mobile of the BMD options, literally could fly to the desired location and be operational immediately.

### **BMD's Larger Role**

Most discussions of BMD have focused on NMD and its impact on strategic consideration regarding possible conflicts usually involving nuclear weapons. The discussion here focused on BMD's role not symbolically but as part of US diplomacy. As indicated above, states struggle over how to signal seriousness of intent. In principle, the US confronted by crises in the Western Pacific, the Ukraine, and the Middle East could solidify its commitments there by returning to the Cold War model of deploying significant numbers of military assets in support of allies and friendly states. That however is improbable given the decline in US conventional forces in terms of numbers including troops, planes and ships. Barring an existential crisis, Cold War military formations are unlikely to return in equivalent numbers. In fact, American military successes in two Iraq wars demonstrate the fact that such large forces may become vulnerable to a technologically sophisticated adversary. Present day forces may be more lethal, agile and flexible but their numbers are too few and the costs too high to engage in large scale growth in terms of size. The forces committed would be locked into a specific area of operations.

The US in fact is in a strategic situation similar to that confronting the British prior to WWI. Their commitments were global and their resources finite. Therefore, the British relied upon symbolic commitments of small but highly visible manifestations of their

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interest in a particular situation. This went under the rubric of “gunboat diplomacy” when a British warship of varying sizes and capabilities (literally gunboats to battleships) were sent to show the flag. Such deployments continued a traditional practice that arose in the age of sailing ships. These were effective because the ships deployed were superior to the likely potential adversary at the point of contact. The British fleet dominated the seas as a symbol of power and threat. As such, the ship deployments were effective when the party to be impressed was vulnerable to the threat expressed. That is: when the issue was internal beyond the reach of the ship’s weapons; the threat lacked credibility. The British were then forced to consider deploying ground forces – a situation fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. The 1996 Taiwan missile crisis saw the US threaten to send two carrier battle groups to the area unless the firings halted. The crisis proved to be an example of both sides being ambiguous in their signaling the Chinese to Taiwan and the Americans to China.<sup>12</sup>

The US has followed the same path with aircraft carrier battle groups with their aircraft and missiles. Battle groups are deployed to signal US engagement and commitment to the state being threatened. Battle groups are deployed to signal US engagement and commitment to the state being threatened or the to threaten the aggressor with unknown consequences. Because of technology advances, weapons wielded by the battle groups can reach farther across the shoreline. However, like the ships before, there are limits on such deployments unless one is willing to commit forces indefinitely as occurred in the Middle East. These deployments do not blunt or negate the BM threat posed by the aggressive state or nonstate actor. Also, battle groups are expensive and few in numbers, the US has only 11 battle groups with several in different stages of rehab (a multiyear process).

As allude to above, BMD until the 1990s was not credible as a symbol because it was not deployable. A deployed force must be able to move with ease from one location to another. The Army is confronting this issue when deploying its heavy divisions, which requires sea lift which is slow comparatively speaking. Their answer is predeployed equipment and supplies but that requires established allies and secure facilities, not necessary common in regions of possible need. BMD requirements previously mean that the radars and missiles were permanently stationed in a specific location. The

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Patriot deployment in 1991 marked a major change because regardless of its effectiveness, the weapon system was important as a marker of US concern for protecting both its troops and allies. In 1991, that protection extended to Israel, a nonbelligerent in the first Gulf War. If Israel had entered the conflict by responding to Iraqi Scud attacks on its population, the Coalition would have collapsed when the Arab states withdrew as a result. This first use of BMD as a symbol of US commitment to a threatened ally set the pattern in motion. What occurred has been a merger of technology advancement with diplomacy. The technology has become more flexible and adaptable, making it more deployable in relative short time frames. This is a logical extension of US military policy in that all forces are expected to be in expeditionary mode as the US withdraws from its many overseas bases.

The development of various BMD technologies has expanded the possibilities since the systems are now both land and sea based. In 1998, North Korea fired a missile (described as a “space launch”) over Japan with no prior warning. The Japanese public was clearly alarmed so the government response was to embark on a program of building space assets for surveillance of North Korea and its missiles and deployment first of Patriot batteries and later Aegis equipped ships off the North Korean coast. US engagement has been to deploy Patriot batteries and later to sell Patriot PAC-3 batteries along with Aegis equipment for its ships.<sup>13</sup> The US has extended similar protection through a combination of deployments in the short term and longer term transferring BMD technology to allies including Europeans through NATO and the Middle East to the various Gulf States.<sup>14</sup> These represent long term commitments to allies by helping them nullify or reduce their BM threat to their regional neighbors.

More recently, two events occurred in which BMD units became important symbolic and substantive commitments to NATO allies and friendly neighbors. In 2013, the Syria government engaged in missile attacks against insurgents where were close to the Turkish border. Turkey as a NATO member invoked its protection against attack. Patriot batteries were deployed from several NATO allies including the US to provide protection against possible air and missile attacks.<sup>15</sup> The deployment is small scale but clearly places NATO and the United States in the posture of protecting an ally . When the 2014 crisis in the Ukraine saw Russian troops (unacknowledged by Russia)



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intervene in the Ukraine, NATO and the US made several commitments of troops, air patrols, and BMD batteries to NATO members in Eastern Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Deployment of BMD systems as symbols of US support for a threatened state has several major aspects that are beneficial. First, the deployment is defensive and thus does not in itself introduce more tension into the conflict since these units are not going to engage in offensive operations. This is important when the situation is volatile and the other party's intentions are unclear. In fact, BMD deployment has the virtue that it can be done for one purpose and fulfil another. An example is the deployments in Eastern Europe which support the national governments against at least certain levels of BM attack. Radar facilities and actual missile facilities can be in several adjacent countries which expands their political reach while not adversely impacting their combat effectiveness. Such facilities once deployed can also be upgraded with replacement BMD units of greater reach and effectiveness. For example, the deployment of Patriot PAC-3 batteries may be the first act but can be followed by THAAD or Aegis Ashore batteries whose range and effectiveness is much greater. In fact, a joint European-American project is underway which builds off the Patriot PAC-3, the Medium Extended Air Defense System (MEADS) to expand capabilities further. BMD deployments can also be to reassure Americans both in and out of the military that they are protected against BM attack. After the North Korean space launch in December 2012, the US deployed THAAD units to Guam as a reassurance for both US forces and the residents of the territory.

Second, BMD units can be withdrawn quickly as the political situation improves, simplifying US deployment questions. Support forces will have to be sent also but that is not a big footprint. More critically, the BMD units are more easily supplied and personnel rotated in and out as time passes. This simplifies the logistical aspects of the operation because local resources can be purchased rather than having literally to ship everything from CONUS. Conversely, deployments can be more open ended as units remain but personnel rotate. The US Navy rotates crews in order to sustain operations overseas for long periods to maximize use of specific ship types.<sup>17</sup> However, those rotations are shorter than usual for ground forces although experience since 2003 has led to shorter tours depending on the type of unit.

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Third, BMD deployments are at the invitation of the local government which US allies can in time take over operation of their own BMD units to replace the US forces. This has occurred in Japan, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, and Saudi Arabia. The reality is that BMD deployments become a very important instrument through which allies can be reassured, enemies repulsed, and security can be provided against a widely spread threat. States with BMs do not have to engage in conflict but with their spread the potential for such rises. BMD deployments supplement the air craft carrier and other symbols of US commitment to states under stress.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Brigid Starkey, Mark A. Boyer, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *International Negotiation in a Complex World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; 3rd ed, 2010), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Kessler, "President Obama and the 'red line' on Syria's chemical weapons," *Washington Post* (September 6, 2014), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/> (accessed September 30, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The blockade of Cuba in 1962 forced the Soviets to decide what the value of the missiles being deployed was worth compared to the probable cost. The Soviet ships carrying missiles stopped and then reversed course, signaling Soviet acceptance of the US objection. Obviously in the background, other quid pro quos were being exchanged, i.e. the subsequent withdrawal of US intermediate range missiles from Turkey. That latter was supposed to already be underway but bureaucratic delays meant they were still present. The tradeoff was never announced officially but did occur. James Hershberg, "Anatomy of a Crisis," *The Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Spring, 1995), [http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba\\_mis\\_cri/moment.htm](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/moment.htm) (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Ronan Thomas, "Thirty Years After the Cold War Tragedy of Flight 007," *Moscow Times* (September 5, 2013), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/30-years-after-the-cold-war-tragedy-of-flight-007/485554.html> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Christer Jönsson, "Diplomatic Signaling in the Television Age," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* (1996), 1: 24. The analysis is prior to the growth of social media which has made the situation even more chaotic and confusing.

<sup>6</sup> The official statement from the NATO Treaty says: "armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all." *The North Atlantic Treaty*, (Washington DC: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 4, 1949), article 5.

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Cody, “After 43 Years, France to Rejoin NATO as Full Member,” *Washington Post* (March 12, 2009), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/11/AR2009031100547.html> (accessed October 1, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> “Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988”, *Global Security.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm> (accessed September 8, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Barkley, “Ballistic Missile Proliferation: An Empirical Investigation,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2008), 52: 455-473.

<sup>10</sup> Simon A. Mettler and Dan Reiter, “Ballistic Missiles and International Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2012), 57: 854-880.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Handberg, *Ballistic Missile Defense and the Future of American Security: Agendas, Perceptions, Technology, and Policy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 64-66.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace J. Thies, and Patrick C. Bratton, “When Governments Collide in the Taiwan Strait,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2004), 27: 556-584.

<sup>13</sup> “U.S. to deploy Patriot missiles in Japan,” *NBC News* (June 26, 2006), [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/13546585/ns/world\\_news-asia\\_pacific/t/us-japan-agree-patriots-us-bases/#.VFvv2BbgW5I](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/13546585/ns/world_news-asia_pacific/t/us-japan-agree-patriots-us-bases/#.VFvv2BbgW5I) (accessed November 6, 2014); and Chester Dawson, “Japan Shows Off its Missile-Defense System,” (December 2012), <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323316804578165023312727616> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Roger Handberg, “The Symbolic Politics of Ballistic Missile Defense: Seeking the Perfect Defense in an Imperfect World,” Paper presented at Annual Meeting, ISAC/ISSS Sectional Conference 2012, Chapel Hill, NC, October 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Andreas Gozewski, “NATO Sets Up Missile Defense Shield in Turkey,” *Deutsche Welle* (January 20, 2013), <http://www.dw.de/nato-sets-up-missile-defense-shield-in-turkey/a-16535457> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Sisk, “US-UK: Expand Missile Defense in East Europe,” *Military.com* (March 26, 2014), <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2014/03/26/us-uk-expand-missile-defense-in-eastern-europe.html> (accessed November 6, 2014); and for a broader look at NATO’s engagement with BMD defense with regards to NATO territories, see “Ballistic Missile Defense, (October 14, 2014), [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49635.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49635.htm) (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Congressional Budget Office, “Crew Rotation in the Navy: The Long Term Effect On Forward Presence,” (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, October 2007).