



LITERATURE REVIEW

Robert M. Soofer, et al., *“First we will defend the homeland”: The case for homeland missile defense* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2024), 119 pp.¹

President Trump’s January 27, 2025 Executive Order on “The Iron Dome for America,” has sparked yet another debate within the national security community over whether a more robust nationwide missile defense program makes strategic sense, is technologically feasible, and is worth the cost, especially in light of other pressing strategic and conventional force modernization priorities. This debate is decades old, and very few new arguments have been introduced since President Ronald Reagan announced his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in March 1983. Yet, despite the advent of advanced technologies and the dynamism and fragility of the current international strategic environment, critics who view any effort to protect the nation against the potential breakdown of deterrence as unworthy of pursuit continue to propagate the same tired arguments against a more effective homeland missile defense. This is further proof that—at least in Washington—bad ideas never die.

The Atlantic Council’s report titled, *“First we will defend the homeland”: The case for homeland missile defense*, effectively refutes the critics’ arguments by providing a detailed and thorough analysis of the benefits of improving U.S. missile defenses. The report is comprehensive, logically organized, and well documented. The title is taken directly from a quote on the first page of the *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States*, which acknowledges the growing threat of adversary offensive missile programs. Yet, as the authors note, “The nation falls short in fully protecting against an ever-growing number, diversity, and sophistication of long-range missile threats. This does not make sense.”

The report begins by assessing these growing missile threats from both rogue states and peer and near-peer nuclear adversaries, noting that along with deterring the likes of North Korea, the United States “must now simultaneously deter two nuclear-armed great powers—Russia and China.” It argues persuasively that failing to address these threats “could significantly narrow US decision-making and curtail a president’s freedom of action during crisis and conflict.” It notes that improving homeland missile defenses strengthens deterrence by complicating the attack calculus of any potential aggressor and reduces the efficacy of coercive nuclear threats. Further, it argues that advances in technology make it possible to significantly augment existing homeland missile defenses over the next five years. The report concludes that “the missile threat to the homeland is real and growing and, if left unaddressed, could seriously undermine US grand strategy and the very basis of national defense strategy.” This is a sobering conclusion that should be taken serious by U.S. decision makers.

So what do the authors recommend the United States do to address the issues they cite? Their principal recommendation is to “update US homeland missile defense policy to remove the false distinction between rogue-state and major power missile threats and to eliminate

¹ The report can be found at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/First-We-Will-Defend-the-Homeland-2024-FINAL-1.pdf>.



sole reliance on nuclear retaliation to deter Russian and Chinese limited coercive missile attacks against the homeland.” This recommendation makes eminent sense and is consistent with other reports and studies that have assessed this issue, including the October 2023 report of the bipartisan, congressionally mandated Strategic Posture Commission and this author’s January 2025 National Institute *Occasional Paper*.² Moreover, the report argues for defending against all types of offensive missiles, including cruise and hypersonic missiles; improving the survivability of U.S. strategic nuclear forces and their associated command and control nodes; protecting critical U.S. infrastructure against major power cruise missile threats; and developing “next-generation missile defense capabilities,” including space-based kinetic and non-kinetic technologies.

The authors clearly and effectively address the critics’ persistent yet erroneous arguments that enhancing U.S. homeland missile defenses will be destabilizing, spark an arms race, and cost too much. They explain the political and ideological fault lines in the contemporary debate over the value of homeland missile defense. They note that the primary purpose of missile defense is to bolster deterrence and to provide a degree of protection for the nation should deterrence fail. They also point out that defense of the homeland contributes to the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and assurance, noting that “Allies must understand that US homeland missile defense makes Washington more likely—not less—to come to their aid and increases—rather than jeopardizes—strategic deterrence across the alliance.” As the eminent strategist Herman Kahn noted, it is not credible for the United States to threaten nuclear war on behalf of an ally if the American homeland is left vulnerable to an aggressor’s strikes.

The report analyzes Russian and Chinese nuclear doctrines, including the prospects of limited nuclear use and their capabilities for limited nuclear employment against the U.S. homeland. It notes that both Russia and China “are developing capabilities and doctrine to strike the US homeland during regional conflict to prevent US support of allies.”

The report discusses the evolution of U.S. missile defense policy after the Cold War, including the respective roles of both the executive and legislative branches of government in establishing policy direction. Importantly, it notes that missile defense and deterrence are “complementary,” and that the United States must not only improve the survivability of its own nuclear deterrent forces but “must be ready to fight two major nuclear adversaries sequentially” in order to deter the prospect of opportunistic aggression.

Finally, the report discusses the architectural challenges of developing a defense system against multiple types of missile threats and proposes a layered missile defense architecture for the homeland, including advocating for a preferential defense of priority assets to improve system effectiveness and efficiency. The report’s recommendations to improve the overall homeland defense architecture, to include space-based defensive elements, are well reasoned and clearly articulated.

² David J. Trachtenberg, *Next Steps in Homeland Missile Defense, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2025), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/next-steps-in-homeland-missile-defense/>.

The authors of this report have produced a document that comprehensively addresses the complexities of the missile defense debate, explains the strategic benefits of homeland missile defense and refutes the mistaken assertions of critics who rely on outdated Cold War thinking that is no longer applicable to today's international environment. In this regard, they have done a tremendous public service. This report should be read and studied by all those who believe that protection of America's homeland should be the nation's top priority.

*Reviewed by David J. Trachtenberg
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James H. Anderson and Daniel R. Green (eds.), *Confronting China: US Defense Policy in an Era of Great Power Competition* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 384 pp.

Confronting China: US Defense Policy in an Era of Great Power Competition provides an excellent introduction to and an overview of U.S. policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC). Distinguished contributors with decades of government experience analyze many important facets of the U.S.-PRC strategic competition and discuss what China's dramatic rise means for U.S. defense policy and strategy.

The authors' contributions can be divided into two areas: regional and functional. The regional chapters discuss U.S. alliances, including in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Each of these regions can play a supporting role in helping the United States outperform China in the rivalry. Just as importantly, the authors remind readers that these regions will not make equal contributions to the U.S. ability to prevail over China in the long-term. That knowledge should inform U.S. resource allocation. The authors also emphasize the need to foster alliance relationships and to counter China's subversive designs in the so called "gray zone," particularly against democracies.

The functional contributions discuss nuclear deterrence and China's emergence as a nuclear peer competitor, the importance of space, cyber challenges, the need to rebuild the U.S. defense industrial base, the implications for deterrence of a growing Sino-Russian entente, and the need to articulate a winning strategy to prevail in the rivalry. Excellence in a single line of effort will not be enough to prevail over the long run; the United States will have to improve its defense policy across the board.

Overall, the picture is not encouraging from the U.S. perspective. China is intent on building a "world-class military" by 2049, including significantly expanding its nuclear, conventional, and unconventional forces. The Chinese leadership considers these military capabilities key enablers in a broader political effort to influence domestic and international opinion in China's favor. The latter effort includes leveraging social media, radio, television, and investments in education as influence tools aimed at securing China's advantage without the necessity to fight.

China's vulnerabilities include its dependence on energy imports potentially at risk of disruptions. China's aging population may make it more difficult to sustain economic growth, the cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy, and force levels. The examination of different facets of the U.S.-China rivalry makes clear that military power is only a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to prevail, particularly over the long-term. While war is not inevitable, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that most great power rivalries end in bloodshed, as Anderson points out. A chapter discussing economic issues is a glaring omission in the structure of this otherwise compelling edited volume.

The United States faces a strategic imperative of putting in place forces that credibly deter China and assure allies. The authors remind us that the U.S.-China rivalry is likely to last for decades to come. Sustaining the U.S. public's attention and support for the necessary policies and alliance relationships over such a long period of time will require an uncommon degree of capable communication on the government's part, particularly considering that the level of defense spending has been unequal to the task for over a decade.

Getting U.S. China policy right will be difficult. The requirement to "address short-term needs without losing sight of the long term," depart from the "business-as-usual" approach, weighing trade-offs, managing risks, and enabling and supporting leaders as they make hard choices seems daunting. Yet, making these choices now, while the United States still possesses advantages in important areas of the rivalry is necessary to avoid having to make even more difficult choices under much less favorable conditions, including a potential war with China.

This edited volume is a good starting point for those seeking to put U.S. China defense policy and strategy on a better track, and those who are looking to improve their understanding of current defense issues shaping this important debate in the United States.

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Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 768 pages.

The Soviet Union has always been difficult for outsiders to decipher. Winston Churchill famously described it as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Soviet archives have proven to be an on-again, off-again resource for historians, but the overall historical record is far from complete. What then, would possess a serious historian to write a major work on one of the most difficult to understand countries, the Soviet Union, during a time period, the Cold War, in which reliable sources are spotty at best?

Sergey Radchenko, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies campus in Bologna, wrote *To Run the World* to answer the major question: what motivated Soviet leaders to act the way they did in their foreign policy? Radchenko wisely framed his study around this question so the book did not expand into other well-trodden

academic ground, such as general Cold War history, U.S.-Soviet relations, or other similar subjects. Instead, by staying focused on the motivations for Soviet foreign policy decision-making, as illustrated by multiple events and surveys contained in the chronologically-arranged chapters, Radchenko advances his argument succinctly and convincingly even for a lengthy book.

Radchenko's argument, in short, is that Soviet leaders constantly sought recognition, and thus, legitimacy, by foreign powers, primarily the United States and the People's Republic of China, but also other members of the Warsaw Pact and various third world states. Soviet leaders sought to achieve this recognition as a superpower and leader of the worldwide revolution by being both a partner and an adversary—in either case, the goals were the same: advance national interests (in large part through military power) and be perceived as powerful and due deference. Radchenko is well aware that the Soviet urge to present itself as both a powerful partner and adversary, often at the same time, appears self-contradictory. Indeed, Soviet foreign policy throughout the Cold War often evinced these contradictory goals and actions, whether it be Stalin's selective commitment to the Yalta agreements or Soviet agreement to arms control negotiations while at the same time pursuing military superiority.

This reviewer was initially modestly skeptical of the explanatory power of the Soviet search for legitimacy, believing there is more evidence for the drive for geopolitical security through expansion that motivated Soviet foreign policy—but Radchenko presents a convincing picture with copious evidence that classic Soviet foreign expansionism was often tempered, or at least modified, by a desire to shape the external perceptions of Soviet allies and adversaries. With the caveat that the historical record is far from complete, a caveat Radchenko is always careful to acknowledge, there is sufficient evidence from private Soviet meeting minutes, memoirs, and other sources, to conclude that Soviet leaders, even though they had unique proclivities and focus areas, generally placed great importance on how they were perceived by other states—even if it occasionally meant a relatively less desirable security outcome.

Radchenko structures *To Run the World* chronologically, from Stalin to Gorbachev, but each chapter often features a global focus. He has written previously on the Sino-Soviet relationship during the Cold War, and that scholarship shows through in the especially enlightening discussions about how Soviet leaders often found themselves competing with Chinese leaders for the spotlight within the Communist sphere—a competition that often affected how the Soviets approached relations with the United States or other Asian powers. Soviet interventions in the third world during the Cold War often provided additional glimpses into how and why Soviet leaders made the foreign policy decisions they did. So, while Western readers may think Soviet actions in the Middle East were relatively less consequential for the United States and Europe, there is still great historical value in recounting these events and how they demonstrated a certain continuity in Soviet foreign policy.

Radchenko is a careful, thorough historian of the Soviet Union as evidenced by *To Run the World's* 100 pages of citations and explanatory notes. He demonstrates an excellent

handle on sources from multiple countries and, just as importantly, he presents fair descriptions of ongoing academic debates on those issues where there is not enough evidence or where the evidence is mixed. Radchenko is often content to present both sides of a debate and then point the reader to the best sources should they wish to explore the topic further. Moreover, he helpfully points out when new historical evidence has come to light, such as the slow drip of declassified documents that Russia releases from the Soviet archives from time to time—some of which he has documented in other publications on more specialized topics.³

Overall, students of the Cold War, and Soviet foreign policy in particular, would do well to read *To Run the World*, especially for Radchenko's framework centered around the Soviet pursuit of external validation. Specialists on the Cuban Missile Crisis, arms control negotiations, or other events may quibble with Radchenko on the applicability and explanatory power of the Soviet quest for recognition in some instances, but the book's overall argument is generally persuasive. Radchenko summarizes his point nicely when he concludes, "Throughout the Cold War, the Soviets tried hard to undermine Western unity even as they craved Western recognition. They never managed." (p. 602)

Readers who are conversant in current Russian affairs will find great value in this history of the Cold War period—the driving factors for Russian foreign policy today have clear predecessors in the Soviet past. Alas, until there is a greater opening of Soviet historical records accessible to the outside world, the Soviet Union will remain profoundly mysterious. And yet, as books like *To Run the World* remind us, the evidence we do have continues to be of great historical and current value.

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³ Sergey Radchenko and Vladislav Zubok, "Blundering on the Brink: The Secret History and Unlearned Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (May/June 2024), pp. 44-63.