

“The United States and China must engage in some deep soul searching. What type of strategic stability does the United States seek with China? Is China a large rogue state whose strategic forces must be neutered by defensive systems, or is it a small Russia where strategic stability is achieved through mutual deterrence?”

China, America, and Missile Defense: Conflicting National Interests

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China has long opposed United States missile defense programs, beginning with the Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative of the early 1980s. This opposition continued through the 1990s but became especially vociferous in the latter part of the decade when the Clinton administration bowed to domestic political pressures to accelerate national missile defense programs and expand theater ballistic missile defense cooperation and support with Japan and Taiwan. Although the current administration's missile defense programs are far less ambitious than those of the Reagan years, China's apprehensions over their implications have been clearly and loudly stated.

The Sino-American clash over missile defenses has coincided with several significant events that have heightened sensitivities on both sides of the Pacific. These include China's use of short-range ballistic missiles to intimidate Taiwan in 1995 and 1996, the modernization of China's strategic forces, United States–Japanese efforts to buttress their alliance, and congressional investigation of China's alleged nuclear espionage. An environment has been created in which the dispute over missile defense involves fundamental differences over threat perceptions, national capabilities, national security concerns, and foreign policy priorities. In short, at the root of Sino-American disagreement over ballistic missile defenses are the conflicting national interests of Washington and Beijing.

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Washington views these programs as a proper response to what it perceives as an increasingly threatening and unpredictable world. The proliferation of ballistic missile technologies and the capability to join them with weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons) has created an international environment that the United States sees as far less stable than during the bipolar cold war era. Under these uncertain conditions, a “thin” national missile defense promises protection against accidental launches and the threat of long-range ballistic missile attacks by unpredictable “rogue” states (now known as “states of concern”) employing only a few weapons. Theater missile defenses promise protection of American and allied forces, bases, and population centers within reach of shorter-range ballistic missiles. The joining of missile defenses with the deterrent effect of offensive weapons is seen as an enhancement of United States security and that of its allies. This combination of offensive and defensive capabilities undermines an aggressor's ability to achieve its military and political objectives through the threat or use of ballistic missiles armed with chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.

Beijing perceives United States development of ballistic missile defenses in a distinctly different light. At one level, ballistic missile defense is viewed as yet another demonstration of America's intention to secure its preeminent global military position and achieve “absolute security.” In its rawest form, many Chinese (especially within the military) see national missile defense (NMD) and theater missile defense (TMD) as key elements in an American strategy to “softly contain” China and to police the world. On a second level, China's opposition to missile defense is based on substantive concerns regarding the possibility of nuclear blackmail, the

role of United States alliances in East Asia, Japan's military potential, and dangers associated with United States military sales to Taiwan.

BEIJING'S APPREHENSIONS

Understanding China's fears requires a brief description of the NMD "architecture" and capabilities currently envisioned by the United States. National missile defense is to be built around ground-based interceptors and a family of ground- and space-based sensors that direct the interceptors to their targets. The missile defense system is to have three escalating deployment patterns, referred to as "capabilities" or "C." C-1, with possible deployment in 2005, will be based in Alaska, with 20 interceptors designed to defeat no more than five "simple" reentry vehicles that do not employ penetration aids to confuse the interceptors. C-1 has an expansion program that by 2007 would deploy 100 interceptors on the Alaskan site designed to counter more complex reentry vehicles, which use penetration aids.

C-2 retains 100 interceptors but would upgrade the early warning and tracking radars, with deployment around 2010. C-3, with a possible 2010–2011 deployment, incorporates a new base in North Dakota. Together with the Alaskan facility, C-3 is designed to defeat tens of complex reentry vehicles with 250 interceptors divided between the two bases.

China therefore anticipates an emerging NMD of increasing effectiveness complementing the world's most capable mix of offensive nuclear and conventional forces. Sha Zukang, director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Department of Arms Control and Disarmament, has criticized the linking of offensive and defensive capabilities, stating that the "United States practice of grabbing a spear in one hand while holding a shield in the other cannot but cause the legitimate concerns of other countries."

Sha's criticism identifies Beijing's primary concern. Even a "thin" deployment of 100 interceptors

¹Even in the 1980s, when the modernization programs began, Beijing was faced with the implications of the strategic defense initiative. Since then China has also had to confront the weaponization of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear programs, which was demonstrated by their 1998 tests. Hence, whatever size force Beijing may have considered credible in the 1980s will almost certainly not be considered sufficient for the next two decades. Thus, China will deploy a larger and more sophisticated force than it currently does.

will severely undermine the credibility of China's small, aging strategic deterrent of approximately 20 liquid-fueled, single-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). These weapons are primarily based unfueled in highly vulnerable silos with their warheads stored separately. Not only are they subject to a disarming first strike by precise United States weapons, but NMD would prevent any surviving weapons from reaching their target. If a military conflict over Taiwan erupted, Chinese leaders fear the United States would use nuclear threats to prevent China's invasion of Taiwan, to stop a conflict from escalating, or to force a resolution on United States terms. With such a small, technologically inferior nuclear force, Chinese planners believe that—for the first time since 1964—their

With missile defense in place, Chinese planners believe that—for the first time since 1964—their country could be vulnerable to nuclear coercion or blackmail.

country could be vulnerable to nuclear coercion or blackmail, as it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. Many Chinese military officials see United States

NMD plans and the Taiwan issue as intimately linked. These fears have become so acute that China's continued adherence to its long-held policy of no-first-use is under debate in military circles.

National missile defense also threatens the credibility of China's future strategic deterrent. Beijing's aging, unreliable strategic force is to be replaced with a new family of solid-fueled weapons designed to increase the survivability, accuracy, and response time of China's deterrent. Although two new road-mobile long-range missiles and one new nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine have been under development for over a decade, the number of weapons Beijing considers adequate to sustain a credible deterrent is not known.

There is sufficient indication from Chinese analyses of future requirements to assume that even without NMD, the number of ICBMs would be greater than the 20 or so now deployed.¹ Yet NMD injects a new factor into this equation and will play a defining role in determining the future size of China's strategic capabilities. As Chinese officials have stated, NMD will require the deployment of many more missiles than they would prefer to ensure that defenses will not render China's deterrent impotent. Beijing may also revisit its previous decision not to develop multiple warhead missiles.

Washington has sought to assure Beijing that the planned missile defenses are not directed at China.

Rather, the NMD program is indeed being designed to protect the United States from accidental or unauthorized launches, and efforts by rogue states using one or two ICBMs to coerce the United States. But American explanations have fallen on deaf ears. Given the United States military's overwhelming strength and ability to deter an attack, Beijing summarily rejects the "rogue threat" argument as a pretext to develop NMD. According to one Chinese analyst, developing NMD to protect the United States from North Korea, Iran, or Iraq is the equivalent of "building a cannon to hit a fly." Most Chinese officials and analysts see NMD as largely directed at China. One source of Beijing's skepticism can be found in the 1998 Rumsfeld Report and the unclassified 1999 National Intelligence Estimate assessments of potential missile threats that provide the analytic base for NMD and TMD. Both identify China's missiles as a possible threat to the United States.

Beijing's second set of arguments focuses on the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and the implications for the future of arms control. China is concerned that the United States will proceed with NMD deployment, even at the risk of violating the treaty and rendering it void. Chinese officials have asserted that despite Russia's ratification of the second strategic arms reduction treaty (START II), NMD's conflict with the ABM treaty could complicate implementation of START II's provisions and indefinitely delay negotiations on START III. China fears that with the ABM treaty abrogated and the strategic arms treaties endangered, Russia and the United States may not only sustain their nuclear forces above the START II levels (3,500 warheads each), but that Russia would revive its own NMD program. Hence, the absence of an ABM treaty and sustained high levels of strategic weapons could lead Russia and the United States to develop robust missile defenses to complement their offensive forces. This eventuality would further degrade China's security environment and force it to commit even more resources to its strategic deterrent at a time when economic growth is still the paramount national priority.

THEATER MISSILE DEFENSE I: TAIWAN

Following the same logic as NMD, theater missile defenses are viewed by the United States as complementing—not replacing—the extended nuclear deterrence that protects forward-deployed United States and allied forces and their supporting bases. China has indicated acceptance of TMD when its purpose is limited to the protection of United States forces. But Beijing strenuously objects to the transfer

of TMD capabilities to Taiwan and Japan, and to the design of theater defenses so robust they could assist a United States national missile defense capability.

United States TMD programs encompass a "family of systems" providing a "tiered" capability to attack missiles and/or reentry vehicles at different phases of their trajectory. "Lower tier" defense is to be performed by the land-based Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) system. The most advanced version under development is designed to defend against short- and medium-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles using an interceptor with a hit-to-kill capability at the terminal phase of the missile's or reentry vehicle's flight.

More ambitious objectives are set for "upper tier" systems represented by the United States Navy's Theater Wide ship-based program and the United States Army's land-based Theater High Altitude Area Defense. These systems are being designed to intercept short-, medium- and long-range theater ballistic missiles at long range and high altitudes. Both can engage a missile or reentry vehicle within or outside the earth's atmosphere. The Navy Theater Wide program is designed to attack missiles during their ascent or boost phase, during their midcourse trajectory, and during the descent phase near the defended area.

China's military and political leaders reserve a special antipathy for United States provision of advanced TMD capabilities to Taiwan. Although Taipei has already purchased PAC-2 systems, Beijing opposes any upgrades for them, especially the newest PAC-3 system with an advanced interceptor. China, of course, considers Taiwan part of the mainland and opposes United States involvement in cross-strait issues, especially arms sales—and especially arms sales involving theater missile defense, which is seen as the worst kind of military transfer because of its political implications.

For Beijing, transferring TMD to Taiwan is essentially a political issue because China could easily defeat a TMD system with an overwhelming short-range ballistic missile barrage attack or with cruise missiles. Beijing's primary concern is that the sale of more advanced TMD systems by the United States would constitute a qualitative jump in arms transfers, suggesting a form of extended deterrence. Beijing argues that the transfer of advanced TMD to Taiwan would require more interaction between United States and Taiwanese militaries, leading to the creation of a de facto military alliance similar to the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty between Taiwan and the United States. Consequently, this would

destroy the foundation for cross-strait dialogue, lead to what the *China Daily* refers to as an “unprecedented setback” in Sino-American relations, and possibly spark a military confrontation.

On similar political grounds, Beijing is concerned that TMD transfers to Taiwan would provide separatist forces a sense of security that could possibly lead to calls for independence. Taiwan might also use some of the TMD technology to develop its own offensive missiles, although Washington denies this is technically possible.

Washington has not decided whether to sell more capable TMD systems to Taiwan, and resolution of this issue is not expected any time soon. The crux of the problem lies in divergent Chinese and American perspectives regarding the political and military dimensions of TMD in Taiwan. For the United States, the TMD decision is largely based on a military calculation of Taiwan's security and China's willingness to create a more favorable security environment across the Taiwan Strait. Specifically, the United States wants China to curb short-range ballistic missile deployment in the coastal provinces opposite Taiwan, which now numbers around 200 missiles and perhaps expanding at the rate of 50 per year.

China rejects this linkage because it considers the Taiwan problem to be an internal affair. To Beijing, China's missile deployments are irrelevant because the United States should not be providing TMD or other military items to Taiwan in the first place. As a result, an offense–defense “missile race” has begun to emerge across the Taiwan Strait with no end in sight.

THEATER MISSILE DEFENSE II: JAPAN

Chinese opposition to United States TMD cooperation with Japan stems from a different set of concerns. Most important, Chinese officials have already expressed an understanding that lower-tier TMD in Japan is needed to protect United States and allied troops and bases; Beijing grudgingly sees Japan's lower-tier systems as satisfying a legitimate security need, especially given the proximity of the North Korean missile threat. Instead, China's apprehensions are focused on Japan's development of upper-tier TMD capabilities. Moreover, unlike with Taiwan, the United States is not only deploying complete TMD systems in Japan but is jointly developing key missile defense technologies that will be used in the Navy Theater Wide upper-tier system.

Chinese fears about Japanese intentions and potential military capabilities are also disproportionately acute. Japan's invasion and brutal occupation of

China in the 1930s and 1940s and Tokyo's continued unwillingness to formally apologize for the excesses of the imperial army have meant that few in Beijing trust Japan and are wary of its “real” ambitions.

China opposes American cooperation with Japan on upper-tier system for four reasons. First, Beijing argues that United States–Japan TMD cooperation could provide the technical and political basis for eventual Japanese remilitarization. The TMD interceptor technologies Japan is developing could be diverted to build ballistic or cruise missiles with advanced capabilities. Theater missile defense will not only improve Japan's defense production capabilities, but may encourage Japan to shift from a defensive to an offensive military strategy. Chinese analysts claim that Japan will first develop missile defenses (a “shield”) and then offensive missile forces (a “spear”).

Second, Beijing is concerned that cooperation on TMD will change the nature of the United States–Japan military alliance, eventually leading to Japan to break out of it. At present, United States protection of Japan restrains its military ambitions but TMD cooperation will place the United States–Japan military alliance on a more equal basis.

Third, if Japan acquired the Navy Theater Wide upper-tier system, it could, in times of crisis, be deployed around Taiwan to protect the island from Chinese missile attacks. Chinese fears were heightened by a 1999 Defense Department report stating that a single Aegis cruiser with a Navy Theater Wide system could provide significant protection for all of Taiwan.

Last, some Chinese maintain that TMD and NMD are closely related and that joint TMD development with Japan will assist the United States in developing the NMD capabilities Beijing already opposes.

Washington's differences with Beijing over TMD for Japan are founded on vastly divergent assessments of Japan's military capabilities and intentions, the United States ability to manage the relationship (that is, to restrain Japan), and the legitimacy of the threats facing Japan. Washington views Japan as a status quo power that relies on its military alliance with the United States for national security. The United States maintains that joint development of TMD will prevent Japan from building offensive missiles by providing for national protection rather than provide Tokyo with an incentive to break out of the alliance and build its own missiles. In addition, American military planners believe that given the constitutional limits on Japan's military expansion, Japan faces legitimate security threats from North Korea that TMD is meant to address. To be sure, many in Tokyo and

Washington also favor TMD to protect Japan from a potential Chinese missile threat. However, that rationale is seldom mentioned, given the sensitivities in Sino-Japanese relations.

PROSPECTS

Beijing's diplomatic offensive seeks to constrain United States deployment of robust missile defenses, but the intense political pressures and momentum in the United States suggest no such restraint. China will almost certainly plan for the worst plausible outcome. If the United States deploys the most capable missile defenses under development, Sino-American strategic relations will remain stunted and China will engage in a sustained quantitative and qualitative buildup, beyond the general requirements of strategic modernization. These responses will be matched by a growing Chinese reluctance to participate in bilateral or multilateral arms control and nonproliferation negotiations, and Beijing may seek to actively obstruct progress by others on these issues.

How can China and the United States avert such an outcome? Certainly, Beijing cannot be allowed to dictate United States policy, but neither can the United States veto China's responses to perceived emerging threats to its security.

Fortunately, the extensive lead-time before the more robust NMD can become operational or before China can deploy large numbers of the advanced theater and strategic weapons currently under development provides the opportunity for constructive dialogue. This window will shrink as NMD deployment decisions are made. Consequently, the diplomatic attention Washington has been lavishing on Moscow should also be equally directed at Beijing in the hope of engaging the leadership in a strategic dialogue. At a minimum, negotiations should take the form of a dedicated channel focused on differences in threat perceptions, national capabilities, and national security priorities. Although disagreements will certainly persist, such exchanges may gradually facilitate the development of a modicum of confidence in a relationship now devoid of trust.

For this dialogue to prove effective, the United States and China must engage in some deep soul searching. What type of strategic stability does the United States seek with China? Is China a large rogue state whose strategic forces must be neutered by defensive systems, or is it a small Russia where strategic stability is achieved through mutual deterrence? It would seem evident that treating China as a large rogue invites an offense-defense deployment

dynamic that would spark a sharp deterioration in bilateral relations. Similarly, Beijing must reconsider its long-standing policy of denying any transparency about the composition, size, and doctrine of its nuclear forces, since this lack of transparency provides an incentive for deploying more capable NMD.

Although challenging, theater defenses to be deployed in East Asia are more amenable to negotiation and deal-making than are bilateral NMD programs. The issue of Taiwan presents major difficulties, however. Before making any final decision, the United States must decide whether lower- or upper-tier TMD enhances or degrades Taiwan's security. Because China can simply overwhelm TMD with a barrage attack or countermeasures, the security benefits from TMD may be ephemeral, at best, and provocative, at worst. The value of TMD for the United States and Taiwan lies in its potential use as a bargaining chip. Theater missile defense transfers to Taiwan could be limited to the land-based PAC-2 or the least-advanced model of the PAC-3 in exchange for China's restraint in deploying short-range ballistic missiles in coastal provinces. Linking TMD sales to Taiwan with curbs on Chinese missile technology exports to both Pakistan and Iran is also in the United States security interest.

The challenge facing Washington and Tokyo is to convince China that the alternatives to TMD for Japan are worse. Confronted with increasing vulnerability to North Korean missile threats, Japan could easily leverage its advanced space launch industry to develop sophisticated ballistic missiles if a missile defense program did not exist. More important, TMD cooperation serves as an alliance-enhancement mechanism and further strengthens the greatest bulwark against Japanese remilitarization. In terms of confidence building, the United States and Japan could consider a system of joint operation of TMD platforms to provide further assurances to China that the system would not be used for other than defensive purposes.

It should be understood, nonetheless, that although strategic dialogue and deal-making can seek to avert action-reaction deployment dynamics, it cannot eliminate all friction associated with the differences found in Sino-American approaches to security. Preparing highly capable missile defenses, regardless of how justified and benign in the eyes of American policymakers and military planners, has raised many deep-seated security concerns in Beijing that cannot be easily mollified. Without focused diplomacy, these programs risk disruption of a pivotal relationship at the very time when the entire security landscape in Asia is being reordered. ■