



Missile Defense & China

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Longstanding cold war fears that missile defenses would destabilize nuclear deterrence led the United States and the Soviet Union to conclude the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 1972. Nevertheless, in the U.S., the attractions of missile defense endure, fueled most recently by the apparent Gulf War successes of the Patriot missiles and by perceived threats of long-range missile launches by so-called "rogue" states.

There are several levels of missile defenses. Lower-tier theater missile defense (TMD) weapons, such as the Patriot, attempt to intercept shorter-range missiles as they descend toward their targets. Upper-tier TMD weapons (now under development) aim to intercept missiles while they are still above the atmosphere, thus protecting wider areas of territory. Current leading upper-tier proposals include the land-based Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and the Navy Theater Wide (NTW) system, which would be deployed on Aegis destroyers.

National Missile Defense (NMD) focuses on defending North America from intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Unlike the more ambitious SDI (Star Wars)

program promoted by the Reagan administration, the recently postponed Clinton administration NMD proposal would have deployed interceptors on North American soil to protect against a small number of ICBMs.

TMD and NMD proposals are more intricately linked than is often recognized. Although a key locus of these linkages in the Asia-Pacific region is China, the impact of proposed missile defenses on China is not sufficiently

recognized. With a coalescing mandate to protect U.S. troops and fleets abroad, TMD development has proceeded without much scrutiny by U.S. citizens. The more rigorous NMD debate has focused mostly on the degrees of missile threats posed by states such as the DPRK (North Korea), NMD's potential impact on U.S.-Russia relations, and the merits of the ABM treaty.

China's concerns over both NMD and TMD, while differentiated and nuanced, fall generally into three categories. A major Chinese concern is TMD's potential application to Taiwan. Many in Beijing believe that only China's threat to use force deters an overt declaration of independence by Taiwan. Though many analysts doubt that China could successfully invade Taiwan to suppress independence, Taiwan is clearly vulnerable to China's short-range missile force. Deployment of TMD in or

near Taiwan would reduce China's ability to use missile threats to politically intimidate Taiwan's leaders. Moreover, any U.S. role in such deployment would signal (to both Taipei and Beijing) a greater likelihood of U.S. military support of Taiwan in the event of overt conflict. Thus, China worries that TMD deployment would bolster Taiwanese independence sentiments.

A second Chinese concern is the impact of TMD in East Asia. Currently, the U.S. and Japan are collaborating to develop TMD to protect Japanese targets against regional missile attacks, most specifically from the DPRK. Chinese analysts are not persuaded that the DPRK threat is so grave, and so U.S.-Japan TMD collaboration exacerbates Chinese fears that both countries seek less constraint to act against China. The strengthening of the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines, which conspicuously fail to define the geographic boundaries within which events could lead to joint U.S.-Japan military operations, underscores this Chinese perception.

These two concerns are directly linked. U.S.-Japan TMD planning now favors the NTW system, which would be deployed on Aegis cruisers that could be moved near Taiwan in the event of a conflict there. Hence, for China, NTW deployment in Japan would provide implicit TMD protection to Taiwan. Chinese leaders additionally worry that such deployment, combined with the open-ended regional scope of the U.S.-Japan defense guidelines, would open the door to direct Japanese involvement in a China-Taiwan conflict.

China's third concern focuses on U.S. NMD plans. China is undertaking long-term modernization and expansion of its strategic nuclear forces, which U.S. strategic analysts perceive as a latent threat. Still, China's nuclear force will remain relatively small, and the U.S. will retain a massive retaliatory deterrent. Hence, even in the event of direct U.S.-China military conflict, the prospects of China launching nuclear missiles against the U.S. will remain slim. Nevertheless, China's nuclear capabilities are a meaningful coercive instrument politically—however remote the prospect, Pentagon war planners must still reckon with China's possible use of nuclear weapons directly against the United States. U.S. NMD deployment would act to mitigate the political utility of this threat.

This concern is linked to the first two. NMD would moderate Pentagon defense planners' concerns over escalation in the event of U.S. intervention in Taiwan or other U.S.-China regional conflicts. NMD capability would also add enormously to these planners' perceptions of policy flexibility on many issues, including Taiwan. China would, they reason, perceive its coercive influence over the United States to have diminished, and the United States would thus have an expanded freedom to maneuver.

Key Points

- Taiwan is central to China's perceptions of TMD and NMD.
- U.S.-Japan cooperation on TMD development acts to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance in the post-cold war context, raising Chinese concerns regarding the Northeast Asia region.
- As its strategic role expands, China's reactions to TMD and NMD become increasingly important.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

For the United States, avoiding conflict in the Taiwan Strait requires delicate judgments of political trends in both Taipei and Beijing. Unfortunately, shrill, ideological, and highly polarized U.S. domestic debates over policies toward China greatly complicate the task of carefully balancing policy concerning China and Taiwan. In particular, overly simplistic treatment of the Taiwan issue by Washington policymakers obscures the Chinese domestic factors girding Beijing's commitment to preserving China's sovereign title to Taiwan.

The leadership in Beijing is not concerned simply about the geostrategic implications of Taiwanese independence but is also worried about the repercussions of Taiwan's independence within mainland China. Populations in several regions in China, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, harbor irredentist ambitions that Beijing worries would be unleashed by actual Taiwanese independence. The Beijing leadership has made Chinese territorial integrity a core principle of its own legitimacy. The fate of Taiwan is therefore embedded in the Beijing leadership's perceptions of its prospects for sustaining the legitimacy to rule China at all. Thus, a decision in Beijing to use force to prevent Taiwanese independence might be based not on the practical prospects of reclaiming Taiwan militarily but rather on the core prerequisite of regime survival.

If TMD deployment neutralized Taiwanese perceptions of the Chinese missile threat, it could catalyze a movement toward independence by Taiwan. Because of Beijing's concern over its domestic legitimacy, there would be a real danger that China would use force regardless of the level of support it expects the U.S. to provide to Taiwan. In the event of such deterrence failure, Washington would feel the compulsion to make good on U.S. commitments to support Taiwan. Thus, U.S. deployment of a TMD system applicable to Taiwan would dramatically heighten the risks of a war in the Taiwan Strait and would likely embroil China and the United States in direct conflict.

The prominence of domestic politics in the U.S. policy debate regarding China lends credibility to Chinese charges that the United States exaggerates the DPRK missile threat to justify TMD capabilities really meant to confront China. Indeed, many U.S. TMD supporters acknowledge that the United States should and would proceed with TMD development in East Asia, even in the absence of a DPRK missile threat. The justification for this approach flows from continuing U.S. reliance on extended nuclear deterrence to guarantee Japanese security—the “nuclear umbrella.” Advocates of joint U.S.-Japan TMD development often cite its crucial role in reaffirming U.S. commitment to this alliance, particularly as enhanced under the new security guidelines.

Beijing perceives deployment of TMD in East Asia as a challenge to China's capabilities to pursue legitimate interests in its immediate geographic region. This concern by no means applies exclusively with respect to Taiwan; if that issue were in some way resolved, China would still look upon TMD development both as a signal that U.S. and Japanese long-term intentions in East

Asia are confrontational rather than collaborative and as a portent of a U.S. containment policy aimed at China.

The potential for such Chinese reactions should be of concern to Washington policymakers, because China's strategic global role in the post-cold war world is growing, and hence China's reactions to U.S. actions will powerfully affect Washington's success in achieving the goals it intends. The United States has not taken Beijing's reactions sufficiently into account in its policy-making, mainly because of a strong reluctance in some quarters to treat China as a global strategic actor.

For example, China is proceeding to modernize its nuclear arsenals and long- and short-range missile forces (although they will remain small compared to those of the United States and Russia). Some Pentagon defense planners directly assert that Chinese modernization will proceed regardless of U.S. decisions on NMD. However, there is considerable scope among Beijing's future options for developing a nuclear weapons force structure. In assessing the factors that will influence Beijing's decisions, Chinese perceptions of U.S. intentions and capabilities will likely prove to be at least as important as are perceptions of China's intentions and capabilities in Washington. In addition, China's strategic policy choices will likely wield a decisive influence on the outcomes the United States seeks to affect by its actions—perhaps even more influence than will Russia's choices. Therefore, anticipation of Chinese reactions to U.S. actions is highly relevant to Washington's success in achieving its long-term strategic goals. Basing strategic policy on the weak assumption that Beijing is not sensitive to U.S. actions and that Chinese actions are only incidental to core U.S. concerns risks rendering U.S. actions counterproductive and missing opportunities for mutually beneficial accommodation.

In this context, the fate of the ABM treaty looms largely. If the United States abandons the treaty explicitly and proceeds to develop an ambitious NMD system, incentives would be great for Russia-China cooperation on a host of strategic issues. Such cooperation would likely help the Chinese develop countermeasures to missile defense, some of which China might also be able to apply to defeat regional TMD systems. Conversely, if the United States and Russia renegotiate the ABM treaty to allow limited U.S. NMD deployment, such an agreement would likely preserve the credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrent while continuing to undermine the deterrent credibility of China's much smaller forces. This specter of a U.S.-Russia condominium of power would likely induce China to seek support wherever else it could. Under these circumstances, Washington would find it very difficult to secure Chinese cooperation in stemming proliferation of missile technologies to states such as Pakistan, the DPRK, and Iran.

Key Problems

- U.S. policy toward cross-Taiwan Strait relations exhibits insufficient foresight.
 - Washington's post-cold war emphasis on strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance risks missing opportunities to build stronger, cooperative security elsewhere in East Asia.
 - The United States does not fully acknowledge China's role as a global strategic player in the post-cold war world.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

The long-term effects of Chinese reactions to pending TMD and NMD decisions are too often overlooked in current U.S. strategic debate. In particular, the debate over NMD is too focused on the pre-existing U.S.-Russia relationship and on emerging concerns over threats posed by small “rogue” states. Because a direct military conflict over Taiwan would gravely damage U.S. (and Chinese) long-term interests, Washington needs to carefully consider the potential repercussions

Key Recommendations

- Washington needs to assess the full implications for Taiwan Strait issues of any East Asian deployment of TMD that could be utilized in the Taiwan Strait region.
 - The U.S. needs to place less emphasis on reinvigorating its alliance with Japan and more emphasis on building cooperative security in the region.
 - The United States needs to treat China as a global strategic actor and must make NMD decisions that facilitate full Chinese participation in the global nuclear weapons reduction processes.
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that deploying TMD or NMD may have for prospects of peacefully resolving the Taiwan question. However, the United States should also acknowledge and concretely justify its desires for missile defenses, independent of the proximate threats posed by DPRK or Taiwanese contingencies. As urgent as it is to directly face the effects of TMD or NMD development on Taiwan Strait issues, it is equally vital to take fully into account the broader potential impacts of missile defense deployments on the overall U.S.-China relationship and on global strategic relations generally.

Not only is China not taken into account sufficiently in missile defense debates, there is also considerable ambiguity in engaging China generally. Sometimes China is cast as a small strategic power with which the United States will have growing conflicts but with which it can also choose to negotiate. Other times China is depicted more as a big “rogue” state whose motives are inscrutable and whose actions the United States cannot influence but whose threat can be defeated by sheer muscle.

The goal of peace and stability in East Asia requires the U.S. to regard China as a global strategic actor. Regarding China as an implicit “rogue” state locks the United States into a hostile relationship and blinds Washington policymakers to China’s capacities to frustrate U.S. strategic goals if it so chooses. In this sense, China’s strategic status is a material reality, not a policy choice. Treating China as a strategic actor is a prerequisite to ensuring that Washington’s strategic decision-making does not both undermine U.S. interests and increase regional instability. This approach does not by itself preclude U.S. missile defense deployment, but such a decision would require reckoning with issues currently excluded from policy debates and would demand strategic reasoning with considerably more nuance and long-term perspective than missile defense advocates have so far offered.

The United States promotes worthy goals for Chinese behavior: moderated nuclear weapons modernization, restrained proliferation, adherence to missile and nuclear material guidelines, and enhanced transparency on military matters generally. The United States would improve its prospects of achieving these goals by forging a realistic strategic relationship with China. This rela-

tionship would not be the “partnership” once envisioned by the Clinton administration, but would engage China in regional regimes for security as well as in global nuclear weapons arms control talks. Such a relationship offers the prospect of generating a common ground on missile defenses by both moderating Chinese objections and reducing missile threats themselves. Thus, cooperative security regimes in East Asia can promote U.S. interests better than sole reliance on security alliances, especially insofar as dependence on alliances fuels Chinese perceptions of an anti-China containment policy.

Many missile defense advocates claim that, even in the post-cold war world, the United States still faces grave dangers to its security—dangers that allow no room for reliance on multilateral agreements and security communities. However, today, U.S. military, political, and cultural preeminence imposes on the United States a responsibility for world leadership. Whatever choices Washington makes regarding international security policies, other countries are sure to react.

The United States could continue to rely on cold war era conceptions of deterrence and faith in the efficacy of absolute military strength. Ambitious deployment of missile defenses will set the United States clearly on this path, deepening its reliance on military alliances—as opposed to multilateral security structures—and its emphasis on the political efficacy of strategic weapons, despite any deep cuts in U.S. nuclear weapons levels under the Bush administration. In this event, Russia, China, India, and other states will point to the U.S. example to validate similar approaches to their own military policies. History suggests these states would emerge as strategic rivals and U.S. preeminence eventually would be balanced.

Alternatively, the United States could take advantage of the high relative security it currently enjoys to build new conceptions of its leadership role, better informed by the multilateral and nonmilitary features defining the post-cold war world. In this event, the U.S. could generate multilateral security communities that would not only promote global peace and stability but also enhance the legitimacy of U.S. global leadership and thereby strongly protect U.S. security interests in the long run.

The scope of this opportunity for U.S. leadership suggests that the stakes of Washington’s choices regarding current strategic issues—most particularly, missile defenses—have in many ways never been higher. There is a danger the U.S. will make the wrong choices. However, the greater danger is that Washington will fashion its policies piecemeal and implicitly rather than with deliberation and foresight, and hence will fail even to recognize the long-term strategic choices it is *de facto* making. In that event, the unanticipated repercussions of U.S. actions will contribute to generating the very threats that many missile defense advocates fear, undermining general global security in the process.

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