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US BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSES: IMPLICATIONS FOR ASIA

by Brad Roberts *

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential benefits and drawbacks to US national missile defense deployment and its implications for Asia. The potential drawbacks to NMD include possible acceleration of China's strategic modernization, potential promotion of nuclear build-ups in Asia, a shift in China's regional role from restraint to obstructionism, and a diminution of China's participation in arms control and nonproliferation regimes. However, the potential benefits to NMD include the reassurance provided to US allies, the prevention of the reemergence of a less desirable political order in East Asia, and reduced reliance on US nuclear threats or actual attacks to achieve US regional security goals.

It is against these potential benefits and drawbacks that the Bush administration needs to understand and examine NMD deployment. Despite the unique circumstances that brought the Bush administration to power, it believes it enjoys a strong mandate to move forward with missile defense, and some type of deployment now appears inevitable. However, a great variety of views exist within the Bush administration about how to proceed and what type of defense to construct. Beyond that, technology remains the essential constraint that will shape the timelines associated with each missile defense option. When it comes to the Asian stability consequences of NMD, how the new administration proceeds is as important as what it decides to do. The Asian debate about NMD is rife with misperceptions and the new administration should do everything it can to understand those perceptions, the concerns of its allies and partners in Asia, and the interests that fuel them.

BACKGROUND: THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

As this paper is written, the Bush administration is just settling in to the seats of power in Washington. Although uncertainty remains about many of the personnel and policies of the new administration, this much is certain: President Bush comes to office with a strong commitment to deploy a national missile defense (NMD). His Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, has played perhaps the leading role of any person outside the U.S. government in advocating such a defense. (1) A team is coming together in both the Pentagon and White House of people far more strongly committed to ballistic missile defenses than the out-going team. (2) In general, the Republican Party believes it enjoys a strong mandate, despite the unique circumstances in the recent electoral contest, to move forward with defenses. So the deployment of some type of defense now appears inevitable.

The new administration starts with the proverbial clean sheet of paper. This implies that the approach set in place by the Clinton Administration will be set aside. The system of ground-based interceptors based in one or two locations and in relatively modest numbers (and limited space-based sensors) may well be scrapped. The new administration will reconsider all possible technologies and architectures. Bush has made it clear that he intends to extend the shield over U.S. allies, in part to assuage the concerns they have expressed about NMD (and he promises more consultations with them). Bush has stated also his intention to exploit the move to defenses to undertake much deeper reductions in the strategic nuclear arsenal, perhaps to the level of 1500 warheads. He has also made it clear that he intends to pursue a bilateral dialogue with Moscow on new approaches to arms control, both offense and defense, but that Washington will not be held hostage to Moscow's preferences. Expect the administration to offer Moscow a new approach to arms control that supercedes the START process and the ABM treaty, what some have termed a freedom-to-mix approach in which each side can field roughly but not precisely equal forces. But do not expect it to wait very long for Russia's agreement.

There are two important caveats to these observations.

First, the apparent consensus support for ballistic missile defense in the new administration masks a great variety of views about how to proceed and what type of defense to construct. As the administration has signaled its intentions to review all aspects of the U.S. defense posture, there has been rising interest in a thorough review of the international stability consequences of different U.S. choices before proceedings (one of four criteria by which the Clinton administration considered the readiness to deploy in summer 2000). (3) Second, technology remains an essential constraint. Clinton deferred the NMD decision in large measure because the technology that appeared most ready is in fact not ready. As the new administration considers which defense to build (ground based, sea-based boost phase, space-based kinetic) and how "thin" or "thick" to make it, its preferences will be shaped by the timelines associated with each technology. Given the state of the technology, it seems quite unlikely that the US would have an operational NMD any time in the next four years, and indeed perhaps much longer.

The NMD decision will come as part of a planning and decision-making process that others may not fully understand. The new administration will begin with a new National Security Strategy, a document prepared by the National Security Council, vetted at the highest levels of government, and then publicly released. Over the spring and summer of 2001 the defense community will be heavily engaged in a Quadrennial Defense Review of strategy, forces, and resources. Public law mandates that this be followed by a Nuclear Posture Review, with a due date of December 1. (4) Decisions about what type of defense to construct and when and how to proceed seem likely to be the result of these multiple reviews.

NMD AND ASIA

What might be the impact of NMD on Asian stability and security?

This is a question that has been of considerably more interest to Asians than to Americans. Among supporters of NMD in the United States, a general view of the strategic impact has taken hold. NMD is aimed at ensuring that regional aggressors made newly powerful and ambitious by their acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (and especially nuclear weapons) are not able to achieve a relationship with the United States analogous to the relationship of mutual assured destruction (MAD) that prevailed between the United States and Soviet Union. MAD with the rogues (to use a term no longer in favor in Washington—although perhaps coming back into favor) is seen as destabilizing. It is seen as worrisome to US allies, who have expressed doubts about the credibility of US guarantees in the face of new nuclear-tipped missiles. A MAD-like relationship with the rogues is also seen as increasing US reliance on nuclear weapons to deter their threats at a time when the United States and the world community more generally are trying to deemphasize nuclear weapons and reduce nuclear risks. NMD supporters have believed that a defense can be constructed to deal with the rogue WMD threat while also preserving MAD in the relationship with Russia. Until recently, China has figured barely if at all in their calculus of the strategic impact of NMD—and beyond China (and North Korea), Asia not at all. (5)

Further insights into the potential consequences for Asia were elaborated in a study of NMD conducted by the US intelligence community and widely reported in the press in summer 2000. (6) Reportedly, the community's National Intelligence Estimate concluded—after extended internal debate—that NMD would accelerate strategic modernization by China, so that it would move from a force of roughly 20 single-warhead ICBMs based in silos to a mobile missile force of 200 MIRVd warheads equipped also with defense countermeasures. This, went the argument, would lead India to a sharp build up of its forces, with the necessary reply by Pakistan. Separate analysis published at the time concluded that the Indian buildup would result from a "tipping" of the debate between so-called moderates and hard-liners in Delhi—and by signaling the end of both bilateral US-Russian and multilateral arms control. (7)

This view of falling nuclear dominoes in Asia and of tit-for-tat build-ups provides an answer to the question about the impact of NMD on Asia that must certainly please the bean counters. From this analyst's perspective, it takes too simple a view, one focused too narrowly on numerical force-on-force considerations. It is necessary to think more broadly.

The impact of NMD might be felt not just on the quantitative parameters of nuclear forces in Asia, but also their qualitative ones. Those forces may increase in numbers, but the new types of capabilities that are fielded are likely to matter at least as much as the numbers. Let us consider China first. Will it continue to rely on a strategic posture of single-warhead ICBMs or will it deploy multiple warheads atop its missile? If it chooses this latter approach, will it deploy few (i.e., 2 or 3) warheads or many (8-12)? What effect might modernization of its forces, including the move to road-mobile systems capable of operating at high alert rates, imply for its strategic doctrine? Will it increasingly embrace nuclear war-fighting and counter-force style mission planning?

What about India? The NIE posits merely an increase in numbers, but improving capabilities would bring with them improving range and perhaps destructiveness. How might Delhi think about the requirements of stable deterrence vis-à-vis a China growing much more nuclear capable? How might new forces be postured (rail based Agni II in the Himalayas?) and to what extent would thermonuclear weapons be seen as a necessary counter to numerical Chinese superiority? What impact would the development of such capabilities have on India's own strategic doctrine?

And what about Russia? What if Russia's response to NMD is indeed, as it has promised, to abandon its obligations on the treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF)? Might it reconstitute an INF force as a way to compensate for the military imbalance wrought by the demilitarization of the Sino-Russian border? What counters would this generate in China's strategic posture?

These questions are raised for the simple purpose of illustrating the fact that we oversimplify the issues associated with nuclear force modernization when we reduce them to a question of numbers. U.S. NMD may generate nuclear build-ups in Asia, as the NIE suggests, but the stability concerns generated by such build-ups will derive as much from the types of forces that are constructed and fielded as their raw numbers.

But let us think even more broadly about the potential negative consequences of NMD.

First, it is possible that the United States and China will fall into a defense/offense arms race. If Washington chooses to try to cap China's growing arsenal, however large it gets, such an arms race appears likely—today in Beijing it is intolerable to accept the loss of face associated with the loss of credibility of its deterrent, especially at a time of such deep concern about America in its unipolar moment. (8) Such an arms race would have far-reaching consequences and not just in the bean-counting world. In both countries it would consolidate the enemy image of the other; it would settle the debate about whether the future will bring a cooperative order or containment and confrontation. In East Asia such a souring of US-PRC relations would be especially unwelcome, as America's allies there would not want to be enlisted in an overt and vociferous strategy of containment, just as America's allies in Europe did not want to be enlisted too overtly into the Reagan administration's crusade against the Evil Empire. (9)

Third, China could well respond to a defense/offense race with actions outside the realm of nuclear forces and their disposition. Two length quotations from China's disarmament ambassador, Sha Zukang, can help us to understand these possibilities. First:

"The NMD program…is designed to gain unilateral strategic superiority by building US security on the insecurity of others. This will undoubtedly undercut the basis for its cooperation with relevant countries. How can you expect progress in [the] arms control field while you yourself are developing NMD at full speed? It's just wishful thinking." (10)

Second: "The NMD programme will most definitely be challenged by other countries and is bound to adversely effect the realisation of other objectives within the United States' well-calculated strategy. As the saying goes, 'you can't have your cake and eat it'….China, inter alia, may be forced to review the arms control and non-proliferation policies it has adopted since the end of the Cold War in light of new developments in the international situation….Over the decade since the end of the Cold War the international community has achieved remarkable progress in stemming the proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery. The basic reason for such progress lies in the relative stability of the global and regional security environments, as well as the willingness of the countries concerned to resolve problems through dialogue instead of confrontation. If the United States is genuinely concerned, as it claims, about the threat to its security caused by the proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery, the right thing to do would be to abandon its hegemonic mentality and behaviour, respect the legitimate security interests of other countries, strengthen international cooperation and dialogue, and shore up—and where possible build on—the international arms control and non-proliferation regime. The development and deployment of NMD and TMD systems may be able to psychologically and temporarily satisfy some people's anxiety for absolute security, but it will do little to reduce the threat of WMD and their means of delivery. Furthermore, by disrupting the global strategic balance and stability it will destroy the basis for any progress in the field of arms control and non-proliferation, and in the end adversely affect the security interests of all countries, including the United States." (11)

How might this manifest itself? Beijing could cease to cooperate to promote regional restraint by countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and even North Korea. It could take a more obstructionist role, frustrating U.S. efforts at the United Nations Security Council and trying to construct international political coalitions against U.S. initiatives. It could adopt a more critical attitude toward the long-term functioning of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and opt to play a far more negative role in the 2005 review conference. Worse yet, it could return to its old ways as an exporter of sensitive technologies associated with the production of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and their missile delivery means. We must also reckon with the possibility that China might opt to export to the so-called rogue states the technologies and expertise necessary to counter and penetrate the ballistic missile defenses being constructed by the United States.

Fourth, and directly connected to the previous point, if the US pursues NMD without Russian agreement to a new arms control framework, many will conclude that the era of bilateral and even multilateral arms control will have come to an end. If arms control comes to be seen as a vestige of the Cold War and not as an essential component of a cooperative security order, many states may opt to translate latent weapons capability into actual deployed systems. Moreover, many will perceive the necessity of responding in some fashion to the perception of America as a rogue hegemon, exploiting its moment of preeminence to escape the bonds of negotiated restraint and to gain freedom of maneuver about the laws it has helped to create. This could have the effect of fracturing US alliances in East Asia and Europe, thereby leading to new proliferation pressures as well as an entirely new dynamic among major powers.

Fifth, a US decision to proceed with NMD—together with a decision to proceed with theater defenses (TMD) in cooperation with US friends and allies in East Asia—could have a profoundly disturbing effect on thinking in Beijing about its policies toward Taiwan. There is today in Beijing a sharp debate about whether time is still on its side vis-à-vis Taiwan. Increasingly, the view is that it is not—especially given the apparent widening of the power differential between the United States, rather than the closing expected by Beijing a few years ago. In a worst case situation, decision-makers in Beijing may conclude that they must attempt a military solution to the challenge of Taiwan before US missile defenses are operational. This could bring military confrontation between two superpowers under the nuclear shadow.

Sixth, it is possible that the US move to defenses could precipitate a broader proliferation of ballistic missile defenses. And given the fact that conventionally-tipped anti-missile missiles are extremely difficult even for the United States to build, we must speculate that proliferating defenses may be tipped with nuclear devices, in the style of Soviet/Russian systems. In China particularly there are concerns about whether renewed Russian interest in advanced defenses (as driven by the US) might lead to the sale of such defenses to India. Chinese experts are also keenly interested in improving Indian air defense capabilities, development efforts of the Akash and RF-S300 systems, and efforts to import Israeli technologies. A broader proliferation of offense and defense would seem to have consequences that few have thought about.

Seventh and lastly in this short review, the potential build-up of nuclear arsenals in response to the pressures generated by NMD would bring with it heightened concerned about the command and control of such systems, especially when and if they are "flushed" in time of crisis. In other words, more weapons bring with them heightened concerned about so-called "loose nukes."

EVALUATING POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES

Having composed such a long and far-reaching list of potential negative consequences of NMD, one might simply conclude that Washington should abandon its NMD ambitions immediately. But we are obliged to consider whether these potential consequences are in fact likely consequences—and what conditions would bring them into being. Clearly, it matters a great deal whether or not NMD actually leads to something more than a Chinese effort to restore the status quo ante—if an arms race ensues, more far-reaching consequences to NMD can be anticipated than if the US and China simply float force levels to new numbers. Moreover, it matters a great deal whether or not NMD actually leads to a break down of the arms control and reductions process. One might reasonably conclude that the extent of negative repercussions of NMD for the Asian security environment will be determined to a significant degree by these two factors.

In short, we are obliged also to consider a net assessment. Two such assessments are sketched out below.

The first assessment compares the net trade-off between drawbacks and benefits. The potential drawbacks have already been sketched out above, ranging from the severe to the marginal. Against these, what potential benefits might be gauged?

One important benefit is the reassurance provided to U.S. allies within range of the ballistic missiles of regional WMD-armed aggressors—the reassurance that Washington will not be blackmailed into backing down in time of regional crisis and will remain engaged in regional security challenges even if and as WMD proliferate. This reassurance is intangible and thus difficult to quantify. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that many of those allies whom Washington seeks to reassure have protested loudly that NMD is eroding their sense of stability.

A second important benefit is the effect ballistic missile deployments—including both theater and national—would have on the long-simmering debate about how long America will remain engaged in the defense of its interests in Asia and retain a military presence in the region that many value as preventing the reemergence of a more perverse balance of order politics in East Asia particularly. Missile defense deployments would deepen U.S. military relations with its allies in East Asia and send the message that Washington is serious when it says that it intends to remain in Asia for as long as its Asian allies with it to do so. Of course, this is part of the reason that those wishing an eventual U.S. withdrawal from the region press vigorously against US defenses.

A third important benefit is similarly intangible—and indeed may forever remain entirely notional. This is the benefit that would be felt at a time of WMD aggression by a regional challenger. If the existence of such defenses helps to shape such a confrontation in ways that teach "the right lessons" about WMD aggression and the value of nuclear weapons, etc., then NMD will have contributed something quite substantial to stability in an era defined in part by WMD proliferation. The "wrong answer" would entail the successful use of such weapons for aggression or a backing down and wimping out by the United States and/or the United Nations Security Council in the face of nuclear threats by a rogue state. The "right answer" would entail being able to reverse the aggression and to achieve the war aims deemed politically necessary by the international community. (12) One of the values of NMD would be to reduce reliance on US nuclear threats or actual attacks to achieve these results. This is a "benefit" of NMD that should not be lightly dismissed.

Against these potential benefits, how do the costs tally? In the worst case, with realization of the full set of potential costs listed above, these benefits might not seem particularly compelling, except perhaps to those U.S. allies who in this new circumstance would still place strong credibility in the U.S. extended deterrent. But in this worst case scenario, it would seem that the United States would have traded away a good measure of nuclear stability in Asia for its missile defense. In the more benign case, in which many of the potential costs are not realized, then these benefits could be meaningful and indeed essential to long-term regional stability.

The second net assessment compares the net trade-off between Asia with NMD and Asia without. Is US NMD the only ripple on placid Asian waters? Can NMD alone be blamed for the existence of profound questions about the future of arms control and nonproliferation or about the future of major power nuclear relations in Asia? Blaming NMD for everything unstable in Asia is going rather too far. Consider the following:

* NMD may well induce China to "get bigger, faster." But China is already getting bigger and it is doing so faster than before. This is especially true with regard to medium-range ballistic missiles. Its quiet internal debate about whether to become the world's second nuclear power is driven by political and not simply operational military concerns. * NMD may well influence Sino-Indian nuclear relations. But those relations are already driven by their own logic and pressures and decisions in Delhi and Beijing are certainly going to outweigh decisions in Washington about what kind of nuclear relationship to build. (13) * NMD may well induce China to assist proliferators (and Russia too). But Beijing (and Moscow) have a long history of assistance to proliferators, for both self-serving reasons and given ambivalence in both capitals about nonproliferation. * NMD may well weaken multilateral arms control, especially if bilateral arms control as we have known it ends. But a crisis of confidence is already well developed on the multilateral realm, a crisis born of the Security Council's underperformance in Iraq; the weak implementation of the CWC, BWC, and NPT; and the insults to nonproliferation done by the nuclear tests in both India and Pakistan.

In sum, Asia is not stable, at least from the perspective of nuclear and WMD issues. It is a volatile region where the drift of events points to considerable uncertainty about the future. With or without NMD, Asians and Americans face a significant challenge in preserving a balance of forces that promotes peace and stability. NMD will probably help in some ways and not help in others, just as not pursuing NMD would have a similarly ambiguous effect.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In all political debates there is a tendency to reduce the discussion to black and white terms. A debate among analysts requires us to paint in shades of gray. US NMD may well contribute to an erosion of aspects of Asian security and stability. It may also contribute positively in other respects. It depends.

It depends in significant part on Moscow. Can Moscow tolerate new U.S. preferences and accept a new deal that preserves arms control but in some new guise? If so, bilateral arms control will continue, the major powers will cooperate to promote nonproliferation, and fears for the future of the international legal regime inhibiting WMD will be greatly eased, with very positive repercussions in Asia.

It depends in significant part on Beijing. Can Beijing adjust to new features of the U.S. strategic posture without deeply unsettling its neighbors—and negatively affecting the debate about China in Washington? Will it be content to modernize to restore the status quo ante (meaning approximately retention of an ability to deliver 20 warheads through a defense onto targets in the United States) or will it be motivated to seek to become the number two nuclear power on the world stage and also to counter the world's "rogue hegemon" through support of an anti-U.S. coalition?

But it depends above all on Washington. Will the Bush administration seek to cap China's deterrent with the new defense, or will it tolerate a MAD-type relationship with Beijing? Will it sell theater missile defense systems to Taiwan? Will it deliver the promised unilateral reductions in its offensive forces as defenses increase?

When it comes to the Asian stability consequences of NMD, how the new administration proceeds is as important as what it decides to do with NMD. The Asian debate about NMD is rife with misperceptions and the new administration should do everything it can to understand those perceptions, the concerns of its allies and partners in Asia, and the interests that fuel them. As a new administration, it enjoys the benefit of starting afresh, which it can exploit by listening and explaining in ways that a long-seated administration cannot accomplish. By responding carefully to these concerns, and making its case in terms appropriate to the Asian security environment, the administration could help settle one of the most important questions in Asia today: is America a reliable and progressive power committed to the resolution of common problems in the region, or is it a hyper-power on the fool's errand of seeking invulnerability while unleashing, unwittingly or not, major changes in the balance of power that will lead to the eclipse of its power in Asia? Providing the right answer to this question will go a long way toward promoting the security that all proclaim to seek in Asia.

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(1) Rumsfeld chaired the Commission on the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States. The commission's summer 1999 report proved extremely influential in shifting thinking in the U.S. Congress toward a consensus that the threat is more imminent and real than many had believed and to the formal legal commitment to deploy a defense as soon as technically feasible. See also Statement of the Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld, prepared for the confirmation hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, January 11, 2001.

(2) A number of prominent members of the new administration were associated with a private report entitled "Rationale and Requirements for U.S. Nuclear Forces and Arms Control." Issued in January 2001 by the National Institute for Public Policy (www.nipp.org), the report elaborates the key strategic concepts guiding a policy agenda aimed at moving aware from reliance on cold war vintage deterrence and toward increased reliance on defenses.

(3) For a description of the four Clinton administration criteria, See National Security Strategy for a New Century, The White House (2000) and remarks by John D. Holum, senior adviser for arms control and international security, Department of State, "The President's NMD Decision and U.S. Foreign Policy," to a conference on International Reactions to the U.S. National and Theater Missile Defense Deployments," Stanford University, March 3, 2000. See also Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-DE), "Moving from Politics to Policy: The President's Challenge on National Missile Defense," Congressional Record, January 25, 2001. See also Kalapan Chittaranjan, "US NMD: An Issue That Just Won't Go," Strategic Analysis, Vol. XXIV, No. 10, pp. 1927-1938.

(4) As directed by the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2001, Subtitle E-Strategic Forces, Sections 1041 and 1042.

(5) This argument is treated with some skepticism in Asia. Perhaps the best evidence to support this contention is the detailed public case for NMD made in November 1999 by the Clinton administration's Pentagon point-man on NMD, Undersecretary of Defense Walter Slocombe, which makes no mention of China and has virtually no references to Asia. text of his remarks can be found at http://www.csis.org/html/sf991105Slocombe.html.

(6) Roberto Suro, "Study Sees Possible China Nuclear Buildup," Washington Post, August 10, 2000, p. 2; Bob Drogin and Tyler Marshall, "Missile Shield Analysis Warns of Arms Buildup," Los Angeles Times, May 19, 2000; Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Missile Plan Could Reportedly Provoke China," New York Times, August 10, 2000.

(7) Gaurav Kampani, "How a US National Missile Defense Will Affect South Asia," a Report of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute for International Studies, May 2000. Available at http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/usmsla.htr.

(8) Brad Roberts, "China," in James J. Wirtz and Jeffrey A. Larsen, editors, National Missile Defense and Strategic Stability: Consequences for the ABM Treaty (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, forthcoming). See also Robert Manning, Ronald Montaperto, and Brad Roberts, China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control (Council on Foreign Relations, 2000).

(9) Michael Richardson, "Asia-Pacific Fears Arms Race From Bush Policies Toward China," International Herald Tribune, January 25, 2001.

(10) From introductory remarks by Ambassador Sha to The Second US-China Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation, sponsored by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, May 1999.

(11) Sha Zukang, "US Missile Defence Plans: China's View," Disarmament Diplomacy, January/February 2000, pp. 4-6. Similar remarks were offered by He Yafei, minister-counselor at the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the United States, in a presentation to the Carnegie International Non-Proliferation Conference, March 16, 2000.

(12) For more on the difference between "right" and "wrong" answers to the future wars of WMD aggression, see Brad Roberts, "Rethinking How Wars Must End: NBC War Termination Issues and Major Regional Contingencies," in Victor Utgoff, ed., The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).

(13) Gregory S. Jones, From Testing to Deploying Nuclear Forces: The Hard Choices Facing India and Pakistan, Report IP-192 (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000).

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