NMD, TMD, and Nuclear Arms Control

Recommended Citation

The assumption that large-scale missile defense is incompatible with nuclear arms control has been presumed on an intensely hostile relationship between the hypertrophic attacker and the defender, and the ability of the former to readily enlarge its strategic forces if its penetrability should be perceived to decline due to the latter’s efforts cannot be denied. This is not to say that the US NMD program (indeed or in combination with the TMD program) has the potential of undermining the retaliatory capabilities of Russia and China; its deployment would not necessarily spell the end of nuclear arms control if appropriate political initiatives are taken to ensure that this potential will not be brought to reality. To ensure the prospects for nuclear arms control, however, serious efforts should also be made to adapt the concept of “strategic stability” to the nature of today’s major power relations so that it will no longer rest primarily on the mutual vulnerability to nuclear attack.

Text

During the latter half of the Cold War, it was common to assume that strategic missile defense would harm prospects for nuclear arms control. Challenges to this assumption were foregrounded from the onset. It is no longer clear whether the United States, Russia, and China have indeed “shaped” each other’s mutual vulnerability enshrined in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, which presumably served as a cornerstone of “strategic stability” between the superpowers. The incompatibility between large-scale strategic defense and nuclear arms control during the Cold War was presumed upon two conditions: a high antagonistic relationship between the defender and the attacker and the ability of the latter to enlarge its already formidable nuclear arsenal quickly. If substantial defenses were mounted by one superpower against the other, causing the latter to worry about the penetrability of its strategic arsenal, it would aggressively seek, and develop, the capability to overwhelm these defenses. With regard to the United States’ National Missile Defense (NMD) system, the deployment of which President Clinton has recently postponed, those conditions no longer appear to pertain. Despite important disagreements between the United States and Russia, they have definitely ceased to be armed. The United States and China, meanwhile, maintain a diplomatically correct and economically expansive relationship. Moreover, NMD is ostensibly aimed at “rogue states” (or “states of concern”) in much the same terms as the NATO posturing that is supposed to exist in the nuclear arms race with the United States. Furthermore, the “rogues” may, in the future, confront not only the United States but also Russia and China with the threat of a long-range missile attack.

The vaunted offense-defense dynamics would not be set in motion, therefore, if Washington managed to convince Moscow and Beijing that the limited defenses it is planning in the near future do not stand directed against the “rogue states,” among others. Failure of such efforts, however, would doubtless entail deleterious consequences for nuclear arms control. It is that it is true or without NMD, Russia’s nuclear stockpile is expected to shrink substantially over the next decade. Regardless of U.S. action on missile defense, China is likely to continue the policy of gradually modernizing its nuclear arsenals. As Russia and China become less certain about the penetrability of their strategic forces, however, they will seek to either limit the scope of nuclear reduction (in the case of Russia) or to accelerate the pace of nuclear modernization (in the case of China).

Moscow and Beijing have, in fact, clearly indicated that they would be ready to follow such a course of action. For example, President Vladimir Putin told the Duma prior to the START II vote in April that he would consider withdrawing from the “whole system of treaties” on arms control if Washington breached the ABM Treaty. But the Duma ignored his appeal and the United States also remained committed to resuming the reduction of strategic forces (either through START III process or unilaterally), reconsidering improvements in defense technologies, further composition of NMD, and TMD. After the Russian Duma adopted the bill that would create a new National Missile Defense, the United States has faced difficulties in attempts to persuade Russia and China that NMD is not directed at them primarily because, from a technical standpoint, there is no denying that the NMD program – whether independently or in conjunction with the Theater Missile Defense (TMD) program – has the potential to undermine their strategic capability. Most importantly, China’s current ICBM force, consisting of approximately 20 missiles, could be effectively neutralized by NMD in its initial phase. Russia’s Strategic Nuclear Forces (SNF) and China’s nuclear forces would probably begin to increase in the number of interceptors might create a situation in which the United States could, in theory, rationally contemplate first strike against Russia (4). Moscow’s fear is compounded by the fact that Republicans are calling it “rogue states” for which the United States might come to possess as many as 200 strategic warheads in fifteen years, as estimated by the U.S. intelligence community (3), the United States would also have acquired the ability by then to shoot down a large proportion of those warheads in a retaliatory strike.

Defense of strategic forces mounted by Washington and Moscow could easily be defeated by Russia’s strategic arsenal, which will continue to contain more than 1,000 warheads in the foreseeable future. Moscow is concerned, however, that radars and satellites to be introduced or upgraded with the evolution of the NMD program might enable the United States to put in use a much greater number of interceptors than the currently planned level of 250. Coupled with the growth of the counterforce capabilities of Russian and Chinese strategic forces, the rapid and perhaps even the early expansion of the U.S. retaliatory capability and the decline in the number of interceptors might create a situation in which the United States could, in theory, rationally contemplate first strike against Russia (4). Moscow’s fear is compounded by the fact that Republicans are calling it “rogue states” for which the United States might come to possess as many as 200 strategic warheads in fifteen years, as estimated by the U.S. intelligence community (3), the United States would also have acquired the ability by then to shoot down a large proportion of those warheads in a retaliatory strike.

Finally, apart from the possibility of its being tied to the NMD program, the TMD program could prompt China to enlarge its missile forces because of regional considerations. TMD might be extended to Taiwan, which China regards as part of its own territory. Beijing would fear that as people in Taiwan become more confident in their ability to defend themselves, they will be further inclined to support a call for independence. Second, it can be assumed that China will place a high value on its potential to launch a nuclear strike against Japan (and possibly some others countries in Asia). It is with this potential that it hopes to deter the United States from militarily interfering in what Beijing considers internal affairs, and keep Japan in check generally. Participation by Japan (and others) in the NMD program would partially offset this potential.

On the other hand, if TMD is deployed alone, it is less likely to be a factor in slowing down the reduction of Russia’s nuclear stockpile. Moscow remains receptive to the idea of theater missile defense as distinct from strategic missile defense. This is suggested by the fact that it continues to cherish the Demarcation Accords for all their worth and is prepared to sign the Protocol to them, should it be reviewed by Russia. Moscow has also agreed to a proposal of the United States to build a joint Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and the RIM-162E Standard Medium Range Air Defense (SMRADS) system. Opposition is voiced to the Army Theater Missile Defense (TMD) system, the Navy Theater Wide (NTW) defense system, and the Europe Theater Missile Defense (ETMD) system, which would be deployed in Europe. Opposition is voiced to the Army Theater Missile Defense (TMD) system, the Navy Theater Wide (NTW) defense system, and the Europe Theater Missile Defense (ETMD) system, which would be deployed in Europe.

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