NMD, TMD, and Nuclear Arms Control

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The putative incompatibility between large-scale strategic defense and nuclear arms control during the Cold War was premised upon two conditions: a highly 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 eventually achieve, the capability to overwhelm those 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 a fear. The United States and China, however, remain a diplomatic ally and economically expansive relationship. Moreover, NMD is ostensibly aimed at “rogue states” or “states of concern” in an area of official terminology such as North Korea, Iraq, and Iran—none of which could possibly engage in a nuclear arms race with the United States.

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 are indeed directed against the “rogue states,” a fallacy. Failure of such efforts, however, would doubly entail deleterious consequences for non-nuclear arms control. It is that the truth or with no NMD, Russia’s nuclear stockpile is expected to shrink substantially over the next decade. Regardless of U.S.

The assumption that large-scale missile defense is incompatible with nuclear arms control has been premised on an intensely hostile relationship between the hypothetically attacker and the defender, and the ability of the former to rapidly enlarge its strategic forces if its penetrability should be perceived to decline due to the defenses. It cannot be denied from a technical standpoint that the US NMD program (independent 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 be also 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 heard ringing throughout the United States. It was clear whether the United States had procured it fully. Nevertheless, that mutual vulnerability was enshrined in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, which presumably served as a cornerstone of “strategic stability” between the superpowers.

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