NMD, TMD, and Nuclear Arms Control

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by UMEOTO Tetsuya

Abstract

The assumption that large-scale missile defense is incompatible with nuclear arms control has been premised on an intensely hostile relationship between the hypothetical 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 defenses. It cannot be derived 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 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 can be found in the literature. It is now clearer whether the US deployment of NMD has produced it fully. Nevertheless, substantial 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.

The 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 fund, the means to overwhelm those defenses.

With regard to the United States and Russia (NMD system), the deployment of which President Clinton has recently postponed, those conditions no longer appear to persist. Although important disagreements between the United States and Russia, they have definitely ceased to be evident. The United States and China, meanwhile, maintain a diplomatically correct and economically expansive relationship. Moreover, NMD is ostensively aimed at “rogue states” (or “states of concern”) in much recent official terminology like North Korea, Iran, and Iraq - none of which could possibly engage in a nuclear arms race with the United States; instead, 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 United States are indeed directed against the “rogue states,” not them. Failure of such efforts, however, would doubtless entail deleterious consequences for nuclear arms control. It is that true that with or without NMD, Russia’s nuclear stockpile is expected to shrink substantially over the next decade. Regardless of whether offense 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 buildup (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 during the START II process. In a recent interview, Zhukovskii indicated that the Russian Federation, if it were to choose to do so, might conclude that “the situation in the international arms control arena in the wake of the START treaties is such that the options available to it in the nuclear arms control arena could be used to achieve a certain price of its strategic force structure simply because of the non-functioning of the system of treaties.”

With regard to the United States, its defense policy has been premised on the possibility of the United States and Russia reducing their nuclear arsenals to the point where the former’s nuclear weapons would be insufficient to serve its national interests. However, the United States and Russia would no doubt reach this point if the United States had to rely on nuclear weapons to serve national interests through the early 21st century. Despite the limited scope of nuclear arms reduction which is being negotiated, the United States and Russia will continue to retain large and highly advanced nuclear arsenals for the foreseeable future.

Under these circumstances, it seems that Washington needs to pursue a double-track approach vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing, if it wants to avoid sacrificing nuclear stability for other considerations. First, 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 aware of the United States and China’s nuclear arsenal, they could also encourage proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies, further complicating nuclear arms control.

Migration of nuclear arms to Taiwan, however, is not the only option available to the United States and China. In the context of NMD, TMD, and Nuclear Arms Control

Conclusion

Washington might also seek to lessen Moscow’s latent fear of a first strike by committing itself to resuming the reduction of strategic forces (either through the START III process or unilaterally), reconsidering improvements in active defenses (for example, as a means to enhance the viability of the BMD program), and reducing the number of NMD interceptors or an abrupt growth in the capability of TMD interceptors. Washington might also seek to lessen Moscow’s latent fear of a first strike by committing itself to resuming the reduction of strategic forces (either through the START III process or unilaterally), reconsidering improvements in active defenses (for example, as a means to enhance the viability of the BMD program), and reducing the number of NMD interceptors or an abrupt growth in the capability of TMD interceptors. Washington might also seek to lessen Moscow’s latent fear of a first strike by committing itself to resuming the reduction of strategic forces (either through the START III process or unilaterally), reconsidering improvements in active defenses (for example, as a means to enhance the viability of the BMD program), and reducing the number of NMD interceptors or an abrupt growth in the capability of TMD interceptors. Washington might also seek to lessen Moscow’s latent fear of a first strike by committing itself to resuming the reduction of strategic forces (either through the START III process or unilaterally), reconsidering improvements in active defenses (for example, as a means to enhance the viability of the BMD program), and reducing the number of NMD interceptors or an abrupt growth in the capability of TMD interceptors.