NMD, TMD, and Nuclear Arms Control

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The assumption that large-scale missile defense is incompatible with nuclear arms control has been premised on an intensely hostile relationship between the hypothetic attacker and the defender, and the ability of the former to readily enlarge its strategic forces if their penetrability should be perceived to decline due to the latter’s actions (or inaction). It cannot be denied 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 were made from the ground up by Russia and China, who repeatedly insisted that the United States had imagined its potential threat. It appears that the time has come to at least make a serious attempt to adjust the strategic thinking of Washington, Moscow, and Beijing to a new situation where the proliferation of nuclear weapons by the “rogue states.” It must also be noted that, from the viewpoint of many non-nuclear powers, Washington has faced difficulties in attempting 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 of deployment (the deployment of which was ended by President Clinton in 1995). Although the US NMD program (independently or in combination with the TMD program) would have made NMD a significant factor in the security of China.

On a second track, Washington should begin an earnest search for a new formulation of “strategic stability” among the United States, Russia, and China that does not depend on nuclear weapons. It must be noted that, from the viewpoint of many non-nuclear powers, with more than one thousand THAAD interceptors and several hundred NTW interceptors planned, such linkage of NMD and TMD would substantially reduce the penetrability of not only China’s but also Russia’s retaliatory forces (5).

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. First, TMD might be extended to Taiwan, which China regards as part of its own territorial. 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 TMD 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. Moscow has agreed to locate a Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and the Navy Theater Wide (NTW) defense system would have some, but very limited, capacity to intercept long-range missiles. However, if interceptors could be guided in flight using track data from advanced radars and satellites that had been introduced as elements of NMD, their ability to shoot down strategic warheads would increase many folds. With more than one thousand THAAD interceptors and several hundred NTW interceptors planned, such linkage of NMD and TMD would substantially reduce the penetrability of not only China’s but also Russia’s retaliatory forces (5).

The assumption that large-scale missile defense is incompatible with nuclear arms control has been premised on an intensely hostile relationship between the hypothetic attacker and the defender, and the ability of the former to readily enlarge its strategic forces if their penetrability should be perceived to decline due to the latter’s actions (or inaction). It cannot be denied 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.

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