NMD, TMD, and Nuclear Arms Control

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Abstract

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 its penetrability should be perceived to decline due to the latter. Whether or not this assumption can be defended from a technical standpoint is an open question. However, if 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 spoil 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, 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

In 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 emerged from two sources. The first was ever clearer that the United States had not conclusively defeated it fully. Nevertheless, 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 second 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 then outpace the capabilities to overwhelm those defenses. With regard to the United 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 enemies. 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 recent official terminology like North Korea, Iran, and Iraq -- none of which could possibly engage in a nuclear arms race with the United States.

For 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 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," not U.S. The failure of such efforts, however, would doubtless entail deleterious consequences for nuclear arms control. It is that this with 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 armaments. 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. Moscow had warned China to follow suit. Yet, the United States and China are not mortal enemies of the United States as the Soviet Union once was and the security interests of the three largely overlap, especially when it comes to dealing with the threat arising from "rogue states.

As stated in the opening paragraphs of this paper, mutual vulnerability as a basis for "strategic stability" has been predicated, in part, on an intensely hostile relationship between the possessor of defenses and the hypothetic attacker. However, this condition no longer applies. Today, Russia and China are not mortal enemies of the United States as the Soviet Union once was and the security interests of the three largely overlap, especially when it comes to dealing with the threat posed by the "rogue states." It appears that the time has come at least make a serious attempt to adjust the strategic thinking of Washington, Moscow, and Beijing in respect of characterizing their relations. 


