TMD, US-JAPAN RELATIONS, AND EAST ASIAN SECURITY

Recommended Citation

DUAN Hong, "TMD, US-JAPAN RELATIONS, AND EAST ASIAN SECURITY", Nuclear Policy, July 01, 2000, https://nautilus.org/projects/nuclear-policy/tmd-us-japan-relations-and-east-asian-security/

"East Asian Regional Security Futures: Theater Missile Defense Implications"
The United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan, June 24-5, 2000

TMD, US-JAPAN RELATIONS, AND EAST ASIAN SECURITY(1)

by DUAN Hong

There has been a certain kind of cooperation between Japan and the United States on ballistic missile defense since the late 1980s, but that cooperation has been greatly strengthened and accelerated during the last three years. In December 1998 the Japanese government formally declared that Japan would commence joint research on a TMD system with the US in fiscal year 1999. According to an agreement signed in August 1999, The joint R&D effort will focus on the sea-based Navy Theatre Wide Missile defense system, which will be deployed in 2007 in East Asia. With TMD suddenly becoming something real and impending, it also turns out to be one of the most contentious issues in East Asian security. The fault line is quite clear- cut: US and Japan on one side arguing that TMD is defensive in nature and that the introduction of TMD in Asia actually is irreversible, while China, Russia, and the DPRK are on the other side expressing deep concern and strong objection to the idea of TMD. Though still in the R&D stage, TMD has already begun to show its teeth by dividing countries into different groups and deepening the suspicions between major powers in this region. It is highly likely that the US-Japan co- development, especially the possible deployment, of TMD will lead to more uncertainties in East Asia than otherwise. The joint TMD program will strengthen the US-Japan alliance further, but may do so at the expense of regional stability and security, ironically that which TMD is supposed to achieve.

TMD will increase the military cooperation between the US and Japan and the potential of the US-Japan alliance to take military actions around Asia. Mainly due to Japan's reluctance to join the US on TMD, TMD had been conceived for years as a problem for the US-Japan alliance by defense policy-makers in both Washington, D.C. and Tokyo. However, that trouble has disappeared now. Possible divergence over the scope, size, form, deployment and control of a TMD system might cause new problems in the future. On the whole, however, the joint TMD program may be beneficial to the US-Japan alliance. Obviously, the joint R&D of TMD will increase the military cooperation between the US and Japan, enhance the military and dual-use technology transfers between the two countries, and as such, make their alliance even closer and stronger. There is also an argument by both the US and Japan that TMD is able to improve military interoperability and intelligence information sharing of the US-Japan alliance by helping integrate Japan into the US command system(2).

An effective TMD system will greatly increase the overall capability of the US-Japan alliance and thus, its potential to intervene in regional conflicts. The revision of the US-Japan defense guidelines in the late 1990s has changed the nature of the alliance in a profound way: it has become a mechanism for dealing with a wide range of regional security issues. Under the new guidelines, Japan has the obligation to provide logistics assistance to the US troops that become involved in "contingency in the areas surrounding Japan," although neither country has made clear the very content of such a "contingency" and the scope of "areas surrounding Japan." In brief, the new guidelines provide the framework for the alliance to conduct military action for all possible occasions. But there is a fear that, when a conflict emerges in the areas surrounding Japan - for example, a conflict on the Korean Peninsula - Japan might be reluctant to join in the US military intervention partly because of its vulnerabilities to possible WMD retaliations. An effective TMD will undoubtedly help a lot in this regard. In fact, some advocates of TMD argue that an important rationale and potential benefit of TMD is that it will reduce the risks associated with regional military interventions and as such contribute to the efficiency of the US-Japan military alliance(3). Hence, it is plausible to assume that with the protection of a sophisticated TMD umbrella, the US, and to a lesser extent Japan, may be more ready to use force when dealing with regional security issues. Given what happened in Kosovo in 1999, many countries in East Asia do not see that scenario as a rosy one. Such a super military alliance without any constraint certainly will raise more suspicions and uncertainties among countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Some of them may have to choose to invest more in advanced weapons and military technologies, trying to prepare for the worse. As a consequence, certain kind of arms race in this region may be inevitable in the long run.

TMD will elevate Japan's role in regional security affairs, helping Japan go even further in the direction of becoming a major military power. Except for a lack of strategic capabilities, Japan is already a major military power in many respects. As the biggest economic power in East Asia, Japan has been keeping the second largest defense expenditure in the world for years. In addition to having the strongest marine force in East Asia, Japan also possesses some of the most advanced military equipment and technologies, including highly sophisticated technologies of launching rockets and satellites. Though Japan has chosen not to produce and possess nuclear weapons, it does have the capacity to make nuclear bombs within very short time. In a word, Japan has every POTENTIAL to quickly become a major military power. The US has been encouraging Japan to engage in overseas military actions more actively through the redefinition of the bilateral alliance. Now with the joint TMD program with the US, Japan is not only going to spend more on its military(4), its capabilities in early warning, intelligence collection and rapid response of military action will also be greatly enhanced(5).

Furthermore, as the revision of the US-Japan alliance, the introduction of TMD will have a profound impact on Japan's security approach. To stretch military muscle overseas more actively, to conduct TMD cooperation, and especially the technology transfers with the US, and to deploy a TMD system on Japanese soil, Japan must first address various constitutional and other legal restraints. For example, it will pose a serious constitutional and political problem for Japan if the US and Japan opt for a TMD system with boost-phase interceptors. Actually we have already witnessed some repercussions of TMD on the debate inside Japan over its military strategy recently. Since 1999, some influential Japanese officials began to argue bluntly that it is within Japan's self-defense right to launch preemptive attack against overseas bases from which a missile attack against Japan might be attempted. Soon, Japan's defense white paper of 1999 recognized that right by reinterpreting the constitution.

What makes things even more complicated is the fact that Japan is undergoing critical changes(6). There is greater sentiment for Japan to become a "normal" country. Attitudes about security is in flux, and correspondingly, the idea that Japan should take a more independent security approach and play a larger role in regional security arena is gaining ground. Changing the pacifist constitution used to be taboo, but the topic is now being overtly and hotly debated. There are uncertainties regarding the future orientation of Japan: Will Japan be satisfied with acquiring only missile defense capabilities? How will a Japan with much stronger muscle and more aggressive approach pursue security relations with other countries in this region? The ongoing TMD program may, to a large extent, influence answers to those questions. Some people in Japan do want to remilitarize Japan and TMD can easily be used to facilitate their objectives. Therefore there is deep concern that TMD will be taken as an excuse by those Japanese favoring a strong military and more aggressive security approach. Unfortunately, the lack of transparency over the details of the US-Japan joint TMD program and over the strategic intentions of Japan itself only increases those concerns and suspicions.

TMD has the potential to upset the strategic stability in East Asia and thus shake the very foundation of regional security. There is an increasing consensus in East Asia that relations between major powers in this region, especially trilateral relations between the US, Japan and China, have a decisive impact on the stability of the region as a whole. How that trilateral relationship evolves will influence the landscape of the regional security in a profound way. Unfortunately, relations between major powers in this region are very unbalanced in two ways.

Firstly, there is a large gap between the capabilities of the different countries, both economically and militarily. The US is the only superpower in the world. Japan has perhaps one of the strongest conventional forces in the world, and is increasingly becoming a major military power; it does not possess its own strategic capabilities, but enjoys the protection of the US nuclear umbrella. China is lagging far behind the US and Japan in terms of military power and technological capabilities.

Secondly, the US and Japan are close allies, whose security alliance has just been updated. On the contrary, China's relations with both the US and Japan are far from satisfying; there are a lot of problems in those relationships; a basic trust is missing.

However, a subtle strategic balance does exist between the three - that is, China has a very limited strategic deterrent capabilities. With that very limited strategic capabilities, China feels secure while it does not pose any threat to the security of the US and Japan. On the basis of such a strategic balance or stability, major powers can pursue dialogues and cooperation in spite of mistrust and divergences.

An effective TMD system, if deployed in East Asia, has the potential to break down that fragile strategic stability by neutralizing China's deterrent capabilities. An effective TMD will definitely degrade China's medium-range missile capability(7). Furthermore, according to experts' assessment, upper-tier TMD, like the NTW system that is currently under the co-development of the US and Japan, actually will have a capability to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles with ranges up to 10,000 kilometers(8).

It is true that a sophisticated TMD does not exist now and there're still some uncertainties over its technological feasibility. However, the potential is out there; and the mistrust and suspicions of China regarding the long-term strategic intentions of the other two make that potential even more troublesome. The stake is just too big for China to take the chance. In the long run, China may feel it necessary to take some counter actions, which in turn may push the US and Japan to invest even more in missile defenses and other advanced military technologies. With the introduction and development of TMD, there is a real danger that major players in East Asia will be trapped into a downward spiral of security dilemma.

TMD has increased and will continue to increase the suspicions between major powers in East Asia. It may be cliché to say that there exist deep mistrust and suspicions between the US, Japan and China. But the point is that those suspicions have been getting stronger during the last few years. In the US, China is regarded as potential competitor that may have the capability and willingness to challenge the American primacy in the future. The popular description of Sino-American relations has been changed to "strategic competitor" from the more optimistic "build towards a constructive strategic partnership"(9). In Japan, the perception of a rising China is markedly divided, while the perception of so-called "China missile threat" has become more acute. In the mean time, with the strengthening of the US- Japan military alliance, the introduction of TMD, and especially the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO last year, China is even more suspicious of long-term intentions of the US and Japan. There is a consensus among Chinese scholars that the revision of the US-Japan defense guideline, if it was not completely targeted against China(10), was to a large extent motivated by the perception of China's rising. The joint TMD program between the US and Japan adds new salt to that suspicion.

Both the US and Japan claim the "North Korea missile threat" as the rationale for their development and future deployment of TMD in East Asia. Given the DPRK's unprecedented economic stringency and consequently the deterioration of its security situation, it is extremely hard to think the DPRK will pose any serious threat to Japan and the United States. A military attack initiated by the DPRK will only result in its collapse, and will be no different from suicide. In fact, despite their emphasis on the missile threat from the DPRK, some insiders of Japanese defense policy circle tend to take North Korea's failed launch of a satellite in 1998 as a blessing rather than disaster, for it helps them mobilize the necessary public support for TMD and thereby put new momentum to the alliance with the US. In brief, the North Korea missile threat is just not convincing enough.

Some Chinese do worry that the real intention of TMD behind the scene may be China. Latest development in Northeast Asia deepens that fear further. The DPRK declared a moratorium on missile test in September 1999; then it began to take an unprecedentedly open diplomatic approach, actively pursuing dialogues and better relations with many western countries. Finally the leaders of the two Koreas conducted a summit meeting in Pyongyang in June 2000. Unfortunately, the US and Japan are determined to put forward their joint program on TMD no matter what have been achieved on the Korean Peninsula. But the problem is that, a big adventure like TMD does need something to justify its huge costs and all the possible risks. With the easing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and consequently the inevitable declining of "North Korea missile threat," some Chinese scholars fear, China become the primary rationale for TMD.

TMD will increase uncertainties and tensions over Taiwan Strait Taiwan stands as the most difficult and sensitive issue in both Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations. It is the only issue that can drag the United State and Japan, perhaps to a lesser extent, into a military conflict with China. China's grave concern over the redefined US-Japan security alliance is also largely driven by the deliberately ambiguous attitudes of the US and Japan over Taiwan. Though reluctant to define the geographic coverage or scope of the new defense guideline in an explicit way, neither the US nor Japan rule out the possibility that they will intervene in the case of a conflict or "contingency" across the Taiwan Strait. The same ambiguity strategy is being taken on TMD again. Both countries, especially the US, refuse to exclude the possibility of providing Taiwan with certain form of TMD protection-by selling TMD equipment and technology to Taiwan, by integrating Taiwan into a US-Japan TMD system led by the US, or by deploying a Japan-based ship equipped with missile defense capabilities(11). Such an ambiguity has already enhanced China's suspicions about the US and Japan's real intentions towards China and especially towards Taiwan, which puts new strain upon Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations. Since Taiwan lies in the vital national security interests of China, it is certain that TMD will continue to harass relations between major powers in East Asia and may in a critical way.

To make things worse, the US and Japan's current approach to TMD and Taiwan may aggravate tensions over the Taiwan Strait by giving Taiwan a false perception with regard to the US protection. Now TMD is still in R &D stage. However, given the sensitive nature of TMD and Taiwan issue, for many the symbolic and political implications of TMD go far beyond its real capability. Just as an American scholar observes (quite correctly, if I might say), both those Americans arguing for providing TMD to Taiwan and those Taiwanese seek TMD aggressively from the US are driven more by political calculations(12). They seem to believe TMD will create a tighter military link between the US and Taiwan and thus render American abandonment of Taiwan in a crisis less likely, which remarkably corresponds to Chinese view and worries about this issue. The fact that the US keeps the options to provide TMD to Taiwan open per se may be perceived by the secessionists in Taiwan as sort of guarantee of the US protection, and then they may feel even less motivated to engage in serious political talks with mainland China. As a consequence, the sentiment in Taiwan for formal independence may be encouraged, and as such the likelihood of military conflict will become greater.

Lastly, but not the least important, with an effective TMD system, the scenario that the US-Japan alliance involves in a conflict over Taiwan is getting even more real. Then the possibility of a conflict between China and the US-Japan alliance is also increasing.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis of TMD implications might be too gloomy for many advocates of TMD. Unfortunately, the danger is real. In the past two years, we have already witnessed a lot how TMD issue could damage relations between countries and impede their cooperation on other important security issues. The result can be even worse if the US and Japan continue to head for a TMD system without addressing basic concerns over that issue. As major players in East Asia, the US, Japan and China all have vital interests in maintaining the regional stability and security. There is no reason why we should let TMD damage our relations and ultimately ruin the stability of the whole region. Therefore, to increase confidence and trust between countries, to maintain the stability of East Asia region as a whole, The US and Japan may have second thoughts over their joint TMD program and take into account basic concerns of other countries in a serious manner. At least they could promise not to provide any TMD, whether TMD equipment or technology, to Taiwan. Meanwhile, to reduce the uncertainties that might be caused by TMD, they may show more transparency over their TMD program and their strategic intention towards China. More dialogues on TMD and security issues will certainly be helpful in that regard. We may have a lot of differences, but at least we should and could speak it out.

---

(1) This paper is based on author's presentation at the Workshop on "East Asian Regional Security Futures: Theater Missile Defense Implications", which is jointly sponsored by the Nautilus Institute and the UN University, (Tokyo, June 24- 25, 2000). The paper reflects only author's personal views.

(2) See Yoichi Funabashi, "Tokyo's Temperance", The Washington Quarterly, vol. 23, no. 3 (Summer 2000).

(3) At the workshop on TMD's Implications on East Asian Security held in Tokyo in June 24-25, Japanese participants mentioned this point explicitly. It is a coincidence that, advocates of NMD in the US also believe that one rationale of NMD is for the US to have the freedom to act globally. To know more about this argument, see Keith B. Payne, "The Case for National Missile Defense", Orbis, Spring 2000.

(4) Under the joint TMD program with the US, Japan's R&D costs are expected to be around $250m over five years. See IISS, The Military Balance 1999-2000.

(5) See Zhu Feng, "On TMD and East Asia Security", International Studies, no.4, 1999.

(6) See, for example, Kurt M. Campbell, "Energizing the U.S.-Japan Security Partnership", The Washington Quarterly, vol. 23, no. 4 (Autumn 2000); Michael Green, "Why Tokyo Will be a larger Player in Asia", available at http://www.taiwansecurity.org/.

(7) See IISS, The Military Balance 1999-2000.

(8) See, for example, Frank Barnaby, "Ballistic Missile Defense Re-visited II", Peace, June 2000.

(9) See, for example, David Shambaugh, "Sino-American Strategic Relations: From Partners To Competitors", Survival, vol. 42, no. 1 (Spring 2000).

(10) See China-US-Japan Relations In Transition, edited by Zhang Yunlin, Chinese Social Science Publishing house (Beijing: 1997).

(11) As to the US options for providing TMD capabilities or protection to Taiwan, see "Report to Congress on Theater Missile Defense Options for the Asia-Pacific Region", the US Department of Defense.

(12) See, Thomas J. Christensen, "Theater Missile Defense and Taiwan's Security", Orbis, Spring 2000.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/projects/nuclear-policy/tmd-us-japan-relations-and-eas--asian-security/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org