



A Chinese Perspective on National Missile Defense

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Ballistic missile defense has drawn heated debate in the international community in the recent years. On the one hand, the U.S. has made it a national policy to develop a limited ballistic missile defense program, with a deployment decision to be made by the new administration of President George W. Bush.^[1] On the other hand, the U.S. missile defense build-up has been much criticised by other countries. It is often argued that missile defense would, if unchecked, tilt the balance of power and therefore affect the international political and security order.

To be honest, there may be indeed a genuine concern over the proliferation of ballistic missiles and other types of delivery means. Coupled with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missile proliferation presents a major challenge to international security and stability. This was manifested during the second Gulf War of 1991, when Scuds fired against Saudi Arabia and Israel took on great psychological importance. Ever since then, more and longer-range missile flight tests, in South Asia and Northeast Asia, have been reported.^[2] While the countries concerned may have quite reasonable grounds to acquire missiles for defensive purposes, such a trend of proliferation does not bode well for global as well as regional stability.

Ballistic missile proliferation has thus raised concern among states. There have been three kinds of responses. First, denying the intention of those who would seek such delivery vehicles. This would require the creation of a more secure environment in order to reduce the incentive to acquire them. Second, denying the missile-related technology available through transfer, if denial of intention fails to work. Third, establishing a certain level of ballistic missile defense as a protection against accidental and/or unauthorised attack, or a limited intentional attack with ballistic missiles.

In this context, it is not impossible to understand the need for a limited missile defense, if it is truly limited, especially for a global power as the United States, which has vast overseas presence and interests, often in turn a reason to invite attack.

In fact, the U.S. has never given up its attempt to build various missile defense systems. The U.S. set out to build a sentinel antiballistic-missile program in 1967 against China's nascent nuclear deterrent when it first came into being.^[3] For the last two decades, the U.S. government has persistently pursued missile defense. The Reagan Administration launched its Strategic Defense Initiative, a land- and space-based multi-layer missile defense system that was never successfully developed. The Bush Administration converted the Star Wars dream into Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS). The Clinton Administration decided to continue ballistic missile defense, with components of both National Missile Defense (NMD) and Theatre Missile Defense (TMD). Now George W. Bush's new administration has committed to furthering NMD development.

This article addresses China's position on missile non-proliferation regime and its concern about National Missile Defense. It suggests that China and the U.S. address their respective security concerns and seek a



co-operative solution in missile non-proliferation and missile defense issues.

China and Missile Non-proliferation Regime

Over the last decade, China has been increasingly exposed to a missile-proliferation-prone peripheral environment. Its key neighbouring states either have a formidable missile arsenal, a significant missile program, a fast developing missile capability or an alliance with a nuclear superpower. As such, missile proliferation has clearly affected China's international environment.

Therefore, the PRC has taken a series of steps addressing this problem through joining international missile non-proliferation efforts. It has been cautious concerning the transfer of missiles, adopting strict and effective controls over the export of missiles and related technology. Beijing has committed to missile non-proliferation and kept its obligation. ^[4]

In February 1992, China committed to observing the then guidelines and parameters of Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). ^[5] With the enhanced dialogue that emerged between China and the U.S. in the missile area, the two countries signed a joint statement in October 1996, reaffirming China's promise and obligation of not exporting ground-to-ground missiles inherently capable of reaching a range of 300 kilometers with a payload of 500 kilograms. ^[6]

Although China has not joined the MTCR's formulation and revision, it has signalled that it would study the feasibility of joining the regime. This came as a result of the Jiang-Clinton Beijing summit of 1998, reflecting their effort to cultivate a constructive partnership. It is understood that China has conditioned its joining the MTCR on the question of the U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, especially U.S. TMD development and deployment in this part of the world.

The two countries were engaging on this matter until their talks on non-proliferation, arms control and international security were, unfortunately, suspended in the aftermath of NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999. Their arms control talk was not resumed till July 2000, following their security consultation in Beijing in February. On 21 November 2000, Beijing made a statement to the effect that "China has no intention to assist, in any way, any country in the development of ballistic missiles that can be used to deliver nuclear weapons (i.e., missiles capable of delivering a payload of at least 500 kilograms to a distance of at least 300 kilometers)." ^[7] In this statement, China made it clear that it will publish a comprehensive export control list of missile-related items including dual use items.

NMD Affecting Russia's and China's Security

On March 17 and 18, 1999 respectively, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved National Missile Defense System legislation, stating, "It is the policy of the United States to deploy a national missile defense". ^[8] This has evoked tremendous repercussions around the world, drawing negative responses from all other nuclear weapons states and even U.S. allies in NATO. ^[9]

According to the Clinton NMD plan, the U.S. will deploy 100 interceptors in Alaska in its first



configuration. Assuming a 1 in 4 rate of interception, the U.S. could at most hit 25 incoming missiles, a more than sufficient capability to take care of the alleged threat from those “rogue” states, which are considered to be developing long-range ballistic missiles to target America. At later stages, the U.S. would deploy further kinetic kill vehicles in North Dakota in order to provide nation-wide missile defense.

The U.S. has stated clearly that China has not been figured in its NMD calculations. However, China views the situation differently and remains strongly suspicious of the U.S. intentions in terms of NMD development. From China’s perspective, it is untenable that the U.S. would spend 60-100 billion dollars on a system that has only “rogue” states in mind.

Such capability of an intercontinental strike by ballistic missiles owned by “rogue” states does not yet exist. Excluding the P5, only Israel, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, DPRK and Iran are currently believed to have medium-range missiles with ranges above 1,000km. Only four of these states, India, Pakistan, DPRK and Iran, may have active programs to develop intermediate-range missiles with ranges of over 3,000 km. ^[10] It is highly unlikely that any of them will acquire an ICBM capability within a decade or so. The CIA’s classified 1998 Annual Report to Congress on Foreign Missile Development recognized that the ICBM threat to the United States from so-called rogue states is unlikely to materialize before 2010, with the possible exception of DPRK. ^[11]

Only Russia and China currently have the capability to hit the United States with nuclear warheads on intercontinental ballistic missiles. However, this is not a new phenomenon. Both the U.S. and Russia have maintained their nuclear arsenals of thousands of deployed nuclear weapons. Their nuclear arsenals are at basically comparable levels in terms of quality and quantity. It is the ABM Treaty signed in 1972 that has prevented the U.S. and the former Soviet Union from embarking on unlimited strategic arms race.

The ABM Treaty does allow the U.S. and the former Soviet Union (now Russia as its sole legitimate successor) to deploy limited anti-strategic ballistic missile capability for the sake of defense against accidental and/or unauthorised attack. The Treaty has doubly served strategic stability. First, for limited nuclear attack due to incidental/unauthorized launch, it provides limited capability of interception. Second, for an all-out nuclear attack and counterattack, it assures the rivals of their mutual destruction. Indeed, the Treaty has helped dissuade the two nuclear weapons superpowers from further escalating their strategic offensive build-up.

With Russia’s ongoing social and economic disruption, its military capability has been affected significantly. In the context of strategic offense-defense relationship, Russia is being pressed three-fold. First, a significant amount of Russia’s strategic force is ageing and has to be phased out. Therefore, Russia needs deep bilateral nuclear weapons reductions with the U.S., but it refuses to do so at the expense of revising ABM, permitting the change of balance of power in favour of the U.S. Second, START II would eliminate Russia’s land-based MIRVs. At a time of the U.S. rhetoric of abrogating ABM anyway, Russia has to reconsider the necessity to disarm its lethal MIRVed weapons. Third, Russia’s missile defense, permitted under ABM, is eroding, as its early warning satellite system can no longer provide full coverage. ^[12]

As such the world is experiencing a double danger. Russia cannot properly execute its launch-on-warning of strategic force, as it is unable to fully track missile launch and flight. Russia’s refusal to cut its nuclear



force, when Russia has to cut it, also creates difficulty in nuclear disarmament. However, the latter issue is a result of the U.S. missile defense build-up in violation of ABM Treaty.

Consequently, the U.S. NMD build-up will be harmful to U.S.-Russia relations. It presses Russia to be hesitant in continuing strategic nuclear disarmament, and may force Moscow to strengthen its offensive capability. By revising or even abandoning the ABM Treaty, the U.S. appears to maximize its security regardless the negative effect on the security of other countries.

From China's perspective, the U.S. national missile defense would cause even worse strategic relations between Beijing and Washington. Though China has not publicly made its nuclear capability transparent, its CSS-4 ICBM force, capable of reaching the U.S. with a range of 13,000 kilometers, as reported by Western publications, is largely believed by the Western strategic analysts to number around 20-25. ^[13]

China's concern over the U.S. national missile defense in violation of ABM has been expressed through various channels many times. ^[14] Primarily China is concerned about two issues. One is that the NMD will destabilize the world order and harm international relations. The other is that NMD's advertised technical capability will undermine China's strategic deterrence, weakening China's confidence in its strategic retaliatory capability.

A limited anti-ballistic missile capability, as allowed by the existing ABM Treaty, would be enough to defend the strategic assets of the U.S. against potential missile threats from outside the P5. Indeed, the one-site base of anti-ballistic missile deployment under ABM framework cannot immunize the whole U.S. from being hit. It is exactly this reason that has given Russia (as well as other nuclear weapons states) a confidence that they retain a credible nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis the U.S. Theoretically, part of the U.S. would thus be exposed to some missile threat from "rogue" states. However, either that threat has been too remote, or the overwhelming strength of the U.S. in both nuclear and conventional weapons will be powerful enough to deter potential adversaries from initiating hostilities.

Also, the envisaged NMD cannot stop an all-out Russian nuclear attack, considering the thousands of strategic weapons at Russia's disposal. Therefore, Beijing can only take the view that U.S. NMD has been designed to effectively neutralize China's strategic deterrence.

Given the reported level of China's full-range ICBM force (CSS-4), the NMD plans requiring ABM revision would, if successfully implemented as advertised, compromise China's strategic capability in two respects. Geographically, it will protect the whole U.S. from being deterred. Numerically, even interceptors deployed on a single site may be enough to knock out all Chinese CSS-4s. ^[15] Hence China's national security interest is in jeopardy.

To hold the U.S. credibly deterred is just to reciprocate, to a much lower extent, what the U.S. has long done against China during the nuclear age. In fact, it was the U.S. nuclear threats to PRC on a number of occasions that prompted Beijing to start its nuclear weapons program. ^[16]

Though the U.S. has the most formidable nuclear arsenal and most powerful and sophisticated conventional arsenal, it retains the option of a first-strike with nuclear weapons as its deterrence policy. Now the U.S. would even revise or abolish the ABM that assures nuclear weapons states of their mutual



security.

The PRC has one of the smallest nuclear arsenals and least advanced conventional weaponry among all the nuclear weapons states. However, it still adopts a nuclear no-first-use policy, and a nuclear no-use policy against non-nuclear weapons states or nuclear weapons free zones.

The PRC's national security thus rests with what ABM provides. The U.S. indeed can develop and deploy anti-strategic weapons capability, as permitted by the ABM, in order to gain certain sense of security against incidental and/or unauthorised attack by nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, it ought to take into account the common security of all nuclear weapons states. When the U.S. improves its own security at a time of ballistic missile proliferation, it should mind not to undermine the national security of others. There is an internationally acceptable limit that the U.S. can pursue, i.e. developing its strategic missile defense capability in compliance with the ABM Treaty.

Addressing China's Concern

The U.S. can argue that it is its sovereign right to develop and deploy NMD beyond the ABM Treaty, as the new administration is advocating. However, if the U.S. were to go ahead regardless of others, it certainly would not create a win-win situation. It would rather be counterproductive in facilitating an international missile non-proliferation co-operation. Apparently this is in the adverse interest of the U.S.

Some in the U.S. have been indifferent to the negative security impact that the revision of the ABM would bring upon other states. In this theory, the U.S. shall care to some extent about Russia's concern. As the ABM involves the business between U.S. and Russia, there seems no need to address China's concern.

The U.S. shall understand the ABM is both a balancer of power between U.S. and Russia, and, more fundamentally, a cornerstone of global security. In the latter context, China's security is affected by the standing of ABM. The PRC has expressed its interest in multilateralizing ABM, in the hope of expanding ABM membership.^[17] This reflects Beijing's interest in maintaining ABM by raising the stake of altering a multilateral treaty. Being a member of the ABM, Beijing would be situated in a better strategic position to enhance world stability.

There have thus far been three interception tests of NMD systems. The first was carried out on October 2, 1999 and was found to have flaws.^[18] The second test on January 18, 2000 was a complete failure due to a "plumbing leak."^[19] On July 8, 2000 the third test failed because no separation occurred between the boost rocket and Exoatmospheric Kill Vehicle.^[20] President Clinton announced on September 1, 2000 that he would not proceed with deployment of the planned limited NMD.^[21] More interception tests have been scheduled for May/June of 2001.^[22] Even though future tests could be more or less "successful," it would be still quite questionable as to the true effectiveness of the system under real situation.^[23] It will be in neither America's ultimate interest, nor the interest of the rest of the world, to have such a system installed by breaking ABM.

If the U.S. insists on hurting the national interests of Russia and medium nuclear weapons states, it would



be difficult to gather international support for non-proliferation initiatives in other fronts. The Fissile Materials Cut-Off Treaty (FissBan), for instance, is an obvious example. Were the U.S. to break the ABM Treaty, medium nuclear weapons states would be reluctant to give up their option of re-opening the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes, when they feel their deterrence is eroded.

It should also be pointed out that there are ample means to defeat a missile defense.^[24] Various means such as submunitions, high as well as low altitude countermeasures, balloon decoys, chaff and missile fragment decoys can all be considered. MIRVing and ASAT approaches might also be tempting. It goes without saying that if a state is able to independently develop a strategic missile capability, it should also be able to develop a capability to cost-effectively defeat missile defense.^[25]

Some argue that there is a growing threat from China as it is modernizing its strategic forces. Looking at the CSS-4 force developed and China's sea-based deterrence, one can hardly reach this conclusion. A land-based strategic force of about two dozens of intercontinental ballistic missiles, and a very small submarine-based missile force, is hardly any match for those of the United States.

As China adopts a no-first-use strategy, it serves China's interest to keep a moderate force. However, China has a need to modernize its force as its defensive policy requires doing so, and as all other countries are doing the same. This is especially true at an age of precision-guided weaponry. An ICBM force of some two dozens missiles does not justify the U.S. to revise or abolish ABM Treaty. Quite to the opposite, China's moderate strategic force and moderate modernization play a key role in assuring the U.S. adequate security, which serves a stabilizing role in terms of China-U.S. relations, and world security.

In sum, the United States may have legitimate concern over missile proliferation. That concern requires understanding but shall not be exaggerated. Major powers of the world, along with other countries, should work together to address such international problems, and to find solutions, which serve both international stability and their respective national interests. Moving along the lines provided for by the ABM Treaty provides such a way forward. On the contrary, going ahead with damaging ABM and other countries' interests can only be counterproductive.

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Notes:

1. The Bush Administration has advocated continuing development of ballistic missile defense toward its deployment. [? Return](#)
2. For instance, India has tested Agni and Prithvi, and Pakistan has tested Ghauri ballistic missiles a number of times in the 1990s. DPRK is alleged to have developed and tested No-dong and Taepo-dong intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Reportedly, some other countries are developing their ballistic missile capabilities. [? Return](#)
3. Edward N. Luttwak, "Clinton's Missile Defense Goes Way Off Its Strategic Target", Frankfurter



- Allgemeine Zeitung, June 14, 2000, p.2. [? Return](#)
4. “China’s National Defense”, Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, Beijing, July 1998. [? Return](#)
 5. MTCR was set up in April 1987, and modified in July 1993 to target missiles capable of delivering any type of weapons of mass destruction. [? Return](#)
 6. “Joint United States-People’s Republic of China Statement on Missile Proliferation”, Washington, D.C., October 4, 1994. [? Return](#)
 7. “People’s Republic of China Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Statement”, People’s Daily, November 22, 2000, p.4. [? Return](#)
 8. The House version, sponsored by Curt Weldon (R-PA), was a bill of one-sentence as quoted in the text. [? Return](#)
 9. Joseph Fitchett, “Washington’s Pursuit of Missile Defense Drives Wedge in NATO”, International Herald Tribune, February 15, 2000, p.5. [? Return](#)
 10. “The Missile Threat: An Intelligence Assessment”, Issue Brief (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), February 10, 2000. [? Return](#)
 11. Craig Cerniello, “CIA Holds to Assessment of Ballistic Missile Threat to U.S.”, Arms Control Today, October 1998, p.24. Even for North Korea, the U.S. is negotiating with it for a halt of its long-range missile program. [? Return](#)
 12. David Hoffman, “Russia’s Missile Defense Eroding: Gaps in Early-Warning Satellite Coverage Raise Risk of Launch Error”, Washington Post, February 10, 1999, p.A1. [? Return](#)
 13. CIA put the number at about 20, see Craig Cerniello, “CIA Holds to Assessment of Ballistic Missile Threat to U.S.”, Arms Control Today, October 1998, p.24, and, SIPRI Yearbook 1999: Armament, Disarmament and International Security (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), p.555. IISS estimated the number as 15-20, see, The Military Balance 1999-2000 (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), p.186. In 1993, The Natural Resources Defense Council estimated the number as 4, see Robert S. Norris, Andrew S. Burrows and Richard W. Fieldhouse, Nuclear Weapons Databook Volume 4: Britain, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons (Westview Press: Boulder, 1994), p.11. More recent Western speculation indicated a number of 25. [? Return](#)
 14. For instance, Sha Zhukang, “International Disarmament on a Crossroad”, World Affairs (Beijing), February 2000, p.17; Gao Junmin and Lü Dehong, “A Dangerous Move”, PLA Daily, January 24, 1999, p.4. [? Return](#)
 15. Assuming China has 20 CSS-4s, the 100 interceptors deployed on a single ABM site will be more than enough to hit all of them under a 1 in 4 interception ratio scheme. [? Return](#)
 16. See, Dingli Shen, “The Current Status of Chinese Nuclear Forces and Nuclear Policies”, Princeton University/Center for Energy and Environmental Studies Report No. 247, February 1990; McGeorge Bundy, Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years (Random House: New York, 1988). [? Return](#)
 17. See luncheon speech of Ambassador Shu Zhukang at the Seventh Carnegie International Non-Proliferation Conference: Repairing the Regime, January 11-12, 1999, Washington, D.C. [? Return](#)
 18. James Glanz, “Flaws Found In Missile Test That U.S. Saw As A Success”, New York Times, January 14, 2000, p.1. [? Return](#)
 19. Robert Suro, “Missile Defense System Fails Test”, Washington Post, January 19, 2000, p.1; Bradley Graham, “Plumbing Leak Foiled Anti-Missile Test”, Washington Post, February 8, 2000, p.A1. [? Return](#)
 20. “Update on National Missile Defense Intercept Test”, Department of Defense (DoD) Press



Release, DoD transcript, July 8, 2000. [? Return](#)

21. “Remarks by President Bill Clinton On National Missile Defense”, Arms Control Today, September 2000, pp.36-38. [? Return](#)
22. “The U.S. Will Conduct the 4th NMD Test”, Wen Hui Bao (in Chinese), February 8, 2001, p.5. [? Return](#)
23. Richard Garwin has pointed out that “the proposed NMD system would have essentially zero capability against the most likely emerging threat – an ICBM from North Korea”. See, “Effectiveness of Proposed National Missile Defense Against ICBMs from North Korea”, <http://www.fas.org/rlg/990317-nmd.htm>. [? Return](#)
24. See description in Joseph Cirincione and Frank von Hippel ed., The Last 15 Minutes: Ballistic Missile Defense in Perspective (Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers: Washington, DC, 1996); Countermeasures: A Technical Evaluation of the Operational Effectiveness of the Planned U.S. National Missile Defense System (Union of Concerned Scientists and MIT Security Studies Program), April 2000. [? Return](#)
25. See cost analysis in Dingli Shen, “Security Issues Between China and the United States”, paper delivered at the Workshop on the State of Sino-American Relations, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Paris, October 21-22, 1999. [? Return](#)