Michael McDevitt

Beijing's Bind

Preserving the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty intact, unmodified, is the centerpiece of China's diplomatic attempt to forestall NMD deployment. Assuming the United States will, at a minimum, begin to deploy an NMD system optimized to deal with North Korean and other "rogue" state ballistic missiles, even this limited system, known as C-1, includes elements in its architecture[1] that are not currently permitted by the 1972 ABM Treaty, which, among other things, prohibits a nationwide defense against ballistic missiles.[2] Intended or not, the system would have an impact on China's small intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force, which numbers approximately 20.[3]

Should the Russians not agree to modify the ABM Treaty, the United States will be faced with three alternatives. The first two, either dropping the idea of NMD altogether or developing a new architecture that is ABM Treaty-compliant, seem highly unlikely since neither option would provide protection for the entire United States. The third option would be to withdraw from the ABM Treaty altogether, after giving the required six months' notice. This last alternative, which today seems to be the most likely should modification attempts prove unsuccessful, would be a disaster from Beijing's perspective because it would leave the United States free to select any mix of land and space-based NMD options unconstrained by international agreement. This means that Beijing, by objecting to changes in the ABM Treaty, is pursuing an anti-NMD policy course of action that has a high probability of making Beijing's strategic circumstances worse.[4]

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Background

Until mid-1999, China policy did not clearly distinguish between theater missile defense (TMD) and NMD in its interactions with the United States. This is not because individuals in China did not understand the difference. In fact, both technical and conceptual specialists in China understood what NMD was all about and understood the implications of this latest U.S. attempt to develop a defense against ICBMs. For decades there has been a group of scientists and technologists within China who closely followed the on-again, off-again U.S. missile defense debates—especially Reagan-era Strategic Defense Initiative developments.[5]

China has also appreciated the impact that a successful missile defense could have on its strategic deterrent missile force. But, as a general proposition, this technical and strategic awareness was not translated into an overt policy position until late 1996. At that time, the beginning of an anti-NMD policy line began to publicly emerge. Even then, Beijing's focus was more on TMD and how U.S. theater systems might affect China's ICBM force. Chinese policy did not clearly differentiate between TMD and NMD until the later half of 1999.

Earlier that summer, the United States adopted an official NMD policy when, on July 22, 1999, President Bill Clinton signed legislation that stated U.S. policy was to deploy an NMD system as soon it was technologically possible. The purpose of such a system was to protect all U.S. territory against limited missile attacks from rogue nations. Although not specifically stated, the system would also presumably have the ability to defend against accidental or unauthorized launches from rogues as well as Russia and China.[6] This was followed on October 2, 1999, by a successful NMD test, when an NMD interceptor hit a test warhead that was travelling at ICBM range and speed.

In Beijing, the legislation and subsequent successful test seemed to have had a galvanizing effect. A policy line specifically oriented toward NMD emerged. Before examining Beijing's reaction more closely, a look at China's strategic nuclear circumstances is necessary in order to understand the context in which its policy was formulated.

Vulnerability of China's Strategic Deterrent

Since October 16, 1964, the day China exploded its first atomic bomb, China's declared strategic doctrine has been retaliatory in nature. The official statement made that day continues to guide China's nuclear strategy: "The Chinese government hereby solemnly declares that China will never at anytime, or under any circumstances, be the first to use nuclear weapons."

This "no-first-use" doctrine means that China has adopted a strategy that overtly acknowledges that China will "accept" the first nuclear blow. Its nuclear forces would only be used to retaliate once China was attacked. For such a strategy to be credible, at least vis-à-vis the two nuclear superpowers, its retaliatory nuclear force had to be able to survive an overwhelming first strike from either the Soviet Union or the United States. Because China did not have the means to retaliate against the continental United States until its first ICBM, the DF-5, entered service in 1981, its no-first-use strategy against the United States was really not credible.

How does an NMD system make China's strategic situation any worse?

It is only over the last twenty years that China's minimum deterrent against the continental United States had the possibility of being credible. ICBM survival still seems problematic, though. As Paul Godwin has written about both the DF-5 ICBM and the shorter range DF-4 intermediate range ballistic missile,

> neither of these weapons is maintained at high levels of readiness. Their warheads are stored separately from the rocket launchers, and the rockets themselves are not kept fueled. The process of loading the liquid fuel tanks and installing the warhead can take 2 to 4 hours.[7]

Furthermore, these silo-based weapons are obviously geographically fixed—and hence can be located from space. Because the Chinese do not have space-based missile launch detection systems necessary to warn them of a U.S. missile launch, China could not institute a launch-on-warning posture even if the ICBMs were fueled and otherwise ready during a crisis.

During the 1980s, any Chinese concerns were undoubtedly mitigated by the relatively close anti-Soviet political relationship between Beijing and Washington. The potential for a Soviet first strike must have seemed much more plausible at the time. Against the Soviets, Beijing had more numerous short-range ballistic missiles, its intermediate-range bomber force, and, from mid-decade on, its single ballistic missile submarine available. This intermediate range "triad" made the likelihood of some retaliatory capability surviving a Soviet first strike much more credible.

During the 1990s, Beijing has seen this calculus flip to its disadvantage. The close Beijing-Moscow "Strategic Partnership" makes the prospect of a Russian first strike remote, while the potential for conflict between Beijing and Washington over Taiwan, dormant since the 1950s, has reemerged during this decade. From China's point of view, the prospect of a U.S. first strike is not nearly as far fetched as it was 10 years ago. Instead of the several hundred weapons that could reach Russia, and thus almost guarantee some ability to

retaliate, Beijing today has just about 20 DF-5A ICBMs (8,100-nautical-mile range) capable of reaching the United States.[8]

China's sensitivity to the vulnerability of its retaliatory capability was almost certainly enhanced as the People's Liberation Army carefully analyzed the lessons of the Persian Gulf War. The combination of real-time, space-based surveillance; space-based navigation systems; and very accurate conventional weapons made the possibility of a preemptive strike by conventional weapons another concern. In 1992–1993, preemption with conventional weapons as well as other "revolutionary" possibilities were openly debated in U.S military journals, conferences, and seminars.[9]

As the decade ended, the reality facing Beijing was that its declaratory nuclear doctrine, based on an assured ability to retaliate against the United States, was more rhetorical than real.

Why Does It Matter to Beijing?

Given this assessment, it is fair to pose the rhetorical question, "If Beijing's retaliatory capability against the United States is a strategic fiction anyway, how does an NMD system make China's strategic situation any worse?" Why is Beijing investing political capital in an active anti-NMD policy?

The answer has several aspects. First, from Beijing's perspective there is always the possibility that a few, even one or two, Chinese ICBMs could survive preemption. Even a minimally-sized NMD would be able to deal with these surviving ICBMs. There is some possibility that not all of China's long-range missiles are silo based. Some may be hidden in caves. NMD would have the potential to capture these "concealed" weapons.

Second, and more importantly, there is the concern that a U.S. NMD system would undercut China's ongoing strategic modernization—a program specifically aimed at ensuring a retaliatory force by eliminating China's vulnerability to a preemptive U.S. first strike. Beijing's efforts have largely focused on its ICBM force and, at this time, do not appear to intend to compliment its intermediate-range triad with an intercontinental triad.[10]

Beijing's strategic modernization improves ICBM survivability in five ways:[11]

- *Mobility*: To make it difficult to target China's ICBM force, a move from cave and silo basing to road-mobile ICBMs is underway. This capitalizes on the vastness of China. Two new road mobile ICBMs, the DF-31 (4,300 nautical miles) and DF-41 (6,500 nautical miles), will greatly improve survivability as they are introduced over the next decade.
- *Solid fuel*: China's current ICBM force is liquid fuel propelled. Liquid fuels are highly volatile, and therefore very dangerous to use—particularly un-

der stress. They are also very corrosive. The new DF-31 and 41 will have solid fuel, which is much safer and eliminates the need to fuel just prior to launch.

- *Command and control*: According to the Pentagon in 1997, China is working to improve its command and control.[12] Improvements make it more likely an order to retaliate would be successfully transmitted and received.
- *Accuracy*: In the same 1997 report, the Pentagon states that China is using the Global Positioning System (GPS) to make significant improvements in accuracy. China has also reached agreements to share in the Russian space-based Global Navigation Satellite System.
- *Greater numbers*: There is no conclusive evidence to indicate how large China's ICBM force might become. More missiles do improve China's retaliatory survivability. The number of missiles currently in China's intermediate range strategic force (about 110 missiles and a similar number of bombers) might provide a clue to how many intercontinental systems Beijing would consider necessary to insure its ability to retaliate.[13]

Nuclear blackmail is a serious issue from Beijing's perspective.

A U.S. NMD system may be deployed at about the same time China begins to field these survivability steps, raising the specter of mitigating them and returning China to today's vulnerable posture. This relates directly to the third reason China opposes U.S. NMD—the issue of "nuclear blackmail."

Nuclear blackmail is a serious issue from Beijing's perspective. It dates back to the 1950s when the Eisenhower administration threatened to employ nuclear weapons to end the Korean War and then again during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1958. In 1964 when China detonated its first atomic bomb, its public rationale for developing this weapon was to "oppose the U.S. imperialist policy of nuclear blackmail and threats. … China is developing nuclear weapons for defense and for protecting the Chinese people from U.S. threats to launch a nuclear war."[14]

These arguments may appear self-serving to the United States, particularly since these incidents occurred more than 40 years ago, but they are encountered frequently enough from Chinese interlocutors that they cannot be easily dismissed. Even if one judges this argument as specious, one ought not overlook the Chinese penchant for attributing to others the approaches and techniques they themselves might employ. The persistent Chinese belief that the U.S. bombing of their embassy in Belgrade was a deliberate attempt to "teach China a lesson" is a recent example of this phenomenon.

The nuclear blackmail issue is also at the heart of Chinese concerns about a U.S.-dominated unipolar world. Beijing's desired multipolar world

with China as one of the poles cannot be realized if the "Chinese pole" can be intimidated by nuclear weapons.[15]

The issue of nuclear blackmail leads to the fourth and final major reason why Beijing opposes NMD—Taiwan. The Chinese combine the blackmail argument and Taiwan in the following way: A U.S. NMD would return China to a position of nuclear vulnerability without a retaliatory recourse. Then any attempt by Beijing to use force against Taiwan would permit the the United States to intervene and threaten to escalate the crisis with impunity. In other words, a replay of the 1958 Taiwan crisis.

Implied in this argument is that as long as China's nuclear retaliatory capability is credible, it possesses a wider range of military options against both Taiwan and the United States than it might otherwise consider if the United States can trump China's nuclear response. It also implies that Beijing's "no-first-use" doctrine may not apply in a Taiwan crisis. That certainly is the impression resulting from the now-notorious statement made in 1995 to a former U.S. official by a senior Chinese official to the effect that the United States would not risk Los Angeles on behalf of Taiwan.[16]

China's Policy Response

Translating these concerns into a sensible policy approach cannot have been easy for Beijing. They could hardly persuade the United States not to field NMD because, if the United States did so, it would constrain China's military options against Taiwan.

Nor could Beijing argue that its current retaliatory capability is a "paper tiger" and that it would not be credible until the DF-31s and DF-41s are fielded in numbers. Not only would this undercut its own attempts to use the threat of nuclear weapons to intimidate the United States during a Taiwan crisis, it could easily embolden those in Beijing who press for an increase in defense spending—particularly those who want to accelerate the strategic modernization program even further.

From Beijing's perspective, the best outcome would be to perpetuate the status quo (i.e., either an ABM Treaty-compliant U.S. missile defense system or none at all). During a recent visit to Washington by a high-level Chinese security official, it was clear that the inviolability of the ABM Treaty was the centerpiece of Beijing's anti-NMD policy. According to this official, the importance of the ABM Treaty was that it guaranteed a second strike, or retaliatory capability, for both the United States and Russia.

In turn, this curbed the nuclear arms race and preserved strategic stability. To tinker now with the ABM Treaty would undo these "great achievements." I hasten to add this is not a unique Chinese perspective, as many

experts in the United States and Europe share these views. China's approach should not be considered quixotic.

China has been very active, pressing this policy line globally. They and the Russians are attempting to organize an "international united front" against NMD, all the while hoping that Moscow will not agree to modify the ABM Treaty to permit at least a C-1 NMD system. Beijing has had some success in fueling European concerns—especially France and Germany—about a U.S. NMD deployment and, as a result, U.S. diplomatic efforts are increasingly focused on greater consultation with U.S. friends and allies.

China has also augmented the main line of its argument about the centrality of an unmodified ABM Treaty by appealing to broader world public opinion. The most successful manifestation of this effort took place on November 5, 1999, in the United Nations General Assembly. A draft resolution cosponsored by China, Russia, and Belarus condemned missile defense as destabilizing, arguing such defenses would provoke a nuclear arms race. The First Committee of the General Assembly adopted this draft resolution by a vote of 54 to 4 with 73 abstentions.

The arms race argument is a persistent theme in Beijing's commentary on NMD. This in itself is interesting since no "rogue-oriented" NMD system currently under serious consideration would have a major impact on Russia's ability to hold the entire United States at nuclear risk.[17] It is not entirely clear who, beside Beijing, would become involved in such a race. The arms race line seems to be Beijing's way of publicly putting the United States on notice that it will attempt to outbuild any U.S. NMD system.

The North Korean Pivot

Should Washington decide to go ahead with an NMD system, the initial, and perhaps only, site will be optimized to deal with the North Korean threat. The proposed C-1 system (100 interceptors in Alaska, an X-Band radar on Shemeya Island in the Aleutians, improved early warning radars, command and control at NORAD, and existing Defense Support System satellites) is perfectly located to capture North Korean launches toward the United States. The Alaska site also has a capability against Chinese ICBMs launched from eastern China. Apparently, because of intercept geometry and the curvature of the earth, an Alaskan site would not have a good capability against Chinese ICBMs launched from western China at U.S. east coast cities.

Beijing, as well as some Europeans, downplay or openly ridicule the notion that North Korea in particular, and rogues in general, pose a serious threat to the United States. The Chinese argue that throughout the Cold War, and even today, the United States is under a greater missile threat than

North Korea could possibly pose. China questions whether North Korea could ever reach the United States with an ICBM and asks why "traditional" deterrence will not work against Pyongyang. They reject the U.S. concern that there are some countries, North Korea especially, that may not be able to be deterred.

There are other "rogues" besides Pyongyang. But because of the August 1998 Taep'odong 1 missile shot that landed 3,000 miles "down range" in the North Pacific—far enough to reach Alaska and Guam—it is North Korea that really drives the U.S. political consensus for NMD. It is surprising that Beijing has not focused its energy on removing the North Korean rationale by pressuring Pyongyang to forego further long-range missile development and deployment. This is not the place to ruminate about the degree of leverage Beijing may or may not have with Pyongyang, but it is certainly more than any other country. If Beijing was actually able to twist Pyongyang's arm hard enough to convince the North Koreans to get out of the long-range missile business, that result, along with slowly improving relations with Iran and continued UN sanctions on Iraq, could conceivably mitigate the "rogue" rationale for NMD.

Conclusion

With or without a U.S. NMD system, China has a strategic vulnerability issue it is slowly taking steps to correct through a comprehensive strategic modernization. NMD did not precipitate that modernization, but any U.S. NMD deployment will certainly affect its quantitative, and perhaps qualitative, scope.

Beijing's concerns about nuclear blackmail will almost certainly guarantee that China will attempt to stay ahead of, or circumvent, U.S. NMD deployments by eventually fielding more ICBMs than NMD interceptors. This would probably lead to some sort of Sino-U.S. understanding about the ratio of Chinese ICBMs to NMD interceptors over time, unless the overall state of Sino-U.S. relations deteriorates to the point where the United States attempts to deny China any means to retaliate against the United States by fielding a robust anti-China NMD system (if such a system was technically possible).

In informal dialogue, the Chinese frequently refer to a Chinese nuclear capability modeled on France's "Force de Frappe." What is not clear is whether this is where Beijing was headed if NMD had never appeared on the scene. This author suspects it was. An intercontinental force of largely mobile missiles would address survivability concerns and guarantee Beijing a retaliatory capability in the face of an NMD system limited to dealing with rogues if it was similar in size to the intermediate-range force that preserves a retaliatory capability against Russia. Finally, Beijing could hardly persuade

the United States not to field NMD because if the United States deployed, it would constrain China's military options against Taiwan.

China has very little leverage in pursuing its anti-NMD policy. Beijing is dependent on the Russians to hold the line on an ABM Treaty modification, which paradoxically could actually make Beijing's situation worse by inspiring the United States to simply walk away from the ABM Treaty altogether. Beijing has only a faint hope its ability to mobilize world opinion will be effective in dissuading the United States from fielding an NMD system.

China is attempting to organize an "international united front" against NMD.

With Beijing's talk of an arms race, it apparently hopes the threat of a Chinese strategic buildup will be worrisome enough to Washington to cause them to rethink NMD deployment decisions. This could easily backfire and cause the United States to take advantage of its technological lead, change NMD's focus to overtly anti-Chinese, and pour resources in attempting to keep far ahead in any Beijing-Washington, offense-defense competition. Of course, given the labored and agonizingly slow pace of Chinese strategic development since 1964, it is not entirely clear that the threat of an arms "race" is entirely credible.

Beijing's best hope to arrest U.S. NMD is to somehow cause the North Korean ICBM threat to go away. Failing that, Beijing's remaining tactic may be to keep its fingers crossed and hope that, technically, NMD proves to be too big a challenge for the United States to surmount.

Notes

1. Notional NMD architecture includes:
   - Ground-based interceptors
   - Capability upgrades to existing ground-based early warning radar's in the United States, U.K., and Greenland.
   - Newly developed land based X-Band radar. The rough equivalent of fire-control radar, which closely track incoming missiles/RV's in flight and help discriminate between missile reentry vehicle's, decoys and missile parts, so intercepting missiles can achieve a "skin-to-skin" hit.
   - Battle-management and command and control installation at NORAD in Colorado Springs in order to command the NMD system.
   - Space-based infrared detection of ballistic missile launches utilizing the existing DSP satellite system, and in the future the replacement Space-based Infrared System.
2. Lisbeth Gronland and George Lewis, "How a Limited National Missile Defense Would Impact the ABM Treaty," *Arms Control Today* (November 1999): 11.
3. National Intelligence Council (NIC), U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "Foreign

Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States Through 2010," unclassified summary, September 1999.

4. Over the past two and a half years the author has participated in a number of security and strategically oriented conferences, meetings, and discussions with Chinese interlocutors in official positions as well as researchers and scholars from semi-official Chinese institutes and think tanks. In virtually all cases, these encounters were on a not-for-attribution basis. This face-to-face experience has been put into context by the scholarly work and fortunate interactions I have had with serious scholars of the People's Liberation Army and their approach to nuclear weapons and strategic systems such as Paul Godwin, Iain Johnston, David Shambaugh, David Finkelstein, Bonnie Glaser, Banning Garrett, and especially Gill Bates, James Mulvenon, and Brad Roberts.
5. A draft paper by Iain Johnston, prepared for a March 2000 conference on "International Reactions to U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense" held by Stanford University's CISAC, entitled " A Compendium of Potential Chinese Responses to U.S. Ballistic Missile Defenses" includes an excellent synopsis of how China has closely tracked U.S. missile defense plans.
6. John Steinbruner, "National Missile Defense: Collision in Progress," *Arms Control Today* (November 1999).
7. Paul H. Godwin, "China's Nuclear Forces: An Assessment," *Current History* (September 1999): 260.
8. *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, May-June 1999, cited in ibid., 263.
9. See for example, James R. Blaker, *Understanding the Revolution in Military Affairs: A Guide to America's 21st Century Defense,* Progressive Policy Institute, January 1997. The context in this example is toward preemption against both conventional military capability and weapons of mass destruction.
10. Adding an intercontinental bomber force to the PLA Air Force seems far fetched at this point. Sales from Russia cannot be totally discounted, although that would be a violation of START I. Most analysts credit Beijing with plans to build additional submarines, but they must be able to elude and survive U.S. attack submarines to be considered a survivable leg of China's retaliatory force.
11. NIC, "Foreign Missile Developments," September 1999.
12. U.S. Department of Defense, "Selected Military Capabilities of the Peoples Republic of China," report to Congress, April 1997.
13. Gill Bates and James Mulvenon, "The Chinese Strategic Rocket Forces," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (May-June 1999).
14. Statements of the Government of the People's Republic of China in John Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 241-242.
15. David Finkelstein, *China's New Security Concept: Reading Between the Lines*, a CNA Corporation Issue Paper, April 1999.
16. I am indebted to my colleague at CNA Corporation, Dr. David Finkelstein, for highlighting this point in a presentation at a recent conference on NMD sponsored by the State Department.
17. It is worth pointing out that many Russians do not believe this, knowing full well their own weaknesses and declining forces as well as declining reliability as their strategic forces age past notional service life. The U.S. government has simply not convinced them that the 5,900 warheads currently attributed to Russia could not, over the next decade, dwindle to a much lower number and still provide them with the ability to retaliate even with a limited U.S. NMD system.