

Report 42

National Missile Defense and China's Current Security Perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

As the lead off paper in this project, this essay will provide a brief overview of Beijing's views of the US National Missile Defense (NMD) program through the lens of Chinese security perceptions—long-standing and current. It will address two major issues. The first is this student's views of the key reasons the Chinese object to the US NMD program. The second major issue to be addressed will be the Chinese perception of trends in US-China relations—mainly security relations. At the end of the day, these two strands of Chinese concerns are linked. As ever, it is important to underscore that interpreting the Chinese *weltanschauung* does not imply endorsement or agreement.

OVERVIEW OF KEY CHINESE CONCERNS ABOUT NMD

The Chinese arguments against the plans of the US Government to move ahead with NMD are multitudinous, and they range from the near reasonable (at least from a Beijing perspective) to the incredulous (regardless of where one sits). Indeed, since 1999—the year that the Chinese Government added its audible assault on NMD to its ongoing objections to TBMD—PRC arguments against NMD have taken on a near theological quality.¹

And since 1999, almost every variant of Chinese concern has already been tabled in Track I and Track II dialogues, as well as in the voluminous writings on this topic by China's analytic and scholarly community. Depending upon which ministry, organization, or analytic institute one deals with there is a range of differing priorities and concerns. What unites all of the disparate arguments is that every sector of the Chinese national security and foreign policy community is apparently in agreement that NMD will be a "bad thing" for Chinese national interests.²

¹ For the range of Chinese arguments against TBMD see Finkelstein, "Theater Missile Defense and US Foreign Policy Interests in Asia." (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center *Special Report*, October 2000).

² One Chinese foreign affairs official recently quipped that, "Opposition to US NMD is at least one issue upon which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PLA can agree."

In the final analysis, most of the Chinese arguments against NMD can probably be grouped under two main headings:

- The implications of NMD for the viability of Chinese nuclear deterrence, and
- NMD's perceived impact upon the "international strategic security environment"

The thread that runs through each of the two headings above is increasing Chinese concern about—and distrust of—US intentions toward China. This "thread" will be developed further on in this paper under a separate heading. At present, let us examine each of the two key areas above on their own terms.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF NMD FOR THE VIABILITY OF CHINESE NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

The most immediate, obvious, and significant Chinese concern about the US NMD program is that it is viewed as having the potential to put both the viability and credibility of Beijing's nuclear deterrent at risk. Using the standard four-tier hierarchy of national security interests—survival, vital, major, and peripheral—the perceived *de facto* "challenge" to Beijing's nuclear deterrent posed by NMD would sit at least in the "vital" basket but arguably, from a Chinese perspective, in the "survival" basket.

As Iain Johnston has pointed out, the Chinese view the possession of nuclear weapons as a prerequisite to the international stature China seeks.³ As a member of the "nuclear club," Beijing accrues some degree of *gravitas* in the international order. When coupled with the PRC's permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) Beijing is able to claim "major power status" despite the fact that its level of domestic development is not equal to that of the other members of the UNSC.

All true enough. But the issue of status is *not* the current heart of the matter. The Chinese decision to develop and deploy nuclear weapons some three plus decades ago was chiefly the result of Chinese determination to never again be subjected to what they considered the "nuclear blackmail" they argue they suffered during the Cold War—first by the United States and, later on, by the Soviets. And since 16 October 1964—the day China exploded its first atomic bomb—Beijing's nuclear strategy has apparently been to field a small but credible second-strike retaliatory nuclear force accompanied by a publicly declared "no first use" policy.

Chinese arms control specialists argue that even the modest C-1 NMD configuration that was proposed by the Clinton administration would have called into question the credibility of China's second-

³ Iain Johnston, "Prospects for China's Nuclear Force Modernization: Limited Deterrence versus Multilateral Arms Control," *The China Quarterly*, June 1996, p. 50. "...China's decision-makers have generally accorded a great deal of status and military value to nuclear weapons."

strike nuclear force. That force, which is estimated by most experts to stand at some 18 to 24 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), would certainly be captured, they argue, by the more robust combination of systems the current US administration has publicly stated it is considering in thinking through its options. This alone—the perception that US NMD puts China’s deterrent at risk—makes the US program problematic for China at best and threatening at worst, depending upon their assessment of US intentions. It is extremely difficult to argue away this point with the Chinese—especially since most Beijing arms control specialists and security analysts do *not* believe that the sole purpose of NMD is to provide a prophylaxis against notional “rogue states” (or “states of concern” depending upon which term one prefers).

When considering the implications of US NMD in the context of a hypothetical confrontation with the United States, some Chinese arms control specialists take one down the following logic path:

- The Chinese assumption is that the US would initiate a first strike (PRC analysts are quick to point out that the US does not have a “no first use” policy as does Beijing)
- Out of the two dozen or so Chinese ICBMs they claim (off-line) they possess, the Chinese assume that only a small handful will survive
- The small handful that survive the first strike will then be “captured” by the US NMD system
- Thus, if NMD is deployed (in the absence of changes to China’s nuclear forces) then Beijing’s retaliatory capability will be negated
- Consequently, the survival of the Chinese state will be at risk

The bottom line for Beijing, then, is that the US NMD program is perceived to represent a direct challenge to China’s own nuclear security, thus subjecting Beijing to the potential of “nuclear blackmail” once again, and raising the issue of whether they need a larger force or more modern force, and whether they can still afford a “no first use” policy.⁴

NMD’S PERCIEVED IMPACT UPON THE “INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC SECURITY ENVIRONMENT”

In addition to the perceived direct challenge to China’s nuclear posture, the US NMD program is viewed in Beijing as having potentially adverse consequences for international stability by undermining

⁴ There are some US analysts who argue that China is *already* modernizing its nuclear force (liquid fuel to solid fuel; silo-based to road mobile), hence, Beijing will change its nuclear posture *regardless* of NMD. Other US analysts argue that current Chinese nuclear modernization is a response to the reality that China really does not now currently have a viable second-strike force. I am not in a position to comment on either argument, but I do choose to acknowledge this issue of debate among some in the US.

what was hitherto assessed as “positive trends” in international security and all that this implies for China’s ability to focus on internal domestic issues.

For the Chinese analytic community the assessment of the “international strategic security environment” (*guoji zhanlue anquan huanjing*; 国际战略安全环境) is an iterative affair that is conducted annually on behalf of the top leadership. Tracking trends in the security environment is a serious undertaking for assessing the state of near term Chinese national security interests. But even more important is assessing whether the “keynote of the times” is still valid.

The concept of the “keynote of the times” (*shidai zhuti*; 时代主题) speaks to overall trends in the international security environment and whether Chinese interests are fundamentally secure over the long term. This assessment in particular is not easily changed merely due to short-term issues, problems, or threats. But when it is changed, the implications are profound for Chinese domestic policies, foreign policies, and security policies.⁵ In fact, since 1949, the “keynote of the times” has only changed once. That was in 1985 when Deng Xiaoping’s so-called “strategic decision” reversed Mao Zedong’s long-standing assessment.

Where Mao saw “war and revolution” as the “keynote of the times” Deng Xiaoping assessed that “peace and development” more correctly described the trends in the international security *milieu*. Deng recognized the continuing dangers to China posed by local wars and conflicts. However, he assessed that, overall, (1) China no longer faced the prospect of invasion, (2) the possibility of a world war between the two superpowers was remote; and—most important for the purposes of this essay—(3) the prospects of a nuclear war between the superpowers that could involve China was slight.

As a result of the perceived overall strategic balance between the two superpowers—to include the nuclear balance—Deng ordered the PLA to step back from Mao’s previous instructions to prepare for “early war, major, *and nuclear war*” (emphasis added) and prepare instead for local conventional wars.⁶ Overall, Deng predicted in 1985 that China’s *fundamental security* was assured and it would enjoy at least twenty years of peace in which to focus on internal modernization.

On a conceptual level, then, Beijing’s objection to the US NMD program revolves about Chinese concerns that this capability will significantly alter the balance between the nuclear powers with implied negative consequences for China’s own security. Hence, the often vague Chinese arguments that NMD will “destabilize” the international order; that it will “lead to an arms race”—the implication being that China and other countries will have to enhance their nuclear armaments to reestablish the nuclear balance;

⁵ Think of a major change in the “keynote of the times” as having the same level and breadth of implication as did the assessments of NSC 68 for the US.

⁶ Equally important, Deng’s assessment shifted Chinese domestic policies, economic policies, and foreign policies. Hence, China’s walk away from “class struggle as the key link” to “economics as the central task” and all of the reforms (“reform and opening up,” *gaige yu kaifang*; 改革与开放) that have ensued.

and admonitions that “no one country should have both the spear and the shield.” Moreover, Chinese concern about a presumed nuclear imbalance due to US possession of NMD explains in part Beijing’s new found (but often selective) enthusiasm for arms control agreements—especially the sanctity of the 1972 Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty between the US and the (then) Soviets. That particular treaty—in conjunction with slowly diminishing superpower tensions, the START process, and a host of other international shifts by the mid 1980s—was part and parcel of Deng’s reassessment of the Maoist critique of international security trends.

The Chinese assessment of nuclear security trends in the late 1990s has been rather dire. The US decision to forge ahead with NMD came on the heels of the nuclear detonations in India and Pakistan. In addition, the many Chinese analysts judge that the US that is slowly walking away from arms control regimes. They cite, for instance, the failure of the US Congress to ratify the CTBT and, more recently, their assessment that the US “as the world’s sole superpower” is more and more inclined to act unilaterally in the international community.

Overall, then, there is a group of Chinese security analysts that have come to assess the state of international nuclear security as being on a downward trajectory. And this assessment was one of many security issues that came into play during what I have often referred to as “The Great Peace and Development Debate of 1999”—when, for the first time since 1985, Chinese government analysts (and others) challenged the validity of Deng Xiaoping’s original assessment that “peace and development” was indeed the “keynote of the times.”⁷

Conceptually, then, the US NMD program is viewed as having the potential to radically alter what has been viewed in Beijing as at least a relatively stable international strategic security environment.

CHINESE CONCERNS ABOUT THE UNITED STATES

Beijing’s concerns about the US NMD program are magnified because it is increasingly viewed through the lens of rising distrust of US intentions toward China in the near, mid, and long-term. Especially when it comes to security issues, the general trend in US-China relations has been on a downward slope over the past several years.

From my own perspective, 1996 was a seminal year in bilateral security relations. In the wake of the PRC missile launches in the Taiwan Strait it had become clear (certainly in some quarters of the US Government, and likely in the PRC as well) that both countries were finding it more and more difficult to ignore or paper over the security differences that divided them. And to some extent, security differences since that time have become a more prominent driver in relations, whereas economic ties had previously overshadowed those differences.

⁷ For a full study on the debate see Finkelstein, *China Reconsiders Its National Security: The “Great Peace and Development Debate” of 1999* (Alexandria, VA: The CNA Corporation, December 2000).

Moreover, the leaders of both countries, Presidents Clinton and now Bush, as well as Jiang Zemin, are more and more constrained in their approach to relations by domestic politics in their own capitols. Suffice it to say that in both Beijing and Washington both the American and Chinese “left” and “right” have conjoined in their respective “anti-American” or “anti-China” inclinations, albeit for differing reasons.

Confronting and arresting the increasing mutual distrust on both sides of the Pacific should be a priority issue for both Washington and Beijing if, as was declared in Shanghai during the Bush-Jiang meeting of 19 October 2001, the US and China seek a relationship that is candid, constructive, and cooperative.

The list of US concerns about China is as long as China’s list about the US. US security concerns are well known and need no deep explanation. In the realm of security they encompass Chinese proliferation behavior, the PLA’s lack of defense transparency, Beijing’s intentions toward Taiwan, perceived efforts to undermine US alliances in the region, and a perception that China would like to see a rollback of US forward military presence in Asia, to name a few. What I would like to do, however, is briefly talk to Chinese security concerns about the US in as much as they play into Beijing’s opposition to NMD.

For the purposes of this short essay, we can capture Beijing’s security concerns about the US in two broad categories—US intentions toward China in general and US intentions toward Taiwan.

PRC PERCEPTIONS OF US INTENTIONS TOWARD CHINA IN GENERAL

For many, many years the basic, and unfortunate, long-term Chinese assessment of US objectives toward China is simply this: that the United States ultimately aims to “westernize” China and to “split” China. And anecdotal evidence suggests that the internal CCP assessment has not changed in recent years. As a result, the phrase “seeing the acorn, but imagining the oak tree” is aptly applied to official PRC assessments of US policies that even smack of being in contravention of Chinese interests.

With this approach to viewing the US, almost all American initiatives seem to be analyzed from the start from a worst possible case point of view. Indeed, in Chinese analyses most incidents, mishaps, and mistakes between Washington and Beijing tend to take on the characteristics of ominous strategic calculation on the part of the Americans. Conspiratorial explanations are never hard to find.

This analytic framework on the part of many (although clearly not all) Chinese analysts is in evidence time and again. It was in evidence during the mistaken US attack on the PRC Embassy in Belgrade (1999), it was in evidence during the EP-3 incident (2001), and it has even been evident attendant to world events that have not even involved the US. For example, there are some very serious PRC Government analysts who truly believe that US intelligence had forewarning of India’s nuclear

detonation in 1998 but chose not to share this with China before the fact, hence “proving” tacit US approval as part of a greater plan to contain China via India. One could go on and on. Small wonder that it is difficult to convince Beijing that NMD is not “really” aimed primarily at China.

This analytic bent is buttressed by two phenomena in the US. First, we are an open society—a “noisy democracy” as one of my colleagues at the CNA Corporation likes to put it. What this means is that our freedom of the press is such that there will be plenty of “evidence” available to Chinese analysts who want to believe the very worst of the United States from a Chinese-interests-point-of-view.⁸ One can only wonder how Chinese analytic counterparts are able to wade through so much “noise,” weigh the evidence, and come to empirical conclusions.⁹

The second phenomenon is that the US Government itself is very open in its policy predilections—transparent—and very frank in its own assessments. Therefore, US Government releases, papers, or documents will also tend to reinforce Chinese worst possible case analyses. For example, the most recent *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) released by the Pentagon in September 2001 will be read with great care in Beijing and the appropriate (?) conclusions will be drawn. This brings us back to the issue of current Chinese security concerns about the US.

As recently as the summer of 2001, predating the events of 911, the greater Chinese security analysis community was involved in another “major debate” that indicates continuing Chinese concern (and confusion) about US intentions. The three major questions revolved about the following:

- How should China assess the unfolding state of US-China relations?
- What “China policy” will the Bush Administration adopt? And,
- What are the prospects for future relations?

But the crux of the debate was the following question: “Has the US decided that China is its next enemy and that this will drive US policy toward China and the US’s larger security strategy in Asia?”

As was the case during the very significant debate on Chinese national security that took place in the wake of the errant bombing of the PRC Embassy in Belgrade (May 1999), a wide range of views

⁸ A year or so ago The RAND Corporation published a monograph on US policy toward China that suggested “conengagement” as the appropriate US policy toward Beijing. These types of unofficial documents tend to take on the characteristics of official US policy in some Chinese analytic circles.

⁹ Interestingly, after many years of change in the nature of the Chinese media—especially the explosion of media sources—US analysts are now confronted with the same analytic challenge their Chinese counterparts have endured—i.e., how to decide what is “opinion” and what is “official.” Like their Chinese counterparts, US analysts can have any preconceived notion about Chinese policy or intentions and find plenty of “evidence” in the media to support any analytic argument.

among Chinese security analysts on these questions was allegedly held. Moreover, as was also the case in 1999, analysts of like-minded opinion could be found crossing institutional and bureaucratic boundaries.

Although no final conclusions about US intentions toward China had been reached, many Chinese analysts were said to agree that the trends in US policies and actions toward China since the Bush administration took office had been “negative,” and there was a common list of data points that many cited as evidence of that negative trend. These included:

- The Bush campaign rhetoric portraying China as a “strategic competitor, not a strategic partner”
- The strengthening of US-Japan military relations (perceived to be directed at China)
- The “loud voices of the Blue Team” (so-called in the US) that label China as the next enemy
- The perception that the focus of the new US military strategy is shifting from Europe to Asia (perceived as directed against China)
- President Bush’s remarks in May 2001 about the defense of Taiwan (“Whatever it takes...”)
- Increasing arms sales to Taiwan and especially expanding military contacts with Taiwan (some Chinese analysts believe the US is moving toward a *de facto* military alliance with Taipei)
- The US reception of Lee Teng-hui
- The belief of some Chinese analysts that the US “pressured” Tokyo to allow Lee Teng-hui to visit Japan
- The US transit of Chen Shui-bian
- The “attitude of the Pentagon” toward military relations with China, not just since the EP-3 episode, but as a general proposition of “little interest”
- The US “attack” on human rights in China in Geneva
- The appointment of a State Department coordinator for Tibetan affairs and the Dalai Lama visit

- The general “anti-China” attitudes of some officials appointed to the new administration

And, of course, the Bush administration’s plans to move ahead with NMD which many perceive to be directed at China was part and parcel of the “evidence” that US policy was searching for a “new enemy” and that China was it.

Clearly, this “debate” took place before the events of September 11 and the Bush-Jiang meeting in Shanghai in October 2001. It is too early to tell how the US focus on Afghanistan and the presidential summit will or will not mitigate the Chinese views held previously. However, the very fact that such debates take place speaks volumes regardless of the judgments that result. Odds are that while the corps of Chinese analysts will be somewhat relieved that the (assumed) singular US focus on the “rise of China” as a priority security issue has faded somewhat as Washington deals with Afghanistan and the war on terrorism, the basic lens of distrust that fuels such debates will not fade too far into the background. Indeed, one suspects that Chinese analytic focus will be shifted to thinking through how the US campaign in Afghanistan will or will not play into US security policies vis-à-vis China.

CHINESE PERCEPTIONS OF US POLICY TOWARD TAIWAN

Finally, there is the all-important issue of Taiwan and Chinese perceptions of US security policy toward the island and the issue of unification. Here again, the judgment on trends coming from Beijing has not been, and is not, positive.

President Bush’s recent reiteration of the US “One China Policy” in Shanghai notwithstanding, many Chinese security analysts, especially from the military, assess that there has been a fundamental shift in the US approach to Taiwan—one that predates the accession of the Bush administration.

By early 1999, Chinese security specialists seemed to be in general agreement that there had been a “fundamental shift” in the attitude of “The Pentagon” toward China and the PLA relative to the preceding year (1998).

The Chinese analysis at the time held that whereas previously “The Pentagon” was a positive force for strategic cooperation with China within the US Government, it had now moved to the “right” and was edging closer to views held among the conservative political forces in the US that were arguing that China poses a potential threat to the US. More importantly, the Chinese assessed “The Pentagon” was moving closer to Taiwan. The following was seen as evidentiary:

- ***Tang Fei visit.*** The Chinese assessed that (former) Taiwan Chief of the General Staff Tang Fei received an exceptionally warm reception from the US defense establishment during his 1998 visit and was provided wide ranging access throughout the Pentagon. The Chinese held

that previously the Pentagon was cooler toward the Taiwan military, keeping it at arm's length.

- **TBMD.** The Chinese believed it was the Pentagon that had pushed Japan to participate in the US Theater Ballistic Missile Defense programs—a program, as is the case with NMD, the PLA and others in China views as aimed at them. But more to the point, analysts in Beijing assessed that the Pentagon was the driving force in arguing for sharing future TBMD systems with Taiwan.
- **Taiwan arms sales.** Chinese assessments at the time held that US sales of military hardware to Taiwan would increase in both “quantity and quality” and that the Pentagon was also in favor of this.

More disconcerting, some Chinese security analysts began to assess in 1999 that the US's fundamental security posture in the Taiwan Strait was also undergoing fundamental change as well. Whereas previously it was assessed by the Chinese that the basic posture of the US defense establishment was “detering conflict in the Taiwan Strait,” some began to argue that Washington had shifted to “preparing for conflict in the Taiwan Strait.”¹⁰ And clearly, various incidents, episodes, and US policy decisions since that time—especially arms sales to Taiwan—have not necessarily encouraged alternative analyses (which may be good or bad depending upon one's views). For example, the continued prospect of a future sale of advanced TBMD systems to Taiwan by the US is especially worrisome to Beijing. This is not because of the military capabilities inherent in the systems, but because the Chinese believe that the technology-sharing arrangements and training attendant to such sales will be the first steps toward a renewed military alliance—if not *de jure* then *de facto*.

Here too, the issue of NMD becomes embroiled in Chinese concerns about Taiwan. Some Chinese argue that US possession of NMD would complicate reunification on two counts. First, without a credible nuclear deterrent Taiwan might feel emboldened “to act recklessly” and “force” China to employ military force. (The assumption here is that the US NMD umbrella would “cover Taiwan”). Second, because US intervention in a Taiwan campaign is a PLA planning assumption, military planning for a hypothetical conventional campaign against Taiwan would be exponentially complicated because Beijing would again be constrained by the specter of “nuclear blackmail.” Clearly, it is difficult to gauge how widespread these arguments really are.

¹⁰ US press reports of alleged Pentagon “war games” involving China and the US over Taiwan is usually cited as one piece of evidence by Chinese interlocutors.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

By way of recapitulation, at the end of the day, there are three key reasons that Beijing is opposed to the US NMD program:

- First, and foremost, Beijing is concerned that the US NMD program will call into question the viability and credibility of its own nuclear forces.
- Second, Chinese distrust of US intentions toward the PRC over the long term are not mitigated by US assurances that the NMD program is not aimed at them.
- Third, Beijing is concerned that a US with both a “nuclear spear and a nuclear shield” will exponentially complicate the long-standing Chinese objective of reunification with Taiwan.

How the Chinese will choose to react to or adjust to a future US NMD system (or systems) is beyond the scope of this essay. But it should be clear in Beijing (and the Chinese being very pragmatic it likely *is* very clear in Beijing) that merely arguing against these systems will not preclude their development and fielding. For one thing, the current US administration came to office dedicated to fielding a NMD system. The questions now are not “should the US field NMD?” but “what kind and when?” Second, as a result of the events of September 11th there is now the real possibility that the US and Russia could reach some form of interim agreement on the ABM Treaty that might allow US programs to proceed without Washington having to abrogate the treaty unilaterally. More to follow on this count as President Putin visits Texas and Washington in the coming weeks.

The long term strategic concerns Beijing has about US intentions toward China or the defense of Taiwan will not go away any time soon or very easily. But as difficult as it seems to achieve given all that has gone on in US-China security relations beforehand, China’s best bet yet might be to involve itself in the process and seek reassurances from the US rather than to wish away the NMD program. This will require a stable, frank, and cooperative relationship between Washington and Beijing so that serious dialogue can take place.

The time may in fact be ripe for a new US-China approach to the NMD issue. For one thing, the events of 911 and the Bush-Jiang Shanghai meeting can lead to, and ought to lead to, a new level of US-China discourse on the NMD issue. Certainly, it appears that there has been some subtle change in US Government statements vis-à-vis China and NMD. Now, echoing pre-911 administration statements about seeking a “limited NMD system,” the US Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, in a recent *Far Eastern Economic Review* interview, directly assailed the Chinese argument that a future hypothetical US attack on China was more likely if Washington possesses NMD (the Chinese logic train cited earlier in this essay). But more interesting and potentially significant was a statement that seems to imply that the US and China might be able to reach a *modus vivendi* on NMD just as the US and Russia are

attempting. As reported in the article Mr. Wolfowitz stated, “I really don’t doubt we can reach a balance in which China feels secure and doesn’t threaten other people.”¹¹

Is this a serious feeler on the part of Washington to engage the Chinese on this important issue? Time will tell. But it is certain that if there is no attempt by Beijing to engage the US seriously on this issue, then it will relegate itself to merely reacting to US initiatives and US-Russian agreements rather than taking an active hand in shaping what it claims is a serious security concern for the Government of the People’s Republic of China.

¹¹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 November 2001. “Interview: Paul Wolfowitz – Of Missiles and Terrorism.”