

CHINESE PERSPECTIVES ON US BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE

A Report on the Stimson Center Fellowship in China (Fall 2001)

By

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Summary

US notice of impending abrogation of the ABM Treaty and the development of Ballistic Missile Defenses (BMD) has generated great concern in Beijing. China's small nuclear arsenal capable of striking the United States will be put in jeopardy, giving the United States a freer hand in Asian and worldwide affairs. Despite the growing cultural and economic ties between the two nations, BMD is adding tension to this very important bilateral relationship, with significant consequences for regional and global issues. With some form of a BMD system all but certain, China considers its next steps.

I. Introduction

The fall of 2001 was a time of intense international activity, and notably so for the US-China relationship. Following the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States, US and British military forces on October 7 retaliated against targets in Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, President Bush arrived in Shanghai for the annual APEC meeting. APEC's economic agenda was over-shadowed by the tense events in Afghanistan, and there was great hope among nations that cooperation and multilateralism would help redefine international relations. The

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relationship between the United States and China was one of the most important to be affected by these sudden, global changes.

The US-China relationship suffered greatly through the first nine months of 2001: President Bush took office calling for a strong Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) program while referring to China as a “Strategic Competitor”; American and Chinese-American scholars were imprisoned for espionage in China; and April saw the collision between the US Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese J-8 fighter that ended in the death of the Chinese pilot and the detention of the US flight crew. In September 2001, the United States released the Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) warning with regard to Asia that “a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region.”¹ This is largely understood to mean China. Beijing viewed the QDR language and the missile defense development as evidence that the United States considered it the next big enemy. It was a volatile year for a strained relationship, indeed.

With this in mind, I undertook research on one of the most important issues between these two nations: the US Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMD). Within the context of the rocky US-China relationship, this subject proved to be an excellent topic to research with Chinese scholars, journalists, and military officials. Research consisted of interviews with over 55 individuals in Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Nanjing. Additional feedback from lectures, presentations, and a December missile defense conference held at Fudan University also contributed to these findings.

In conducting this research, my primary interest was in China’s understanding of not only the capabilities and implications of missile defense, but of US intentions toward China. Importantly, I also sought to explore China’s possible responses to BMD, and its repercussions for the US-China relationship and other regional actors and issues. I hoped to gain some insight on the subtle differences of opinion and was surprised and interested to find greater variations than expected. Additionally, the degree of openness in the exchanges was unexpected considering China’s sensitivities to discussing national security issues. People were eager for dialogue and appreciative for the opportunity to exchange ideas with an American. One of the

¹ United States Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, September 30, 2001, p. 12.

lasting impressions I took with me was the dedication that many of these experts had for their subject. It was evident in their writing, conversations, and in their attention to detail. The dominant character of our dialogue and interaction was one of eagerness, cooperation, and respect.

II. *The Chinese Perspective*

China, Russia, and many other nations, including US European allies, have reacted negatively to US administration plans — under President Clinton and, subsequently, President Bush — to move forward with the development and eventual deployment of BMD. Advanced development and deployment of BMD requires US abrogation of the 1972 US-Soviet/Russian Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, long considered the cornerstone of nuclear arms control. On December 13, 2001, President Bush did, in fact, give the required six months' notice to Russia that the United States intended to withdraw from the ABM Treaty on June 13, 2002. Many Europeans, Chinese, Russians, and others feel that this will be destabilizing. China and Russia also fear that, with the United States apparently seeking absolute security and the domination of outer space, they will lose their nuclear deterrent capability.

Many of the Chinese interviewed did not reject BMD out of hand. Though virtually all of them consider it a threat, Chinese arms control experts, military officials, and journalists largely agreed that the United States certainly has a right to pursue its own means of defense. From their perspective, however, such a choice demonstrates arrogance accompanied by a lack of care for the worldwide repercussions from developing and deploying BMD, and flawed thinking for a focus on the least plausible threat to the United States. Like many international observers (including Americans), several Chinese pointed to the use of airliners to attack the United States as evidence that nations wishing to harm America have many alternatives to costly and technically difficult ballistic missile programs.

Chinese Understanding of the United States' Position

In considering the US position on ballistic missile threats, several interviewees acknowledged a potential *regional* threat from the so-called “rogue states,” but flatly rejected any possibility that

Iran, Iraq, or North Korea could threaten, much less attack, the United States (perhaps recognizing that China may itself lack a genuine deterrent capability). The Chinese assert that the rulers in these countries are acutely aware of US power and are determined to maintain control of their regimes. To threaten the United States could invite a preemptive strike, and if war broke out, then complete defeat or destruction of their nation.

Complicating the Chinese understanding of the US position is the inability to separate rhetoric from policy. Chinese experts are not always certain if US leaders are playing to the American public when they hear aggressive comments. This “domestic audience” phenomenon contributes to an overall lack of understanding of US intentions, which the Chinese hope to bridge through exchange and dialogue with Americans at all levels.

From China’s perspective, US Ballistic Missile Defense presents a number of threatening scenarios:

Regional Threat (United States, Taiwan)

China does not believe that the United States is building missile defense capabilities to protect itself from attacks by “rogue” states such as North Korea, Iran, or Iraq, but from China. Although some Chinese scholars agree that these other nations pose problems to varying degrees, they do not feel it is possible that any of them would ever launch a suicidal attack on the United States. Furthermore, they cannot see why the United States does not take a more pro-active approach in negotiating with these countries, or why the Bush administration appears to have abandoned this effort with North Korea. China sees the United States seeking even greater leverage over affairs in the Pacific region, though China’s deterrent force, they believe, is partly preventing the United States from achieving this goal. Nevertheless, the 1995 and 1996 Taiwan Straits crises left China feeling impotent in the face of US power.

Taiwan’s potential acquisition of advanced missile defense capabilities (e.g., US Navy Aegis and the US Army Patriot Advanced Capability-3) adds tension to the already sensitive issue of Taiwan’s status. Some scholars feel that advanced Theater Missile Defense (TMD) could encourage Taiwan to seek independence if it feels capable of thwarting a Chinese missile attack. On numerous occasions, I was reminded that the Taiwan issue was second to none in Mainland

foreign policy, and that, since it is simultaneously viewed as a domestic issue, BMD is perceived by Beijing as very hostile and disruptive.

Different opinions emerged regarding what *Theater* Missile Defense actually means for Taiwan. On the one hand, two or three scholars suggested that the closing time for China's Short Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBM) was so quick as to render Taiwan's TMD assets incapable of responding, and was, therefore, irrelevant. On the other hand, a few also commented that Chinese SRBMs were militarily insignificant, but were being deployed for psychological impact on a number of audiences. Still most believe that the United States strongly supports the status quo on Taiwan, and will not sell Taipei the highest-level TMD available (i.e., PAC-3 or Aegis)

Regional Threat (Korean Peninsula, Japan)

Even if one accepts the notion that US missile defense is focused on China and not North Korea, it is still easy to argue that the North Korean ballistic missile program poses a threat to the *region*. The United States wants South Korea to take part in a missile system, an effort viewed with extreme hostility by Pyongyang and with resistance in Seoul. This presents a destabilizing situation on the Korean peninsula, where China has obvious economic and political interests in maintaining regional stability. Currently, many North Koreans are crossing into China to escape dire economic conditions, and this would only increase in the event of a major crisis. Several Chinese scholars suggested that the United States seeks to maintain its presence in the Koreas as a hedge against China. They conclude that even in the event of a Korean rapprochement, the United States will attempt to maintain troops on the peninsula to influence China more than to "keep the peace."

Closer US cooperation with Japan also is largely seen as a threat to China, particularly US efforts to include Japan in TMD. Some Chinese thinkers see a future possibility of conflict with Japan. Japan may be included in any US NMD umbrella, severely limiting China's options in the event of conflict with Tokyo. Some interesting feedback during the Fellowship was the higher-than-expected level of distrust and antipathy toward Japan. This is based on Japan's refusal to formally apologize for its 19th and 20th century atrocities in China, Japan's plutonium stockpile, and, more recently, China's nervousness at the prospect of Japan's role in any missile

defense system, particularly in view of Japan's naval contribution to the US-led anti-terrorism effort in Afghanistan.

Regional Threat (South Asia Arms Race)

One potential response to US BMD is an increase in the Chinese nuclear arsenal (a detailed list of potential Chinese responses is reviewed in Section III). China and others (i.e., Pakistan) fear that if BMD is developed, it will have to accelerate the modernization of its missile force, setting off a regional nuclear arms race. The argument is that India will feel threatened by Chinese modernization, which will lead to an Indian augmentation. Pakistan would then counter India's development, with each nation building to counter the other. With Pakistani-Indian hostility unlikely to abate in the foreseeable future, this is not an improbable nor encouraging scenario.

Strategic Threat

China's perspective on missile defense is based largely on the fear that its small deterrent force, estimated at 18 to 24 inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), would be ineffective against a US defensive system. The US arsenal of roughly 7,000 warheads and the Russian arsenal of 6,000 warheads mark a clear distinction with the Chinese inventory. The Chinese fear development of BMD will also include the militarization and domination of space by the United States, putting Beijing at an even greater disadvantage by preventing any viable means to warn of a US launch, thereby limiting China's command and control capabilities, etc.

China has a *No First Use* policy with its nuclear weapons, and because the United States has no such policy, the Mainland feels its missiles are quite vulnerable. China fears that a US first strike would likely destroy most, if not all, of its ICBMs. Those missiles that might survive would have a very small chance of penetrating even a modest BMD system, leaving China unable to retaliate and susceptible to nuclear blackmail. [It is important to note that most of the Chinese I spoke with considered the notion of war with the United States very unlikely, but used this example as one way to frame the Chinese perspective].

Economic/Social Threat

Responding to the US missile defense system also threatens China's socio-economic health, something not often discussed in Western media. This issue is of paramount importance to the Chinese. China's national focus on stability and economic development could be derailed if excessive resources are diverted to defense. An economic crisis could threaten nationwide stability, a hard-fought and central goal of the Chinese leadership.

Control over the national agenda is often hotly contested behind closed doors. In response to the question of whether the experts felt the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was gaining additional influence in response to the perceived threat posed by US BMD, most replied no, indicating that the Chinese leadership was firmly in control of national priorities, with economic development and stability as the primary goal. Many respondents also noted that any increased influence enjoyed by the military over decision-making had already accrued as a result of the Belgrade embassy bombing and the Taiwan Straits incidents.

III. *China's Response to a US BMD System*

Much of the Fellowship research and discussion concerning US Ballistic Missile Defense focused on China's possible responses. The following are those that were most frequently cited in discussions of China's potential response to BMD. These options are focused primarily on increasing the size, sophistication, and survivability of the Chinese arsenal.

Increase the Arsenal. From China's perspective, the central threat posed by US BMD is that China's roughly 20 ICBMs will be no match for a US system they expect to have at least 250 launchers not to mention possible airborne and space-based lasers.² An obvious solution is to increase the Chinese arsenal to a level where it can survive a US strike with enough warheads to penetrate the US missile defense system. Some Chinese feel that the ability to strike the United States with even one warhead is a victory and that, after all, even such a small strike would amount to a total failure of the US BMD system. Additionally, Chinese efforts to

² The estimate of at least 250 launchers is based on the upper limit of the previous Clinton Administration's BMD development and deployment plan. For a description of this plan, see William J. Broad, "A Missile Defense with Limits: The ABCs of the Clinton Plan," *New York Times*, June 30, 2000.

modernize the storage of ICBMs to make them easier to launch are moving forward (as they have been for many years). This includes the development of solid-fuel missiles that are less vulnerable than the current liquid-fueled models, the fuel for which is kept separate until launch time.

Mobile Missiles. China has maintained a policy of “strategic ambiguity” with regard to its strategic arsenal due to its limited numbers of ICBMs. Avoiding transparency by concealing information on the numbers and locations of Chinese missiles is important to maintaining deterrence with a small arsenal. China may be seeking increased survivability by fielding a solid-fuel, road-mobile missile. This would increase Chinese confidence that in the event of a US first strike and the presence of missile defense, some Chinese missiles could survive to retaliate against the United States.

Decoys/Penetration Aids. Perhaps the cheapest and most effective countermeasures that China may employ against US BMD are penetration aids. The Chinese are keenly aware from press reports that recent US tests of ground-based and sea-based, hit-to-kill kinetic interceptors had difficulty in differentiating between warheads and decoys and were conducted under unrealistic conditions. The development of advanced countermeasures seems all but certain. Scholars and scientists from Shanghai’s Fudan University and Beijing’s Institute of Applied Physics and Computational Mathematics (IAPCM) demonstrated a very high degree of understanding on the issue of penetration aids and US BMD in general.

Multiple Independently Targeted Re-entry Vehicles (MIRV). Many arms control experts believe that China is developing the capability to add additional warheads to existing and future ICBMs.³ This issue arose publicly with the Wen Ho Lee case when it was alleged that Mr. Lee provided China with technical details on the US W-88 warhead, a miniaturized warhead that is used to MIRV launchers. This would enable China to introduce both decoys and additional warheads in the mid-course and terminal phases of the missile trajectory, creating greater difficulty in not only hitting the incoming warheads, but making the failure to do so much more devastating.

Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM). While submarines provide a relatively invulnerable strategic platform for the United States, China has yet to deploy a *long-range* SLBM capability. Even if this significant technical problem was solved, China would then face a large, lethal, and sophisticated force of US fast attack submarines, surface ships, and aircraft that would certainly nullify any Chinese threat under the waves.

Inaction

As previously noted, many in China feel that the United States views them as the primary future threat, and the rogue states as secondary. However, Chinese leaders and scholars widely see nuclear weapons as instruments that will never be used and serve only as a deterrent. Moreover, because the rogue states may never develop the ability to deter the United States, and China *does* have that ability, Beijing sees BMD aimed squarely at influencing Chinese decisions on regional and global issues.

But many Chinese are bewildered by US efforts to spend hundreds of billions of dollars to create a system that is unlikely to work against a threat that is unlikely to materialize, though some individuals did note that ballistic missiles were clearly a growing problem, one that the Chinese admittedly helped create. A few Chinese scholars said they do not view US BMD as a threat, but rather as a modern-day Maginot Line. One also stated a strong belief that US BMD is psychological warfare, used much as it was against the Soviet Union in its earlier iteration as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Some Chinese respondents, therefore, advocated doing little in response to United States BMD. These individuals feel that technical, political, and financial hurdles will keep the system from ever developing, and that China should not derail its own social and economic development in response to a non-threat. Other respondents see BMD as a *fait accompli*, and fail to see any effective Chinese response. They believe that missile defense will some day work, providing the United States with absolute security.

³ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "China: Nuclear Forces 2001," *Proliferation News and Resources*, available online at <http://www.ceip.org/files/nonprolif/numbers/china.asp>.

IV. BMD Repercussions for the US-China Relationship

Whether US BMD will eventually be deployed or not is secondary to its impact on current US-China relations. Little distinction is made in China between development and deployment, with many Chinese believing that the United States will use whatever it develops, and will not “limit” the system. The effort to test and deploy the system is having immediate and far-reaching effects on the relationship between Washington and Beijing.

Taiwan

Taiwan occupies a central place in Chinese policy. Many PRC scholars and officials suggested that if this issue were resolved, Beijing would have far less to fear from US BMD. Prospects for a rapid solution to Taiwan, though, are not on the horizon, and with a continuing US commitment to arm Taiwan, this will remain a central problem between China and the United States. Despite soaring economic integration between China and Taiwan, the level of belligerent rhetoric has risen. According to the majority of those interviewed, any acquisition of increased missile defense capabilities (i.e., Aegis/PAC-3) by Taiwan would ignite an already volatile situation.

Treaties

Chinese scholars also believe that US BMD development threatens more than China alone. Because the United States intends to abrogate the ABM Treaty, some Chinese feel that current and future arms control treaties will be weakened as a result. Many interview responses centered on the long-standing issue of proliferation. While some claim that China is doing all it can to keep corporations from selling missile-related equipment to other nations, others questioned whether China should cooperate on Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) provisions if the United States persists in threatening China with BMD while also arming Taiwan. Other treaties, such as the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), are stalled in part because of US BMD development and China’s interest in not wanting to limit production of plutonium needed for any arsenal increase. (This does not appear to be a key concern, however. FMCT was never raised unless I addressed it, and when I did, scant attention was paid to it.) One or two respondents noted that China is more focused on the effort to negotiate a treaty on

the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS), indicating that they held out greater concern for the militarization of space.

Terrorism Cooperation

The attacks of September 11, 2001 provided a unique opportunity for the United States and China to cooperate on an issue of global and bilateral importance. Chinese condemnation of the attacks was strong, while their support of the US effort in Afghanistan has been consistent, though tepid. Based on past Chinese reactions to US interventions, this amounted to a fairly strong endorsement of the war on terrorism. Many scholars and officials sprinkled their comments on BMD with references to the “new relationship” between the United States and China being built on cooperation in facing mutual threats, citing China’s dispatch of intelligence officers to meet with their US counterparts shortly after September 11 and in intelligence passed to the US Government.

It appears, however, that there is greater hope on the Chinese side as to the actual benefits to be derived from this cooperation. The United States has not been willing to acknowledge parity between Chinese Muslim unrest in Xinjiang Province and the concerted effort by al Qaeda to attack US interests. Ultimately, the larger, more fundamental issues between the United States and China will continue to define the bilateral relationship, leading most scholars and officials to expect only modest improvements.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Chinese are upbeat and hopeful for an overall improvement in relations with the United States. However, they are, by and large, confused and disappointed by the US posture toward China over the past six to seven years. To many Chinese, the Taiwan Straits incidents, the Belgrade embassy bombing (which many still believe was intentional), the Hainan Island aircraft collision, and the QDR language have firmly cemented the view that the United States is more of a rival and a threat than a cooperative friend. The fast-paced development of US missile defenses and their potential capability to nullify China’s arsenal strongly reinforces Chinese fears of US intentions.

The Chinese are anxious for increased dialogue with the United States and feel that there are excellent prospects to shape a new US-China relationship if greater contact is realized. Scholars reinforced the notion that China is not seeking military parity with the United States, that instead the overwhelming focus of the nation is economic development and social stability, while noting that China's military modernization is not only proportionate, but has been ongoing for years. This reality, they feel, has been overshadowed by flashpoints in the relationship.

Despite the very positive experience and impressions I gained during the Fellowship, there are aspects of Chinese policy that merit serious criticism and should not be overlooked. These criticisms were openly discussed and debated cordially. Especially in the area of WMD proliferation and freedom of expression, for example, China only hurts itself when it acts against widely accepted and reasonable international norms. The United States should keep up the pressure on these issues, but adopt an approach that considers Chinese sensitivities to publicly confronting them. Unfortunately, many US leaders push China into a defensive posture that causes them to dig in their heels. Working closely with a growing, influential China on issues of common interest in a mutually respectful and constructive manner will inevitably improve the chances of solving other problems. Expecting China to liberalize its political system as quickly as its economic system is unrealistic, but American pressure to do so should continue, albeit with improvements in style and manner.

Recommendations

The strongest recommendation I can offer after completing the Stimson Fellowship is to increase the amount and diversity of contact. It would be of tremendous benefit to boost contacts between Chinese and Americans, particularly individuals, organizations, political figures, and academic institutions that are traditionally suspicious of China. Even though I was open to hearing Chinese opinions and felt relatively well informed of China's progress, I was very surprised at what I saw and encountered on my first significant trip to China. China is much more open, engaging, and talented than most would predict. Incredibly, there are US legislators and others weighing in on US foreign policy who have yet to obtain their US passport or to visit China, but who continue to equate China with the Soviet Union through a

simple comparison of political ideology. Treating China like the successor to an expansionist, aggressive Soviet Union is not only inaccurate and absurd, but doing so is to America's economic and political disadvantage.

US officials should re-consider the level of respect it affords China. Only when a senior US leader or the president, himself, visits China is sufficient respect afforded, while day-to-day contacts and acknowledgment appear downgraded to levels below what the Chinese deserve as such an important actor in international affairs. This may be the strategy of some to withhold greater recognition of China's influence so as not to lend Beijing too much leverage, but it is only generating resentment. In a National Press Club address on March 5, 2002, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted that "neither nation gains from an adversarial relationship" and that, in fact, the United States should engage China on a deeper level and expect and prepare for the day when China will become a superpower.

Not surprisingly, China's feelings toward the United States alternate between great admiration and respect to equally great resentment and fear. Economic integration is removing some prickly political issues between the two countries, but the void is being filled with increasing concern for China's security. In an interview at Fudan University with Columbia University Professor Kenneth Waltz, the neo-realist Waltz commented on this phenomenon by asserting that economics are in fact the weaker variable in state-level relationships, believing that political and military issues will continue to dominate US-China relations.

On the surface, US Ballistic Missile Defense development appears to be an insoluble irritant in this relationship. A closer examination revealed that while outright mutual satisfaction of the issue is unlikely, there is substantial room for an increased level of understanding. It appears that the development of BMD will not be reversed — only the final makeup of the system remains to be seen. One leading Chinese missile defense expert commented that China would be "isolated" if it continues to oppose missile defense, with Russia and other nations having acquiesced to a determined United States. For China, the likely course will consist of accepting the inevitable and augmenting its military capabilities while viewing BMD as a difficult aspect of a larger, vital, and generally improving relationship with the United States. There is positive momentum amid the differences, and the opportunities to move forward should not be

missed. US interests thus lie in improving the ongoing dialogue with China. After all, China is one of the most important countries to the United States and to the world. Nothing short of a constructive relationship will benefit either nation.

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