

Theater Missile Offense?

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In modern East Asia, three letters can evoke more emotion in the minds of policy makers than their brevity would suggest: TMD. Theater Missile Defense (TMD) is the American answer to North Korea's long-range missile program, an integrated system of missile interceptors, radar arrays, and early-warning sensors designed to shoot down incoming warheads before they have a chance to do their damage. In a vacuum, it would seem the perfect solution to a potentially destabilizing development; however, East Asia is not a vacuum, and events on the Korean Peninsula have a way of pulling in a variety of actors from across the area. The American proposal to erect such a defense against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is not simply an American-Korean affair, but involves all the major powers in the region from Russia to Taiwan. Moreover, the issue not only concerns a large number of actors, but a broad range of issue areas as well. Alliance politics, technological capabilities, and military strategies overlap in the TMD issue in ways that few issues could. Moreover, TMD's impact is dynamic, driving events and relationships even before its deployment. For these reasons, Theater Missile Defense will continue to be a source of pronounced controversy in the Western Pacific.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF THEATER MISSILE DEFENSE

Before proceeding with this article, it is important to have an understanding of what Theater Missile Defense encompasses. Generally speaking, TMD is an integrated group of defensive systems designed to protect a limited area from ballistic missile attacks. The key difference between Theater Missile Defense and National Missile Defense is scope: National Missile Defense is designed to protect the entirety of the United States proper, while Theater Missile Defense is more limited. It is also a matter of perspective; for example, an American Theater Missile Defense system may be Japan's National Missile Defense system given the latter's smaller area. Nonetheless, the general term "Theater Missile Defense" incorporates a diverse number of el-

ements. Contrary to the rhetoric bandied about by the international community there is no one single TMD system.

TMD is actually collection of several different weapons systems, and although none have been deployed to the region nor even fully developed as of 2001, their impact is already apparent. In addition to the various sensors, radars, and satellites that comprise the warning systems, the currently envisioned system has 4 main subsystems: Navy Area Defense (NAD), Navy Theater Wide (NTW), Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3), and Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). PAC-3 and THAAD are ground-based systems while NTW and NAW are ship-based. These are the so-called "active missile defense" components of TMD, and are generally what are referred to when most politicians use the term "TMD." In actuality, however, active missile defense is only part of the TMD architecture. In addition to the aforementioned early warning systems, the U.S. Department of Defense incorporates passive missile defense, active missile defense, attack operations, and supporting command, control, communications, computers and intelligence measures (C⁴I) to prevent missiles from hitting their targets. Passive defenses include camouflaging, hardening, or otherwise protecting the targets from being targeted by missiles. Attack operations are allied strikes on forces before they can even launch their missiles. This includes everything from attacks on missile research facilities to the missile launchers themselves.¹ The systems are designed to be mutually reinforcing so that the combined effectiveness is greater than the sum of all the individual parts.

THE SHIELD AND THE SWORD

From an American perspective, TMD is a defensive system, and official U.S. statements reflect this belief. TMD, by their rationale, is designed to *protect* against a potentially devastating assault. There is nothing overtly threatening about this protection because unlike conventional military deployments, anti-missile batteries are not offensive in nature. They target missiles, not personnel or instal-

lations. Moreover, the Americans point out that the real threat that is driving the system's deployment is North Korea's ballistic missile program. However, it is not at all clear that TMD is definitively defensive in nature, a concern raised by the Chinese and Russians, among others. They see TMD as heralding a new age of American unilateralist policies, where American troops can travel about freely without fear of nuclear retaliation. The debate is extremely heated and very complex, and draws out many of the long-term concerns of all the major powers in the region.

On August 31, 1998 North Korea sent ripples through the American East Asian alliance network by launching a *Taepo-Dong II* missile over Japan ostensibly to put a satellite into orbit. The missile had three stages, and although it splashed down harmlessly into the Pacific, the effort demonstrated to the American intelligence community that the DPRK ballistic missile program was much further along than had been expected.² More importantly, the missile sent the Japanese Diet into a panic and led them to suspend payments to the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the implementing body of the 1994 Agreed Framework.³ The Diet feared a DPRK attack on the Japanese islands, and had no intention of supplying a "rogue state" with foreign aid; however, if the KEDO plan fell through, the DPRK would have little choice but to resume its nuclear program, which had the potential to make weapons-grade fissile material. Fortunately, the U.S. and the DPRK resolved their differences in a summit in Berlin, where the U.S. agreed to lift certain sanctions in return for the DPRK's promise to suspend its missile tests.

Although it had long avoided a commitment to cooperate with the United States on TMD, Japan acceded to just such an effort in 1998 precisely because of the North Korean ballistic missile threat. It is unclear at this time what contributions Japan can make to the project given the technical disparities that divide the Japanese and American defense industries. Nonetheless, Japan's agreement to share some of the TMD burden as is heralded by some as a new chapter in the Japanese American Security Alliance (JASA). In the 1980s, at the height of the U.S.-Japanese trade disputes, many prominent American politicians disparaged Japan's role in the JASA as merely free riding. In their eyes, Japan was using the American security guarantee to free up considerable resources to challenge the U.S. economically.

As it stands, however, Japan is severely constrained to provide substantial direct support to American defense initiatives. Article 9 of its Constitution "renounces war as a sovereign right," causing difficulties for politicians wishing for Japan to be a more active partner in the JASA. Furthermore, there is an unofficial 1% GDP ceiling on Japanese defense expenditures, and to exceed that limit is to invite considerable domestic unrest if the past is any indication of the future. In fact, it appears to some observers that any time Japan tries to play a more active role in the

alliance, domestic opposition in the Diet resists so forcefully that they emasculate the initiative.⁴ In many ways, joint development of TMD is an excellent way to bypass these constraints namely because it is not an overtly offensive system, and therefore not bound by Article 9. Joint development of TMD promises to change the nature of Japan's partnership with the United States, especially when combined with the new Japanese defense roles defined in the Security Guidelines Revision of 1998.

It is precisely this new activist Japanese role that concerns the Chinese. When Japan was demilitarized and weak, they viewed the JASA as rather positive on the whole. China saw the U.S. security guarantee as a cork in the bottle of Japanese militarism, but with all the talk of the changing relationship their support for JASA has turned into ambivalence. A resurgent Japan is threatening to China in ways that an American East Asian presence is not because of Japan's close geographic proximity. The Chinese memory of Japan's actions in the Second World War is very acute, a fact that comes up time and again in disputes over Japanese history books.⁵ Should Japan play an active role in TMD development, it would only confirm China's fears of a militarily resurgent Japan as a TMD shield maximizes the benefits of a nuclear arsenal.⁶

China worries about TMD for reasons besides a resurgent Japan. Its leadership claims that TMD weakens its nuclear deterrent by making it more difficult for its missiles to penetrate such a shield.⁷ This argument may be flawed, however, for two reasons: first, Japan currently possesses no nuclear weapons or even conventional weapons capable of sustained attacks outside the Japanese islands, so erecting a TMD over Japan would hardly hurt China's deterrent vis-à-vis Japan; second, a TMD system in Japan would not protect the continental U.S. from Chinese Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) so it would not hurt China's deterrent vis-à-vis the U.S. However, China's other concerns about TMD may be more justified. The currently envisioned TMD architecture utilizes two naval components, NAW and NTW, which could be rapidly relocated in the event of a crisis. The introduction of a mobile TMD system would be highly provocative to China because it could be readily shifted to defend the area around Taiwan in the event of a cross-straits crisis.⁸ Furthermore, Chinese and Russian diplomats both argue that American TMD deployments, along with the American transformation of NATO, are evidence of a current trend towards increased American unilateral actions, a dangerous sign in their eyes that threatens the current world order.⁹ Russia and China feel that deploying TMD undermines the current security architecture by demonstrating a complete disregard for international treaties such as the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which limited deployments of ABM systems in the United States and the USSR to only two sites. There are fears that erecting a TMD shield over

areas of American concern like the Korean Peninsula or Japan would be a first step in offensive action by the American military and its allies. For these reasons, both China and North Korea claim that TMD in East Asia will incite an arms race that would severely destabilize the region.¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

The perceptions of Theater Missile Defense range from a destabilizing, offensive weapons system to a stabilizing, defensive shield, and strategic thinking on both sides of the

East China Sea reflects this dichotomy. American and Japanese strategists hold to the system as the only means of staving off a North Korean missile salvo, while Chinese and North Korean leaders see it as yet another Western attempt to undermine China's security. The matter is complicated, wide-ranging, and above all, intense, making rational, constructive dialogue about TMD extremely difficult. Should the United States fail to address the concerns of the Chinese, the single-most influential actor in the area given its relationship to the DPRK, an Asian arms race is a very real possibility.

¹ United States Ballistic Missile Defense Organization, 1993 Report to Congress on the Theater Missile Defense Initiative (Washington: BMDO, 1993), 2-1.

² The 1995 U.S. Intelligence Estimate held that "no country, other than the major declared nuclear powers, will develop or otherwise acquire a ballistic missile in the next 15 years that could threaten the contiguous 48 states and Canada."

³ The 1994 Agreed Framework was the compromise deal between the United States and the DPRK which pledged to replace the DPRK's current reactors with 2 light water reactors and enough oil to offset the dismantled reactors in the meantime. The main problem in 1994 was that North Korea's nuclear program seemed to be on a trajectory that would leave them with enough plutonium to make a handful of bombs. The Agreed Framework was the American answer to this threat: by taking away the DPRK's capability to make plutonium, the U.S. was transforming a potentially threatening nuclear program into a civilian power source. To implement this plan, the U.S. formed the KEDO to raise the necessary funds, which were supplied by Japan and South Korea.

⁴ During the Gulf War, the Japanese response to the Iraqi crisis was grossly insufficient due to domestic uproar over the proposed deployment of even Japanese noncombatants. This forced the Kaifu cabinet to delay the measure until its successor government could pass the measure through the upper house. The actual troop deployment occurred two years after the initial proposal and was so hamstrung by parliamentary restrictions as to make the force almost useless. Japan was forced to rely on so-called "checkbook diplomacy," wherein Japan pays much of the costs of the actual conflict without risking its troops in action. Japan's contribution to the Gulf War effort was nonetheless substantial, standing at some \$13 Billion (U.S.), but checkbook diplomacy and troop commitments are very different things in the eyes of the international community. Edwin O. Reischauer, The Japanese Today – Change and Continuity, Enlarged Edition, ed. Marius B. Janson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1995), pp. 420-421

⁵ In 1982, China repeatedly criticized the Japanese Ministry of Education for a history book that downplayed Japan's actions in the Second World War, causing a considerable controversy both within Japan and the international community.

⁶ Although Japan does not currently possess a nuclear arsenal, some see Japan's advanced civilian nuclear energy program as a potential source for fissile material. Japan's ability to launch satellites is not so technically different from launching ballistic missiles, which would dramatically reduce the time required for Japan to develop a nuclear capability if it so desired. If a TMD shield were erected, there would be a strong political incentive to develop nuclear forces, because lower numbers of missiles would be necessary to ensure a survivable strike capability with a TMD shield. Michael J. Green, "Theater Missile Defense and Strategic Relations with the People's Republic of China" in Restructuring the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Toward a More Equal Partnership ed. Ralph A. Cossa (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1997), 113.

⁷ This argument is premised along the belief that the destructive power of nuclear weapons is so great that nuclear states will be deterred from using them on other nuclear states for fear of a retaliatory strike. It is the same Cold War argument for maintaining nuclear parity between the U.S. and USSR, namely that so long as a nuclear standoff existed, neither side would use their weapons for fear that the other would devastate them in response.

⁸ According to U.S. State Department Spokesman James Rubin, "[T]o the extent [the Chinese] expressed concern about Theater Missile Defense, it was in the context of Taiwan and not... for forward deployed troops." Source: James Rubin, "Briefing at Beijing International Club Hotel," *U.S. Department of State*, 1 March 1999, April 2000.

⁹ According to the joint statement issued by the Chinese and Russian Defense Ministers, "The essence of NATO's new strategic concept is to turn NATO into an interventionist and offensive political and military bloc. Its implementation will

seriously impact the existing norms of international relations, affect international security and stability, and shake the position of the United Nations. It is necessary to maintain a high degree of vigilance against this new strategic concept. Some countries are developing national and theater anti-missile defense systems. This action is not conducive to the international arms control and disarmament efforts, and it will cause a reversal in the nuclear disarmament trend and trigger a new arms race. It will also have a disruptive influence on the global and regional strategic balance and stability in the 21st century.” Source: “Chinese, Russian Defense Ministers Hold Talks, Sign Memorandum,” *Inside China Today*, January 2000.

¹⁰ In response to one missile defense test, the North Korean regime issued the following statement: “This [test] shows that U.S. policy to stifle North Korea has not in the least changed. We will build our defense capabilities with high vigilance against the perfidious acts of the U.S.” “N. Korea to Increase Defense Capabilities,” *Charlotte News and Observer*, 11 October 1999.

