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Ballistic Missile Defence and 21st Century Stability in International Relations

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BLEDDYN E. BOWEN, SEP 1 2009

Is Ballistic Missile Defence a Source of Stability or Instability for States in International Relations in the 21st Century?

The inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States in January 2009 brought forward the prospect that some of George W. Bush's administration's policies might be adjusted or even reversed to stabilise the international political stage. Not least of these policies is the American decision to extend a National Missile Defence (NMD) or Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) to the European continent and improvement of the existing defences on American soil. Although officially the American NMD is a defensive measure against 'rogue' states, this does not alleviate the fears that Russia and China have over the possible future application of this technology and its *potential* to undermine their nuclear deterrent. When referring to BMD, I am not referring to Theatre Missile Defence (TMD), even though the technology used is linked and interchangeable. BMD and NMD in this essay are synonymous and on a national and international strategic scale, designed to intercept medium-long range intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), primarily in the mid-course phase, and to protect the US homeland and that of its allies. I will revert to using the term National Missile Defence more often because I believe it more accurately portrays the US's intentions and to some extent, its capability, of protecting its entire national homeland from ballistic missile attack. This essay will focus primarily on possible consequences of NMD on the stability of American-Russian-Chinese relations. I consider these implications important, as the relations between these three states will map the global political landscape for the next generation or two. This essay determines the effect of NMD is primarily destabilising, however this has to be put in the wider context of relations between the US, China and Russia considering other foreign policy decisions and geopolitical circumstances. The destabilising effect of NMD is very much characterised by how it is used and what kind of policy it is a part of.

Nuclear challenges from emerging nuclear states such as Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) will of course be considered, as the threats from these states are the given primary reason for the development of American NMD. However, due to the scope of the possible effects of NMD, I will focus this essay on the possible effect that NMD will have on American relations with Russia and China. I will evaluate the destabilising effect that, I believe, American NMD will have on those relations. By destabilising, I define it by a rise in mutual fear and greater uncertainty about each state's intentions, coupled with a rise in armament, or an arms race. I would describe stability as maintenance of the status quo in the level of mutual fear and uncertainty and armaments. Stability does not inherently mean a reduction in arms. However, the importance and magnitude of the destabilisation caused by NMD is another matter entirely, and must also be considered – how big a role does NMD play in international politics and how much of an effect does NMD have on China and Russia's defence policies?

Pedigree and Present Capabilities

Ballistic Missile Defence has arisen in the past under the guise of Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). When looking at the SDI's contribution to US-Soviet relations in the early 1980s, it does not look encouraging for today's NMD. SDI was a contributing factor to the cooling of relations after Détente in the 1970s along with Reagan's

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tough rhetoric against an 'Evil Empire', coupled with a benign self-image. With other offensive (or perceived offensive) manoeuvres such as MIRVed missiles and the development of a new generation of nuclear weapons, it increased the Politburo's anxiety about US intentions and almost brought about nuclear Armageddon in October 1983[1]. As of 2009, there is no obvious sign of a return to the intense nuclear face-off of the Cold War anytime soon. However it is worth remembering that modern NMD is the material realisation of a Cold War concept, and it is to little surprise that NMD is often referred to as the 'Son of Star Wars'.

It is important to distinguish two characteristics of NMD's effect on stability (or instability) in international relations. There is a huge gap between current, actual NMD capabilities and the capabilities that Russia and China fear from NMD in future decades. Currently, at the advent of 2009, NMD technology is far from perfect, and has many technical hurdles to jump[2] before even a reasonable guarantee against a low level 'rogue' state missile attack is available. At present Russia and China acknowledge that current NMD positioning and technology will not seriously undermine their deterrent[3]. The Russian reaction against the principle of NMD was to position ICBMs in Kaliningrad (although this has been suspended by Dmitri Medvedev, possibly to test the ground with the new Obama Administration). In any case, Russia would not need to do much different to undermine NMD to what it would do in an all-out nuclear strike, Russia could easily overwhelm any defensive system. As for China, it has already demonstrated its ability to destroy satellites and henceforth the ability to seriously undermine the entire American military machine through neutralising its Global Positioning System (GPS). China would have the greatest concern about NMD because of its smaller nuclear arsenal and doubts over its survivability for a second strike[4], and China could not copy a Russian plan to overwhelm a NMD. Speculative future development of this technology rationally justifies the Russian and Chinese fears and countermeasures, but the fear of the US using this technology against them is rooted deep within human nature and can be considered as the default (rational) behaviour of states[5].

Security Dilemma and Destabilisation

In international relations it is not so much one state's intention towards another that matter, but how states perceive each other as they try to solve their dilemmas of interpretation[6]. US NMD may genuinely not be aimed at Russia and/or China, or any non-'rogue' state, but that does not mean that Russia and China see it that way. Even with technical incapability, and reassurance, that prevent the NMD from interfering with the Russian deterrent[7], the Russian leadership uses the European NMD placement as a bargaining tool with NATO and the USA. One speculation I may add here is that Medvedev could use the threat of NMD as a popular foreign policy tool to justify some of its actions. Also this does not dissuade China from pursuing technology that can undermine the NMD, namely anti-satellite ground-to-orbit missiles. However, an anti-satellite capability is very desirable regardless if it is specifically for anti-NMD reasons from China's point of view. As the US military machine is highly dependent on its GPS, the capability to neutralise GPS satellites is a very effective countermeasure to any US military action, and a powerful bargaining tool.

There are many speculations and actual responses that have accredited NMD with destabilising relations between the US, China and Russia. A realistic and worrying speculation is that NMD would make a nuclear attack on the US less costly and therefore more likely. The US could be tempted to push its adversary further than it would under a deterrent policy, as NMD should give the US adequate protection against the adversary's nuclear deterrent. NMD making a nuclear exchange more likely is a concern noted by James Russell and James Wirtz[8]. As for relations and coercive diplomacy with the likes of Iran and the DPRK, it is unlikely that NMD would embolden or weaken their military threats, as a retaliatory capability from the US is unmatched by any small state[9]. A more likely nuclear exchange will provoke greater arms procurements and mutual fear, creating instability. Another angle to consider on the NMD issue is that it could be an American response to a strengthening China. China could threaten American interests in South-east Asia. It has been argued that the US embracement of NMD is based on the assumption that a powerful China is certainly out to threaten its interests, and reflects a political realist style of thinking in the terms of a zero-sum game[10].

Possibility of NMD Cooperation and Trust-building

There is one glimmer of hope that BMD could be a stimulant for cooperation and mutual protection that would

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hopefully result in stability in American-Russian-Chinese relations, or perhaps a positive-sum game. The technical aspects of boost-phase interceptors impose a series of advantages and impediments that could facilitate cooperation[11]. The most useful and obvious advantages include greater technical feasibility, greater cost-effectiveness and its short range would not affect Russian and Chinese missile capabilities. Glaser and Fetter initially describes the necessity of a boost-phase interceptor to be based close to the target missile launch pads as a disadvantage, but later portrays it as an advantage. The necessity of placing interceptors on other sovereign states' turf requires a relatively high amount of trust in both sides. A boost-phase interceptor based in Vladivostok could counter any missile launch from the DPRK. This would provide mutual protection for Russia, the US, and the rest of Southeast Asia, alleviating the larger possibility of an arms race, particularly concerning Japanese fears. Also, naval deployment of boost-phase interceptors in the Persian Gulf would help contain a nuclear Iran.

This is not without its own issues, of course. Trust of this magnitude would be unprecedented. Would the US be willing to deploy some of its most advanced technology on Russian or any non-NATO soil? A lot of effort would be required through costly signalling to build trust between Russia and the US in this case, to prove one another's trustworthiness and genuine benign intent[12]. An action like this could potentially allow American defences to be held hostage by the state the interceptors are based in, or vice versa. Today's cooperation could become tomorrow's leverage. Realistically speaking, Glaser's and Fetter's hope in boost-phase technology cooperation is unlikely to be realised. Perhaps a bolder, more threatening DPRK and Iran could warrant cooperation among the US, Russia and China. But this is speculation at best, and there are no limits to speculative future world events. As relations stand, and how they seem to be developing, cooperation on the level that Glaser and Fetter suggest seems like fantasy. Russian-American cooperation on missile defences were considered in the past[13], but nothing concrete has amounted from those considerations.

European Divisions

To clarify and conclude the above argument, it seems that NMD has proven to be another divisive development of American foreign policy. While there is always the possibility of cooperation, it seems highly unlikely. NMD has proven to be a hot topic in Europe, with Medvedev reacting brashly to a system that does not undermine its deterrent. Even within NATO and the European Union (EU), NMD is a divisive issue. Not all member states from both organisations want an American missile shield. There is no consensus on the issue, and given the nature of divisiveness that is becoming more apparent in NATO operations in Afghanistan, it risks adding another factor to the breaking of the Alliance[14]. The potential of the destabilising effects from NMD are far-reaching, coupled with the economic plight of the eastern EU states and some hesitant elements in western members to foot the bill of recovery[15], instability both economically and politically is possible. In light of the wider economic dire straits facing virtually the entire globe, NMD might be stepping further away from the spotlight.

Uneasy Acceptance

The importance of NMD in foreign policy considerations is itself a matter of debate. While this essay believes NMD will dispense instability on the international stage, it is important to consider how large that decisively destabilising effect can be. Accompanied by the tough rhetoric of the Bush administration, the extent of the instability caused was greater than it could be under a more mildly-mannered Obama administration. Rather than creating the immediate and drastic souring of relations expected by some[16], American NMD has been accepted by Russia and China. Whether China is modernising its nuclear forces as a direct response to this is not certain[17]. Russia has accepted American withdrawal from the 1972 Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty and entrenchment of NMD, and China has moderated its rhetoric against US missile defences. The two states above have not radically altered their defence policies and nuclear strategies[18]. This is due to the acknowledgement that NMD will not affect the Type I deterrence relationship that exists between Russia, China and the US. Aaron Karp also argues that deterrence in itself is losing or has lost its importance, namely with un-deterrable foes that cannot be retaliated against. To clarify, below is a short summary of the three deterrence types illustrated by Karp:

Type I – Deterrence relationship with stable nuclear powers [i.e. China, Russia] remain largely unchanged since the end of the Cold War, and the reduction in tension has benefited stability, creating minimal need for NMD.

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Type II – Loose deterrence against unpredictable nuclear states [i.e. DPRK and Iran]. No guarantee of deterrent success, greater need for NMD. Retaliation is possible, but credible?

Type III – Deterrence against nuclear terrorists are ineffective and retaliation is impossible.[19]

I believe that the deterrence relationship between the five nuclear powers of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) should not change. Karp goes on to stress the diminishing importance and relevance of deterrence and a transfer of concern (albeit American concern) from Type I deterrence to Types II and III. While it is true that the nuclear threats from Types II and III should be protected against, it does not mean that Type I deterrence is any less valid or unimportant – Type I deterrence between the nuclear powers is still one of the best guarantees to prevent a major interstate war in future[20].

NMD as ‘icing on the cake’

Karp argues that Type II deterrence requires NMD. The value of NMD against states such as Iran and the DPRK are in question. NMD cannot provide protection to the US against short range sea-based missile attacks, which the DPRK could do[21]. Therefore the relative importance of NMD by itself once again is in question. The near-non-existence of inter-state deterrence in the 2002 US National Security Strategy is a testament to changed attitudes on deterrence. This left a dangerous post-Bush Doctrine precedent for Barack Obama – upsetting the deterrent equilibrium with Russia and China threatens greater instability, and NMD is seen symbolically as a destabilising factor. But in truth, G.W. Bush’s administration had undertaken many actions that have destabilised the global political landscape by taking a fiercely unilateralist doctrine, and NMD could be the icing on the cake. Least of all was the preventative war in Iraq. With America ready to infringe the internal sovereignty principle of a state, it could have encouraged greater ferocity in the Iranian and North Korean weapons programmes. Alongside the ‘Axis of Evil’ rhetoric, many other decisions taken by G.W. Bush and his administration had done more to destabilise, stall and reverse diplomatic efforts with the ‘rogue states’ than NMD could ever claim to. As for Russian and Chinese relations with the US, while it may have been a hot topic, it was only symbolic/ political in nature. Nothing will prevent Russian desires to place missiles in Kaliningrad. Perhaps Medvedev was playing to his audience (or his Prime Minister) by trumpeting Russian answers to American high-technology, refusing to allow someone to score a political point over Moscow. Some attitudes of igniting a Cold War with China and outspending it in defence procurement and research and development (an echo of some views as to how Washington “won” the Cold War against the USSR)[22] can be much more damaging than the NMD itself, but couple that rhetoric with NMD and the potential results are worrying. Relative foreign acceptance of American NMD can always be undermined by careless rhetoric and confrontational attitudes, which the Bush administration was no stranger to.

Conclusion

In the wider context of contemporary international relations, the destabilising effect that NMD will project is variable but not dominant. There are more pressing concerns facing Washington, Moscow and Beijing, and NMD should be treated with care so that it does not further destabilise international relations. Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State, has stressed the importance of good relations and economic co-ordination with China, taking precedence over “tensions”[23]. On the Russian front, issues in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) are on Medvedev’s priority list[24]. Perhaps NMD is being marginalised to some extent – events like the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 do more to affect relations and foreign policy planning than NMD[25]. Also, Russia is concerned about NATO expansion, and the Ukraine is another possible hotspot in the decade to come, even more so as Ukraine’s lease of Sevastopol port to the Russians comes to an end in 2017. As aforementioned, the destabilising effects of NMD are mitigated by the lack of protection it offers and its inability to neutralise Type-I deterrence. This is not to say it provides stability. NMD can be treated as a ‘white elephant’ for symbolic purposes. Even more so, NMD’s destabilisation is overshadowed in global terms by larger, more universal and pressing problems. “It’s the economy, stupid.”

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