

China, Missile Defense and Implication

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Three drivers for China's missile defense

Over time, China has developed its impressive missile program, ranging from short-range battlefield-level missiles, to medium-range theater-level missiles, and to intercontinental-range strategically-orientated missiles. This assures that China, under nearly all circumstances, would have a host of options to exercise effective missile retaliation once it is attacked and decided to launch counter effort. Depending upon the type of payload, China has already acquired various options to respond in kind and to exercise its own deterrent so as to achieve crisis prevention.

China has developed its missile program over time to meet its national security needs. On the one hand, it has a range of territorial disputes with nearly half of its neighbors - by now China still has territorial disputes with nine out of its twenty neighbors, on the land and at sea. On the other, China has its national unification unfulfilled, leaving it the only major power with such a challenge. Even worse, on the issue of territorial integrity, while the US "acknowledges" that Taiwan is a part of China, Washington has kept selling weapons to Taiwan per Taiwan Relations Act, an American public law established soon after the US switched official recognition to Beijing on January 1, 1979, so as assure that Taiwan would not be coerced under security pressure.

Therefore, China's historical mission to reintegrate with Taiwan and America's domestic legal obligation to defend Taiwan could clash. For the past 45 years since Beijing and Washington normalized their relations in 1979 the two countries have managed their difference by developing certain partnership: China needs the US assistance of economic modernization, while the US collaborated with China to counter Soviet expansionism at an earlier time, and Beijing's cooperation on various global governance issues such as anti-terrorism and spread of weapons of mass destruction. However, given the respective nature of realism and China's overall rise, it is hard to conceive that China will be satisfactory with the status quo and a virtually divided China across the Taiwan Strait.

While China was vehement in opposing the US missile defense at the Clinton time in the 1990s, no matter a Theater Missile Defense (TMD) or National Missile Defense (NMD), Beijing could be tempted to conceive its own missile defense system when it is able to afford it financially and technologically. Presently, it seems that the time is ripe for China to work on its own missile

defense, as it indeed is acquiring its financial capability, technological preparedness, let alone the security needs it has long faced.

China's missile defense: present and future

As aforementioned, China faces rivalry with some of its neighbors for territorial dispute, as well as its long-term strategic competition with America on its reunification with Taiwan. Therefore, it has needs for at least both point and area defense. Since China opened its door and renormalized relationship with the Soviet Union/Russia, Beijing has been able to access Moscow's missile defense equipment, such as S300 and S400. China may have carried out reverse engineering and now it is able to export its own version of theater missile defense gear, such as FD-2000. Turkey, a NATO member, would almost decide to order the FD-2000 system, among competition from PAC3 and S300, should the Pentagon not to intervene in 2014.

It is widely understood that China first conducted its ASAT test with no announcement on January 11, 2007. Not only its strategic intent of such a program, but also the debris thus generated in space, have warranted concerns of the US and other states. Later on, China publicized its mid-course missile defense exercise on January 11, 2010, and January 27, 2013. By now, China has no intent that it is working on its own missile defense systems, which may cover major metropolitan cities, in addition to providing theater-level area defense on the land and at sea.

As China goes space, a reasonable speculation is whether China will build its space component of missile defense. The technology that China developed through its ASAT test in 2007 could be surely used in missile defense program, with even more extension to laser beam as weapon, deployed on the ground or possibly in the space, against offensive missiles or space-based platform of the others.

For long time, China and Russia have put forward various documents at Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, attempting to initiate negotiation toward an international institution of the "Prevention of Arms Race in the Outer Space" (PAROS). However, the US has been uninterested in it. Washington commits to the peace use of space but doesn't view the military R&D in the space to be prohibited. The Pentagon has been of the view that "at a time of necessity, America shall cutoff all others' access to the space". Such notion of American freedom of action in the space has found no acceptance in Beijing and Moscow.

It was understood that when the US was frenzy in 1980s on a Star War type of missile defense structure, China had started its own research and experiment on the technicality of such space-based reentry vehicle, though it was hindered by financial challenge. Now that its financial and technical resource is much affluent, it is mere a political decision whether to compete in the space.

Therefore, no matter China uses the US unwillingness on the non-militarization of space as an excuse to justify its own space military program, or truly seeks to build up its space competence after failing to persuade America to impose self-restraint, China is catching up. This makes

cooperation on space non-weaponization too late. But at this stage, nations still can negotiate on curbing space militarization.

China's missile defense: impact on the US

Though both China and the US are believers of school of realism, their point of departure for missile defense is quite different. For the part of US, it aspires to build so-called "absolute security" under the banner of Pax Americana. Despite the fact that China has also enjoyed its "Chinese exceptionalism" complex, it has not developed nuclear weapons to reestablish a Chinese dominion in East Asia. Rather, China was expelled to develop nuclear weapons under multiple nuclear threats from the US in 1950s. So Beijing has conceived the legitimacy of its nuclear strategy due to its defensive nature. Similarly, it views its present limited missile defense in the same light – defensive solely to assure the effectiveness of its strategic retaliation.

If China will construct a truly limited missile defense for its political and population center, as well as for theater military purpose, Washington shall have no reason not to understand and accept. After all, all nations shall deserve limited missile defense at the missile age. But to avoid any offensive missile race, it will be desirable for China and the US to engage in strategic dialogue, so as not to enter Thucydides trap due to security dilemma. At a time of China's rise and the US President Donald Trump's push to "make America great again", the two countries have to be sensible for respective strategic sensitivity.

The THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) deployment in South Korea just offers an opposite case for such sensitivity. The China side insists that the THAAD radar detection has been excessive, which undermines strategic trust between China and the US as well as South Korea, playing into the hand of North Korea. Accordingly, China's ongoing missile defense program shall be carried out within a reasonable range, taking care of security balance across the Pacific.

China's missile defense: impact on Russia

Despite Russia's decline vis-à-vis the former Soviet Union's defense might, Moscow still enjoys a tremendous amount of strategic superiority over Beijing in terms of nuclear missile offense and defense. Given their current strategic partnership to balance the world, it is inconceivable that Russia would think that China's missile defense buildup has presented a challenge to Moscow's security interest already.

Beijing and Moscow partnered in Geneva in 1990s and 2000s on the notion of PAROS. The Kremlin is averse of the persistent US missile defense in Central Europe, and now in South Korea, as these systems undercut Russia's ballistic missile prowess. Therefore, for the sake of regional and global balance, China and Russia have been often on the same wavelength.

While Russia could understand China's rationale of limited missile defense, China still needs to manage its program with certain restraint, for instance, not to set up long-range radar facing

Russia, especially with no powerful interception missiles coupled. As they have completely resolved their territorial dispute, they shall enjoy their stable strategic partnership for long time.

China's missile defense: impact on India

India views China and Pakistan as its primary regional competitors. China's capacity rise doesn't bode well for realists in New Delhi. In its perspective, the nuclear and missile axis between Beijing and Islamabad projects shadow on India's future security. The ongoing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship of Chinese President Xi's Belt-and-Road Initiative, is much perceived as an intrusion into India's legitimate interest, as the Pakistan-controlled-Kashmir is where the CPEC has to cut through.

Strategically, as India has to develop nuclear weapons as a hedge, there is no reason why it would welcome China's missile defense, especially if such system will be deployed at its doorstep, or be introduced into Pakistan. Should that happen, a missile defense race might be unavoidable in that part of the world, which in turn will drive Pakistan to catch up.

India has already developed its medium and intermediate range of ballistic missile, with no rationale vis-à-vis the US and Pakistan. However, to place Beijing and Shanghai under its deterrence could be the only plausible justification. With China's development and deployment of missile defense, India shall build up its missile offense through more strategic systems and better platforms, as well as refined penetration aid. Finance and technology permitting, it may push its own missile defense. Given their increased mutual suspicion since Modi and Xi came to power, their strategic rivalry due to Chinese missile defense buildup would only enhance.

China's missile defense: impact on Pakistan

As China's "all weather strategic partner", Islamabad benefits from Beijing's rise. China's missile transfer to Pakistan in 1990s beefed up the latter's defense capacity, while downgrading China's own relations with the US. In fact, it is absolutely unlikely that China would refuse Pakistan's request for missile defense technology, since Beijing was willing to bid for such sale to Turkey.

Reportedly China has assisted Pakistan with air defense, after the episode that the US SEALs broke into Pakistan to arrest (and kill) Osama ben Laden, in 2011. China has transferred destroyers to Pakistan, equipped with ship-based limited missile defense. There is a full reason such defense partnership will continue in the years to come.

Then, probably India and Pakistan will not only engage in missile race, but missile defense race, though the latter is quite expensive and could be relatively easily neutralized. It looks that such a new form of zero-sum game will emerge, as various previous forms have unfolded. As played before, the US and/or Russia could be involved in a certain way, by offering their missile defense system to India or Pakistan, somehow with a new role to play.

To sum, at a time of missile spread, it is inconceivable that China would not engage in missile

defense buildup, especially when it is rising. Such buildup will bring about readjustment and realignment of relationship among major powers and project regional impact, in particular as far as China is concerned.