A Pause in Unilateralism?

Explaining the diplomatic challenges the U.S. national missile defense (NMD) program faces, President Bill Clinton put forward three principal strategic reasons for deciding not to deploy the system during his term: "the United States and Russia cannot reach agreement"; "we cannot secure the support of our allies"; and "the Chinese will respond to NMD by increasing their arsenal of nuclear weapons substantially with a corollary, inevitable impact in India and then in Pakistan."

While Clinton continued by saying that the next president may nevertheless decide to deploy, he added, "We can never afford to overlook the fact that the actions and reactions of others in this increasingly interdependent world do bear on our security."

This was a key comment, which indicated that, for the present at least, those at home and abroad who have been arguing against NMD because of its disruptive impact on arms control, non-proliferation, deterrence, stability, national security, and international cooperation have prevailed. Although the NMD debate is far from over, it is encouraging that the extreme reluctance of the allies, Russia, and China to acquiesce in the U.S. quest for missile defense has had an effect on U.S. policy.

One of the macro themes in foreign criticism has been that the NMD program, pursued despite a great deal of international consternation, represents a unilateralist trend in U.S. foreign policy. At an August conference of French ambassadors, Hubert Vedrine, France's foreign minister, urged his diplomatic corps to be attentive, as far as the United States was concerned, to the "rise of a sort of neo-unilateralism (which is the opposite of isolationism), a concept which results almost automatically from being a hyper-power. It calls into question the idea that the United States ought to negotiate with others, adversaries or allies."

Sha Zukang, China's top arms control official, made the point in somewhat less philosophic, more realist terms when speaking this March to a group of visiting Europeans: "The real motive of the United States [in pursuing NMD] is to grab the strategic high ground for the 21st century by taking advantage of its peerless economic and scientific power so as to break the existing global strategic balance and establish itself as the unrivalled hegemon." Not to put too fine a point on his critique, Sha said, "The United States will not be content with being the 'world leader.' Nothing less than 'world ruler' and substituting the existing collective security system with the Pax Americana will satisfy its real ambitions."

The French and the Chinese, at least, have noticed that the debate around NMD reflects a struggle for the soul of American foreign policy—a struggle between those who believe American security is best assured by interdependence, as President Clinton acknowledged, and those who believe that the United States should be free to make any decisions it wants to make on behalf of its own defense. The latter are the unilateralists who believe, as Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ) told a crowd at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in June, that the United States needs "a different approach to national security issues—an approach that begins with the premise that the U.S. must be able to act unilaterally in its own best interests...that we should work to secure peace and our safety first through our own strength."
What About Europe?

In addition to casting the United States in a unilateralist role, Washington's NMD plans have unified the Europeans on another point: they agree that it is crucial to avoid unilateral abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and that, if the treaty is modified, it must preserve its original aim of restricting defenses. The Europeans like the predictability and the structure that the ABM Treaty lends the overall strategic climate, and they think it unwise to upset this predictability and thereby provoke unnecessary responses by Russia or China.

One group of NATO allies—the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Canada—clearly has some equities in this discussion. Two of them are basing countries for current and future upgraded sensor systems, and the other is a close partner with the United States in the air and space defense of North America. Although they feel a great deal of pressure from the United States, they have made it clear that they are concerned about where the NMD program may take them, and they have not yet agreed to cooperate with the United States in actions that would abrogate the ABM Treaty. They do not want to pull the rug out from under U.S. missile defense plans, but by no means are they happy with them.

The French, the Germans, and others without joint-basing constraints have been freer to criticize. As Camille Grand has pointed out, the Europeans are concerned about the three "d's": decoupling, disarmament, and deterrence. Whenever the United States takes a security policy decision related to Europe, the Europeans tend to look at it through the optic of decoupling. For the Europeans, the question is whether that decision will in some way reduce the U.S. commitment to the defense of Europe. The sense among some Europeans, such as German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, is that NMD has the potential to differentiate the security of the United States from that of Europe to the detriment of the latter.

The Europeans are also concerned that NMD will undercut arms control and disarmament efforts. Some claim that the current NMD fever among U.S. political elites is an expression of contempt, or at best indifference, to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In pursuing NMD (and rejecting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty), the United States, they would argue, is giving the impression that it has abandoned the cooperative, interdependent approach to security threats created by these international arms control regimes. Some Europeans would go even further and add that NMD indicates the United States no longer has much confidence in deterrence or much interest in a diplomacy-first approach toward "states of proliferation concern."

Some Europeans are interested in theater missile defense (TMD) to protect their homelands. The Italians, for example, seldom miss the opportunity to remind interlocutors that theirs is "the first and only NATO country to experience a real missile attack, courtesy of Colonel Ghadhafi." They believe that the emphasis should be on TMD systems currently available to ward off attacks on U.S. allies, and not surprisingly, they would like to see more joint armament programs with the United States and other NATO allies, "an arena which is by far more difficult than intercepting a missile!"

There is one final twist to the saga of NMD and Europe: America's deafness on this issue is making some Europeans consider more seriously forging a common security and foreign policy. If America is dashing down the unilateralist trail, then the European Union (EU) may have to act in Europe's own best interests on security and defense matters. The likelihood of a common policy on NMD emerging from Europe should not be overestimated. Nonetheless, the NMD deferral comes at a time when France, which holds the EU presidency, is seeking a politically more unified Europe, while U.S. policy is immobilized until early next year. As Britain's Guardian newspaper pointed out immediately after the president's speech, Clinton has "made the world a safer place, at least for the five months until his successor takes over."

Where Is the Bear?
The Russians have been and appear to remain dead set against abetting U.S. efforts to subvert the ABM Treaty. With that understood, their reaction to the deferral of NMD has been divided. Some observers consider the postponement a major diplomatic victory for Russian policy and for President Vladimir Putin personally. Others believe that Clinton was primarily influenced by the failure of the last intercept test, the desire not to have to defend a deployment decision at the United Nations Millennium Summit, and the evident reluctance of the allies to support the program. (The last two were even alluded to by Putin in his official statement on the decision.) Both groups, however, recognize that NMD will continue to plague efforts at strategic cooperation under a Gore administration and will be even more of a problem in a Bush administration.

Despite Putin's official response to the decision and his declaration of readiness to "work actively with the United States...to ensure international security, including early progress toward agreements on further cuts of nuclear arsenals," the Russians do not seem prepared to negotiate major amendments to the ABM Treaty, nor do they seem to expect to conclude a START III agreement in the near future. Two weeks after the president's announcement, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov stated at the UN that while Russia is "ready to actively continue the process of nuclear disarmament and to move toward the conclusion of a START III treaty...this will only be feasible if the 1972 ABM Treaty remains intact."

Dealing with the United States on NMD has been extremely difficult, both for U.S. allies and potential adversaries, because the program—like the missiles it is supposed to intercept—is a moving target. The Clinton-Gore plan for 100-250 ground-based interceptors has been severely criticized both by NMD's domestic opponents and by its strongest supporters in Congress. In an April letter to President Clinton, 25 pro-NMD senators claimed that the proposed system fails "to permit the deployment of other promising missile defense technologies—including space-based sensors, sufficient numbers of ground-based radars, and additional interceptor basing modes, like Navy systems and the Airborne Laser."

In this environment, the best Russian negotiating stance has been not to negotiate at all but rather to continue to point out that NMD violates the basic intent of the ABM Treaty: to restrict the establishment of a defense of national territory or the base for such a defense. Russia has refused to move from this principled opposition because it understands that turning to detailed discussions would be the first step down a slippery slope to an unknown, unwanted, and unwelcome outcome.

Bring on the Hegemon

China's reaction to the president's announcement was muted: on September 2, a Foreign Ministry spokesman called the decision "rational" and expressed the hope that the United States would consult more with other countries on the issue. A few days later, another ministry spokesman, Sun Yuxi, said, "China is strongly opposed to this effort, and we urge the United States to heed the trend of the time and urges of the international community and give up this anti-missile system." Sun added that in the view of the Chinese government the system is "aimed at establishing a unipolar world."

For China, even a small number of NMD interceptors would have a substantial impact on its limited nuclear deterrent, which consists of only about 20 ICBMs. As Sha noted, "It is evident that the U.S. NMD will seriously undermine the effectiveness of China's limited nuclear capability from the first day of its deployment." Obviously, if the NMD program goes ahead, China will have to devote additional resources to upgrading its strategic weapons, expanding its modernization program, and developing sophisticated countermeasures.

In addition to these near-term challenges, the Chinese are convinced that in its pursuit of NMD the United States is laying the groundwork for the total militarization of space. At the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva, they have warned that many currently accepted commercial and military activities in space would become problematic if the United States deployed space-based components of an anti-ballistic missile system. Hu Xiaodi, China's ambassador to the CD, told the
closing session of the conference on September 21 that space will "become a battlefield for NMD." He went on to say that "the danger of weaponization and of an arms race in outer space is real." For Professor Gu Guoliang, a senior scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a five-year veteran of the CD, the goal of NMD is nothing less than "to achieve an absolute superiority in both offensive and defensive capabilities so that the United States can dominate the world, acting as it sees fit without any restraint from other countries."

Finally, China is concerned that advanced U.S. theater missile defense systems, particularly those that might be deployed to Japan or Taiwan, blur the line between the line between theater and national defenses and will far exceed the military requirements of the countries involved. A TMD capability, the Chinese claim, could lead to Japanese involvement in any major conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Moreover, a joint U.S.-Japanese TMD project would be exploited by those Japanese who want to remilitarize Japan. Concerning Taiwan, "Any TMD assistance or TMD protection provided by any country in any form to Taiwan is, by its nature, an open interference in China's internal affairs, which could only encourage the separatist forces in Taiwan to resist national reunification," Sha said.

We're All Agreed Then

There are three areas in which the allies, Russia, and China agree. First, there is much skepticism about the "rogue state" rationale for NMD. The Europeans find the U.S. reaction somewhat ludicrous, akin to an elephant being scared of a mouse, and the Chinese consider it no more than a pretext to deploy a defense that will neutralize their deterrent.

Second, there is a consensus that more emphasis should be placed on a diplomatic, as opposed to a military, approach when dealing with "states of proliferation concern." The example of the 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea, as well as the successful efforts to denuclearize Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, come immediately to mind.

Third, there is general agreement that more attention needs to be given to alternative means of controlling ballistic missile proliferation, including Russian ideas for a cooperative anti-missile program, French ideas for a prelaunch notification agreement, and general confidence-building measures that would allow states to distinguish between space-vehicle and ballistic missile programs. In any case, most of the "other nations" who have spoken on this issue find NMD to be the least attractive response to missile proliferation as well as the most disruptive to the strategic relationship among the nuclear-weapons capable countries.

Of the "other nations" concerned with NMD, the Chinese are the most adamantly opposed to both NMD and advanced TMD and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The Russians are also opposed to NMD unless it becomes a truly cooperative program (perhaps involving the Europeans as well as the United States) and until the United States can give its NMD program a definitive form and accept some serious constraints. Notwithstanding its opposition, Moscow's ability to forestall the NMD program and its options if efforts fail are quite limited. They clearly hope that European unease and the possible Chinese reaction will aid their case.

The Europeans, for their part, are not so naive as to believe the struggle over NMD is over, but the president's deferral has shown that their voice can have an impact and their criticism of the program will persist. Their unhappiness notwithstanding, many of the allies still fear that the deployment of some NMD hardware may be a political inevitability, although they recognize that the outcome of the U.S. elections—congressional as well as presidential—will be important in determining the extent and nature of that deployment. At a minimum, the Europeans hope that the next U.S. administration will negotiate "in good faith" with Russia over any changes to the ABM Treaty and not force the allies—the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Canada in particular—to become complicit in Washington's efforts to undermine the "cornerstone" of strategic stability.
Jack Mendelsohn is vice president and executive director of the Lawyers Alliance for World Security.

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