

## New Delhi's Dilemma

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The U.S. debate on NMD is taking place at a time of deteriorating relations among the three major world powers whose policies and actions have the greatest impact on Indian security. The Sino-U.S. and U.S.-Russian relationships have soured due to several disputes and conflicting interests. The issue of missile defense will further aggravate tensions between these powers which, in turn, will affect India's strategic options and interests.

With international politics and security in flux, U.S. NMD has introduced a disruptive new element. Although unipolarity has become stronger in the past decade, emerging rivalries in the world point to a new cold war in the offing, a reality likely to become clearer following a U.S. decision in favor of NMD.

Today, the global strategic environment is more competitive than ever. The revolution in military affairs (RMA) is producing new destructive capacities. In the past century, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missiles came to occupy a central military role. That is likely to remain the case in the foreseeable future. The growing attraction of missiles—which are much cheaper and easier to operate and maintain than manned bomber aircraft—flows from the fact that the attacking nation does not have to bring its forces in harm's way. As the disarmament process has stalled, missile defenses have been justified and encouraged. In the distant future, NMD could make the strategic environment even more competitive as missile-defense research yields technologies for offensive space-based weapons.

### **Policy Implications for India**

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Antiballistic missile (ABM) systems are theoretically of great interest to

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New Delhi. Few countries in the world confront the multitude of missile threats that India does. These threats stretch all around—from China in the north to the missile-armed foreign naval fleets in the Indian Ocean to Pakistan and Iran in the west. Further afield is Saudi Arabia, with its traditionally close military ties to Pakistan and its China-supplied, intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) that can reach India. Two of India's neighbors, Pakistan and Iran, startled the world by testing IRBMs in a space of three months in 1998.

Through China's new generation of solid-fueled, multiple-warhead missiles, however, India's largest neighbor is conducting the biggest expansion of missile capabilities anywhere in the world. The first of these new missiles, the Dongfeng (DF) 31, last tested in July 1999, can reach every corner of India but little of U.S. territory. This multiple-warhead, truck-mobile missile,<sup>1</sup> and China's other planned solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the DF-41, are "most destabilizing" weapon systems as they are precisely the kind of multiple-warhead, land-based missiles that START II seeks to eliminate.<sup>2</sup>

The growing proliferation and use of missiles carries serious implications for Indian security. First, missiles have come to symbolize power and coercion in international relations. They are useful not only to achieve military objectives but also to realize aims through political intimidation and coercion. Second, there is, unlike in the case of nuclear weapons, no international legal structure to control them and no taboo related to their use. Although nuclear weapons have not been employed for nearly 55 years, missiles are being used with increasing frequency. China used ballistic missile "tests" in 1996 as a means to intimidate and blackmail Taiwan. Its M-9 maneuvers against Taiwan were the first instance in history when ballistic missiles were employed for political warfare and blackmail in peacetime. In a span of less than eight months during 1998 and 1999, the United States fired with impunity cruise missiles at targets in Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yugoslavia. The low-flying, slower cruise missiles, unlike the much-faster ballistic missiles, strike with a high degree of accuracy.

Third, the 1999 U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air war against Yugoslavia, more than the 1991 Persian Gulf War, provided a vivid reminder of the high costs of being defenseless against a foe firing missiles and other high-tech, remotely fired conventional weapons. The RMA process is only increasing the costs of defenselessness. Had India not embarked on building a nuclear deterrent, it would have remained vulnerable to vindictive strikes by an adversary. As John Mearsheimer has said, "Nuclear weapons are an excellent deterrent against aggression, and India lives in a dangerous neighborhood."<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, only nations without the capability to hit back are falling victim

to missile strikes. In fact, these states are becoming guinea pigs for the testing of new missile systems. Iraq was turned into a testing ground for upgraded Tomahawks in 1996. The tests showed that not all the target-locating defects from the Gulf War had been purged. Two years later, another improved Tomahawk variant was field tested on Sudanese and Afghan targets. During the strikes on the hideouts of Afghanistan-based fugitive Osama bin Laden, however, a few stray Tomahawks landed on Pakistani territory, underlining the need for a still-better Tomahawk version.

So far, India has looked at only one way to deter missile terror and blackmail—a reliable missile-deterrent capability to ensure a proportional response. Without the capacity to effectively strike back with missiles, India will remain vulnerable to the type of blackmail China mounted against Taiwan or the kind of missile warfare waged by NATO against Yugoslavia. Since the best and only reliable method to defend against a missile

strike is to deter an attack from occurring in the first place, India has concentrated on building operational missile forces to ward off the growing range and intensity of threats. The lack of a missile-deterrent force had been the main deficiency in Indian defenses.

Before India succeeds in erecting a credible missile-deterrent force, it faces new issues relating to missile defenses. India will be directly affected by the larger Asian consequences of a U.S. deployment of theater missile defense (TMD) against short-range ballistic missiles and national missile defense (NMD), a system that will employ space-based sensors to track incoming ICBMs and have interceptor missiles and radars based on land.

India will be affected by NMD in three different ways.<sup>4</sup> First, it will trigger a new arms race in Asia, at the center of which would be China and Russia. Yet, India will be most affected by the response of China, with which it shares its longest border. China is likely to retort by sharply accelerating its already ambitious nuclear and missile modernization programs. The buildup will have a direct bearing on India's security. No other country is placed in as adverse a nuclear environment as India, with its two nuclear neighbors, China and Pakistan, engaged in close strategic collaboration. U.S. missile defenses can only make that environment more adverse to Indian security.

A major motivation for India's 1998 nuclear tests was the growing military asymmetry with China, compounded by Beijing's continuing covert nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan. Right after the first round of tests, Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spelled out those concerns in a letter to heads of government of the G-8 states: "We have an overt nuclear-weapons

**Missile defense could make the strategic environment even more competitive.**

state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962. To add to the distrust, that country has materially helped another neighbor of ours to become a covert nuclear-weapons state.” China bared its animosity toward India by responding menacingly to the tests, warning New Delhi of “serious consequences” and demanding global action to “stop” it from developing nuclear weapons. Official Chinese newspapers started attacking India with a vehemence reminiscent of the period leading to the 1962 Chinese invasion across the Himalayas.

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India has no real ally in a world in which most states of consequence are in economic and military alliances. Not only does India have to fend for itself, it faces a growing imbalance of power in Asia inimical to its long-term interests. At the center of this imbalance is an increasingly powerful and assertive China, whose rapid rise has been

accentuated by the decline of Russia and Japan. China, with its pursuit of naked power politics, has done everything possible to keep India contained, employing Pakistan as a surrogate and gaining a strategic foothold in Burma.

Any plan that can possibly limit China’s growing power and arrogance should aid Indian interests. NMD threatens to weaken China’s “minimal” nuclear deterrent, despite Defense Secretary William Cohen’s contention that it is aimed at the alleged rogue nations. So India, with its growing friendship with the United States, should not in principle be opposed to NMD. To see the Chinese rattled by U.S. missile defenses is surely an agreeable sight for India. The problem, however, is that Beijing’s Leninist rulers, thriving on a burgeoning trade surplus with Washington, will use NMD as a justification for going on a frenzied nuclear and missile buildup.

Second, India’s existing modest deterrent capabilities will be gravely undermined as China builds up its nuclear and missile armories. The Sino-Indian asymmetry will increase to the extent that New Delhi will be compelled to respond by diverting more of its scarce resources to new nuclear and missile development projects. An Indian ICBM program in that situation will become inevitable.

ICBMs are already an idiom of big-power status. To a country like India that aspires to be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, their attraction is strong. In a situation where China begins a major program to expand its ICBM arsenal,<sup>5</sup> India will have every incentive to acquire similar assets that play a primary role in power-projection strategies. In addition to intercontinental missile-strike capability, power-projection as-

sets also include a hardy naval force of indigenously-built submarines, instruments of precision strike in the form of cruise missiles, and space-based information systems. Missile defenses will put India on that path.

India's current focus is on building a minimal but credible nuclear deterrent based on survivable, second-strike assets. India's no-first-use policy (or retaliation-only nuclear posture) places it in a sitting-duck position, making second-strike assets essential. While supporting a nuclear-powered submarine program, India so far has not funded ICBM development, although it has demonstrated its latent capability through construction of civilian space launch vehicles.

India wishes to ensure that China's ongoing nuclear and missile modernization, as well as its reported theft of U.S. nuclear secrets, does not undercut its nuclear-deterrence posture. India also would like to ensure that Pakistan does not continue to match India in nuclear and missile technologies through the assistance Pakistan covertly receives from China. It is obvious that China is the root of the proliferation problem India faces. That problem will be greatly exacerbated when China responds to U.S. missile defenses, making strategic stability in larger southern Asia harder to achieve.

Third, China, once it begins to build more modern NMD-resistant systems, will have commercial motivations to recover some of the costs of its new buildup by transferring to Pakistan its older technologies. Beijing has repeatedly broken its assurances with impunity to halt clandestine strategic transfers to Islamabad. As a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) annual report states, "China has provided extensive support to Pakistan's WMD capabilities."<sup>6</sup> Beijing has found ingenious ways to proliferate, according to a Pentagon intelligence report, "on a consistent basis without technically breaking agreements with the [United States]."<sup>7</sup> One way is to help set up production facilities in Pakistan. Another is to employ North Korea as a conduit for transfers, as evidenced by Pakistan's Ghauri IRBM.<sup>8</sup>

The reported Chinese theft of advanced U.S. nuclear and missile blueprints has already set the stage for increased transfers of older technologies to Pakistan by Beijing. But as China builds newer systems to outwit missile defenses, commercial and strategic reasons are likely to further goad it to sell no-longer-needed technologies to Pakistan. Faced with the growing capabilities of its two hand-in-glove neighbors, India will be left with no option but to step up its indigenous efforts in the nuclear and missile fields.

## **Larger Ramifications**

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In addition to the more specific implications for its national security, India also has to be concerned about the likely larger ramifications of an early U.S.

decision to go ahead with NMD deployment. The change of the original 3+3 to a 3+5 NMD plan—three years of research and development up to 2000 to be followed by the prospective deployment of a land-based system over a five-year (instead of three-year) period—has not diminished international concerns. Indeed those concerns have been heightened in anticipation of a Clinton decision this summer to go ahead with deployment.

One cannot fault U.S. policymakers for looking at ways to meet future missile challenges. A prudent policy should always look ahead and anticipate threats. U.S. policymakers and lawmakers, however, have to carefully weigh the strategic benefits and costs of erecting ambitious missile defenses against hypothetical threats. Compounding matters is the manner in which the issue of national missile defenses has become entangled in U.S. national politics.

The political demand in the United States for ICBM defenses has to be traced back to the Clinton administration's initial "cry wolf" approach. The Clinton team spent its first years in office conjuring up all sorts of missile threats. The "rogue-states doctrine" came in handy to shield defense spending from deep cuts and fashion a military strategy aimed at concurrently waging and winning two major regional conflicts. That doctrine also has spawned the controversial counter-proliferation initiative, based on America's "duty" to deny other nations, through military means if necessary, the right to develop weapons it has in its own arsenal. Having whipped up national passions on supposed missile threats, the Clinton administration then began pouring cold water over the threat scenarios it had itself advanced. A National Intelligence Estimate suggested that tangible missile threats were still 15 years away. Then as Republican criticism mounted, the Clinton team has taken pains to deny it is downplaying threats by saying "the threat is here today."<sup>9</sup>

The irony is that after having first shifted from strategic to theater defenses, the Clinton administration is now reemphasizing defenses against long-range missiles. NMD has overtaken the earlier top priority, TMD, with the major research and development effort today focused on a strategic option originally conceived as a hedge against a future ICBM threat.

NMD's potential benefits could help strengthen and expand U.S.-led security arrangements. If NMD is seen to work, the United States could extend a "missile umbrella" to its allies the way it presently holds out a nuclear umbrella. As the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense Organization has stated, such a globally expansive missile defense system would help safeguard unipolarity, providing the impetus to other nations to enhance their military arrangements with the United States and come under its missile-defense umbrella.<sup>10</sup>

India, as a potential strategic partner of the United States, could avail itself of such benefits and reduce its burden of developing appropriate coun-

termeasures against a burgeoning Chinese missile might. While nations as far afield as Japan, Taiwan, and Israel express interest in defenses against a potential missile attack, India (with its multitude of missile threats from different directions) has more reason to seek cooperation in that field with the United States. In a world marked by rapid change, it is conceivable to think of a future India with its own nuclear force but under a U.S. strategic missile-defense umbrella.

The psychological benefits of missile defenses also should not be underrated. Although the 1991 Gulf War showed that defending against even unsophisticated short-range missiles is problematic, with the Patriots causing most of the civilian damage in attempts to intercept incoming Scuds, it also demonstrated the same Patriots' morale-boosting role. NMD will yield valuable psychological benefits against any major power that attempts to flex its nuclear muscles and impose its writ on any continent. The contention that NMD will have a destabilizing effect in Asia has to be seen against the already existing power disequilibrium in Asia.

The drawbacks of NMD, however, are equally compelling. Despite spending tens of billions of dollars, the United States is still encountering serious technical difficulties in developing a reliable protective system, even against theater ballistic missiles. Even if an NMD system were successfully developed and deployed, it could be frustrated by an adversary in different ways: by firing a barrage of missiles rather than one or two at a time, by concealing a nuclear warhead inside a mylar balloon and releasing dozens of decoy balloons, or by cooling the warhead's nose cone with liquid nitrogen to foil heat sensors. Defenses against medium- and long-range missiles, because of their faster speed, are technologically more challenging.

NMD will compel states already armed with a range of different missiles to build even more sophisticated missiles that can foil defenses of any kind. NMD reminds India that it faces the challenge of not only deterring regional missile threats but also catching up with fast-changing technologies. The emerging missile defenses mean that India will have to arm its ballistic missiles with decoys and other countermeasures, as Russia is doing with its new Topol-M and China is planning to do. With its fast-growing capabilities, China would seek to defeat any NMD system by saturating or fooling its defenses, as would Russia, which lacks the money to develop its own NMD. While China and Russia will go ahead with their countermeasures, India

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may be forced to seek U.S. help.

While U.S. research on futuristic space-based X-ray lasers continues, a covey of ground-based hit-to-kill interceptors, supported by a Space-Based Infrared System, will form the NMD system, whose deployment could demolish the central pillar of strategic stability—the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. NMD also raises the prospects of developing space-based weapons. Space-based platforms and other weapons such as antisatellite lasers could undermine strategic stability and global peace, even though they would ensure continued U.S. military preeminence.

NMD's biggest casualty, however, will be international arms control. China is already holding up the agenda of the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, including negotiations on a fissile-material cutoff treaty, by linking everything to U.S. missile defense plans. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia will be more assertive, although it will be more willing than Beijing to work out some honorable compromise with Washington on NMD. The bare fact, however, is that NMD will allow Washington to both deliver a nuclear punch and shield itself from counterattack. In the aftermath of a U.S. deployment decision, therefore, the already-stalled process of arms control and disarmament is likely to disintegrate.

On balance, India can take an unruffled, nonjudgmental view of any U.S. decision to go ahead with NMD deployment. After all, it is the sovereign right of every nation to defend its security by appropriate means. Nevertheless, the likely response of those states whose security will be directly affected, particularly China, will significantly affect India's interests. This is what India has to worry about. U.S. missile defenses will not threaten India's security. In fact, India could potentially seek to derive, in partnership with Washington, some benefits from such defenses. In due course, the action-reaction cycle triggered by missile defenses could drive India closer to the United States.

## Notes

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1. The DF-31 likely benefited from stolen U.S. secrets. James Risen and Jeff Gerth, "China Missile is Said to Use US Secrets," *International Herald Tribune*, May 15-16, 1999, 1.
2. Therese Delpech, "Nuclear Weapons and the 'New World Order': Early Warning for Asia?" *Survival* 40, no. 4 (winter 1998-99): 63.
3. John J. Mearsheimer, "India Needs the Bomb," *New York Times*, March 24, 2000.
4. Nearly all of these implications will also arise from a U.S. TMD deployment in Asia.
5. China has only about two dozen ICBMs at present, with most of its nuclear arsenal made up of short- and intermediate-range weapons of direct consequence to neighbors such as India.

6. "China Aiding Pakistan's Nuclear Program: CIA," Associated Press, July 23, 1998.
7. Bill Gertz, "China Still Shipping Arms Despite Pledges," *Washington Times*, April 15, 1999.
8. Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "DPRK-Pakistan Ghauri Missile Cooperation," Federation of American Scientists (FAS), p. 4.
9. "Defense Secretary Cohen on National Missile Defense Program," March 24, 2000, *Wireless File*, U.S. Government, Washington D.C., March 27, 2000.
10. *Space-Based Laser Programme*, <[www.fas.org/spp/starwars/program/sbl.htm](http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/program/sbl.htm)>.

