THE DAGGER AND THE SHIELD: THE BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENCE
AND SINO-US STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

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Abstrak
Menghadapi potensi ancaman serangan senjata rudal penuh massal dari rogue states, seperti Iran and Korea Utara, Amerika Serikat (AS) merespon dengan mendirikan program Pertahanan Rudal Balistik (BMD) untuk menembak jatuh rudal-rudal tersebut di angkasa. Akan tetapi, Republik Rakyat Cina (RRC) menganggap program BMD AS itu tidak hanya bertujuan untuk menghadapi rogue states, namun juga RRC. RRC menilai rudal dan senjata nuklir sebagai “belati” yang telah berhasil menjamin stabilitas internasional melalui penciptaan hubungan saling gentar (mutual deterrence) di antara kekuatan-kekuatan nuklir dunia. Sementara program BMD yang diibaratkan sebagai “perisai” dianggap hanya akan mendestabilisasi hubungan tersebut. Guna mengimbangi BMD AS, RRC akan meningkatkan jumlah dan kualitas rudal serta senjata nuklirnya hingga tetap kredibel dalam menjaga hubungan saling gentar dengan AS. Kondisi ini justru akan menciptakan lingkungan strategis internasional yang makin tidak stabil dan bahkan berpotensi memicu perlombaan senjata nuklir antara RRC dengan AS. Untuk mencegah kondisi tersebut, AS harus meyakinkan RRC bahwa program BMD hanya digunakan untuk menghadapi rogue states.

Kata kunci
Pertahanan Rudal Balistik (BMD), hubungan strategis Sino-AS, senjata penuh massal, mutual deterrence dan perlombaan senjata nuklir.

This essay examines the United States (US) initiative to deploy a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system and its implication on Sino-US strategic relationship. The US motivation to deploy BMD is aimed to increase its national security in the face of “rogue states” (i.e. Iran and North Korea) acquiring nuclear and ballistic missiles capability. However, how does this situation implicate China, for it is already suspicious of the BMD system as being directed against its nuclear deterrence? Jeffry Taliaferro argues that international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions. Taliaferro’s “defensive realism” thesis believes that in order...
to avoid generating more insecurity to other states, a state ought to generally pursue moderate strategies as the best route to security.\footnote{1} Under anarchy - the absence of overarching authority in the international system - a state uses many of the means to increase its own security which may decrease the security of other states. US decision to deploy BMD can be seen in this light, whereby BMD is the means for the US to increase its own security, but it makes other states, e.g. China, feel more insecure. Should the US insist, not only would China increase the number and sophistication of its nuclear weapons, but might also revise its current nuclear policy from emphasising only on strategic deterrence to include tactical war-fighting capabilities.

In terms of the logic of nuclear deterrence, P.M.S. Blackett and Albert Wohlstetter present compelling arguments. Blackett argues that for deterrence to work, a state should not have to engage in a nuclear arms race with its adversary, since no state wants to launch a nuclear first strike and risk nuclear retaliation, however limited it might be, from the adversary.\footnote{2} In two nuclear armed states, notwithstanding numerical nuclear imbalances between them, there is very little incentive for each to launch a first strike against the other. Blackett points out the impossibility of counterforce capability achieving nearly one-hundred percent accuracy.\footnote{3} Thus, an opponent might still be able to retaliate – and no leader is willing to run the risk of retaliation. His argument is diametrically opposed to Wohlstetter.\footnote{4} The latter argues that a numerical imbalance in favour of the opponent may put oneself in danger of a first strike. Thus, not only is first strike possible, but it is also desirable by an opponent as soon as it is technically and operationally feasible. For example, he has achieved numerical superiority in the number of warheads and delivery systems compared to one’s own, superb intelligence of one’s nuclear deployment whereabouts (e.g., missile silos, strategic bombers, command and control nodes), and the cost-and-benefit estimate of a first strike favours that of the opponent. Hence, deterrence is not dispensable...It would be extraordinarily risky for one side not to attempt to destroy the other, or to delay doing so, since it not only can emerge unscathed by striking first but this is the sole way it can reasonably hope to emerge at all.\footnote{5}

Based on the above statement, Wohlstetter implies that it would be in one’s own detriment not to launch a first strike once the condition for such presents itself. How can these arguments be made within the context of BMD and Sino-US relations? This essay addresses this question as follows. First, it addresses the Sino-US strategic relationship. Washington’s decision to deploy BMD may be part and parcel of its...
pursuit of national security made more precarious by the so-called “rogue states” acquiring ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities, but this is not what Beijing sees. For Beijing, this is Washington’s attempt to increase security whilst degrading China’s own. Second, it examines China’s nuclear policy as seen from Blackettian and Wohlstetterian prisms. It argues that China follows a Blackettian logic in its “minimum deterrence” nuclear policy. However, this policy is also regarded as being dynamic and flexible. Third, it assesses China’s possible responses towards a BMD deployment. Washington’s persistent move towards a BMD capability increases Beijing’s own insecurity since it would render the latter nuclear deterrent capability ineffective. As such, this may prompt China to alter its nuclear deterrence from what currently resembles more that of Blackettian logic towards a Wohlstetterian one. Finally, it concludes that the US must reassure China that its BMD system is not bent on increasing China’s sense of insecurity through engagement in “costly signalling” ways.

**The Sino-US Strategic Relationship**

In a nutshell, Sino-US strategic relationship can be said as heading towards more competition. Obviously, the US sees China as a “peer competitor” more than a trustworthy partner and thus, China would represent “a most serious threat” to the US. Competition, however, should not be misconstrued as conflict. Rather, there would likely be more disagreement on how China and the US view each other and how they view the world. Whether such disagreement might erupt into a conflict or war is a different matter altogether and related to how they can best manage this disagreement in order to maintain stability. For Michael May, stability does not mean that the relation is static (which it cannot be), but that, when faced with change and the accidents of history, it tends to return to peace rather than degenerate into war. “Stability is measured,” May notes, “by the ability to deal with change and disorder without catastrophe.” Further, May explains five factors that influence this stability, namely the relative status of both military forces, geography, alliances and other relationships, domestic perceptions of the relationship, and economic relationship – all of which does indicate ingredients for a more unstable relations, but thus far, these ingredients do not yet constitute a recipe for conflict. Simplifying May’s analysis, this essay takes two prisms – military-strategic (status of forces, geography, and alliances) and socio-economic (domestic perceptions and economic relationship) – to broadly explore the current Sino-US strategic relationship.
Military-strategic dimension of the relationship is affected by, among others, three inter-related major issues, namely Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Washington’s regional network of military alliances. The most contentious issue between Washington and Beijing remains over Taiwan. The US has yet to cease its commitment on the Taiwan Relations Act which authorises US military assistance for Taipei. On January 2010, US President Barack Obama “notified the US Congress of its intent to sell $6.4 billion worth of arms to Taiwan..., including PAC-3 missiles, Black Hawk helicopters, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, mine-hunting ships and fighter jet communications systems.” Beijing responded by ceasing all military exchanges and vice-ministerial-level consultations international security, arms control and non-proliferation issues with Washington. However, one report notes that Beijing’s response was “more bark than bite” due to very limited extent of the response – cooperation with the US on international and regional issues has not been severely affected and no US companies dealing with the Taiwan military aid were given sanction by Beijing.10

Whilst the Taiwan issue remains unresolved, the situation in the South China Sea looks no less contentious. The South China Sea is vital for China’s shipments of oil and natural gas to satisfy its rapidly increasing demand for energy, 80 % of which transits this strategic waterway. Other regional states, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines expressed concerns that China was more aggressively defending its territorial claims in the South China Sea in violation of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct. This “vaguely worded” and “ineffective” document clearly did little to stop Beijing from deploying the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in exercises in the South China Sea in July 2010 “which alarmed regional states.”11 Later on, the US State Department officials began to refer the South China Sea as China’s “core interest” in March 2010 and it was in the US “national interest” to see the dispute be peacefully resolved.12 In response, China’s foreign minister lambasted at the US by saying that Beijing opposed any attempt to “internationalize” the issue.13 Finally, China is also becoming worrier of US network of military alliances and regional force deployment that seems aimed toward containing China’s rise and influence. Beijing is concerned over Washington’s bid for Japan to play a more active role in regional and global security. The central issue for China regarding the US-Japan military alliance is the deployment of a Ballistic Missile Defence. An upper-tier BMD system jointly deployed by the two countries in the name of protecting allies and overseas troops
could readily be turned into a BMD system to offset the mainland missile strikes against Taiwan.\textsuperscript{14} The Indo-US nuclear deal also alarms Beijing. As a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Beijing vehemently opposed the sale of US nuclear technology to India, a non-member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.\textsuperscript{15} Such manoeuvre by Washington led Beijing to think that the former is indeed on the course of containing the latter, flanked by Japan on the east and India on the south.

The socio-economic dimension exhibits no less friction. Despite both states are mutually interdependent in terms of economy and trade, disagreements over these issues are neither scarce nor abated. Friction in this dimension reached its “zenith” in early 2010 with both countries “clashed on numerous occasions within the World Trade Organisation over duties imposed by each in retaliation for perceived protectionism.”\textsuperscript{16} Regarding financial issues, the US Treasury Department is appalled by Chinese currency policy of undervaluing the renminbi to boost export, thus describing Beijing as a “currency manipulator.” Responding to this remark, Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, accused Washington “of practising protectionism by artificially undervaluing the dollar.” In terms of social interactions, people-to-people contacts are vibrant, but perceptions are somewhat ambiguous. In the US, “even moderate to liberal domestic...opinion views China as a future rival, if not a present one, and is on the whole suspicious of the Chinese form of government and intentions.” Only a handful groups harbour a more benign view towards Beijing, but the influence of these groups are limited only to “business rather than political matters.”\textsuperscript{17} As such, they are not in charge over the course of US strategic policy towards China.

With these issues in mind, the deployment of BMD by Washington will further fracture the fragile relations marred by numerous bones of contention. Beijing would undoubtedly construe the US as heading toward a collision course with China. To what extent BMD would shatter the relations depend entirely on the US intent on whom the BMD will be aimed against. For the US, the debate is still ongoing on whether BMD is aimed solely to rogue states, i.e. Iran and North Korea, or to include Russia and China.\textsuperscript{18} However, for China, the BMD plan already sent a loud and clear message: Washington is feeling insecure not only from rogue states, but also from China. This insecurity led the US to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and develop a missile defence capability that could potentially shatter the strategic balance which hitherto has been keeping the lid on a possible Sino-US nuclear and missile arms race. Thus, it should come with no surprise, if China would revise its current nuclear
policy emphasising on a small and limited number of nuclear weapons in favour of a larger and modernised one.

**China’s Nuclear Policy**

China’s nuclear policy rests on two main principles, namely minimum deterrence and no-first-use (NFU) policy. China uses the word “policy” instead of “doctrine” to emphasize the political utility of nuclear weapons. This makes China different from the other four nuclear powers in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), namely Britain, France, Russia, and the US. For the four states, nuclear weapons are not the last resort solely for the purpose of deterrence, but they are also embedded with war-fighting capabilities. The case is different with China. Chu and Yu argue that China has not seriously sought to offensively use its nuclear weapons for two reasons. First, China “would be less vulnerable than other countries in the event of a nuclear war...[since] China is a developing country with a massive population scattered across a vast territory.” Destruction of Beijing, or even Shanghai, would not shatter the country’s will and capacity to fight to the end. Second, China embraces a defensive nuclear strategy in which China relies more on manpower and its large territory in a protracted “people’s war” without using nuclear weapons. Thus, they believe that for China, nuclear weapon “has been and continue to be limited and partial.”

Within this context lies the concept of minimum deterrence. Minimum deterrence puts China to maintain only “a small number of missiles...deployed in a pattern designed to ensure that if attacked first, the country would still be able to inflict unacceptable damage on its opponent.” Defined more precisely, it constitutes the “minimum capability” to deter stronger powers from using nuclear and large-scale conventional forces against China, primarily on deterring the US from intervening in a conflict across the Taiwan Strait and preventing an American attack on Chinese soil. It runs parallel to the Blackettian logic which argues that small number of nuclear arsenals is enough to deter a nuclear armed opponent. Thus,

> Chinese leaders and strategists believe that the country does not need a large nuclear arsenal comparable to that of the US and Russia; they adhere to the belief that it is not necessary to be able to destroy the enemy a hundred times if you can destroy it once.

The second principle of China’s nuclear policy is related to the first. Since China maintains only a minimum deterrence, nuclear weapons are used only for
retaliation if any states strike the first nuclear attack against China. China’s 2010 Defense White Paper posits that “China remains committed to the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons, pursues a self-defensive nuclear strategy, and will never enter into a nuclear arms race with any other country.”25 As such, China puts more emphasis on improving its second-strike or retaliatory capability through the development of a nuclear triad, namely land-, sea-, and air-based nuclear delivery systems. Among these three, the most reliable by far is land-based nuclear missiles. The other two are relatively less developed and less reliable.26 For example, China “has no experience in managing a [ballistic missile submarine] SSBN fleet that performs strategic patrols with live nuclear warheads mated to missiles.”27

The BMD and China’s Possible Responses

In general, there is no doubt that BMD deployment will elicit a military response from China. Beijing views such weapon, “no matter how limited it might be, would no doubt reduce the effectiveness of China’s deterrence against US nuclear use.”28 According to China’s Blackettian logic, nuclear weapons promote stability in which defence is favoured over the offense, thus negating any incentive for aggression or a first strike. Meanwhile, missile defence, regardless of its name, constitutes an offensive capability since it would shatter the effectiveness of nuclear weapons as the primary means of deterrence. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that BMD constitutes a very defensive shield, [but] when used against the only flying dagger [i.e. nuclear weapons] the opponent throws at it while taking the deadly blow, would be very offensive in nature. We all know the famous paradoxical logic in deterrence relations: nuclear force that is to be used as a last resort against enemy cities is defensive in nature and stabilizing in function, while a leakproof umbrella against nuclear attack is offensive in nature and destabilizing.29

BMD deployment could shift China’s “Blackettian” nuclear policy towards a “Wohlstetterian” one. In effect, not only would China attempt to achieve a numerical nuclear parity with Washington’s arsenals, but also maintain a significant number capable of overwhelming BMD interceptors. This move is to ensure that Beijing remains in possession of assured retaliatory capability against the US.

Many studies have assessed China’s possible responses to the US BMD system. They argue that China will increase its nuclear weapons in numbers and quality in the face of US BMD deployment. However, they differ on the extent of China’s response. Moderates view that China would only respond by increasing its nuclear warheads
similar to the number of US BMD interceptors, leaving small numbers to penetrate the
missile defence systems. Chinese military planners may make a worst-case
assumption of 100% effectiveness of US missile interceptors and prepare to face the
fully deployed BMD system, which may have 250 interceptors. Thus, the number of
Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) China fields might possible be expanded
tenfold or more. In addition, China might also increase the pre- and post-launch
survivability of its ICBMs by “using camouflaged, hardened silos; and developing
road-, rail-, and barge-mobile ICBMs” or deploying decoys and other
countermeasures. As a consequence, China might reconsider its participation in
multilateral nuclear arms control treaties in order to expand its nuclear arsenals in the
face of a BMD deployment. This might involve Beijing’s withdrawal from the Fissile
Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) since missile defence and FMCT are “inextricably
linked, because China could not afford to end the production of both highly enriched
uranium and plutonium for weapons if it needed this fissile material to expand its
nuclear arsenal in response to US deployment of missile defenses.”

The second school of thought holds a bleaker view. Not only would China
increase its nuclear missile force capability, but it might reconsider or change its
current NFU policy in favour of “launch on warning.” Jia Qingguo argues that since
the other four permanent members of UNSC does not adhere to NFU policy; China’s
adherence to it would only place it “in a disadvantaged position.” As such, “it is time
for China to change that policy so as to best defend China’s security interests.”
However, China’s concern over NFU is not limited to its self-perceived naïveté vis-a-vis
other permanent UNSC members. Other strategic and operational considerations
are now being contemplated by Beijing that makes NFU ambiguous. For example,
China “would likely begin a nuclear counter-attack of some sort”, if the US would
strike its “vital nuclear command and control node” since “it would be interpreted as a
first strike on its strategic forces.” Another possibility might involve the Taiwan
contingency in which Beijing would “lower the nuclear threshold to deter intervention
in a Taiwan crisis or conflict.” NFU policy, like minimum deterrence, is dynamic and
flexible, and would likely be adjusted according to the operational realities once a
conflict over Taiwan has begun. Indeed, “China reserves the right to make various
caveats to NFU, thus declaratorily setting the stage for actual use.” With the
deployment of BMD, the Taiwan contingency would become more precarious.
Deriving from both schools of thought, two classifications can be made regarding China’s possible responses to BMD. First, Beijing would possibly react to BMD with improvements in active and passive defence for its existing nuclear missile force. The former refers to the ability to increase missile penetration aids against thick-layered BMD. This can be done through improvement in post-launch survivability, such as by deploying countermeasures and salvo launch. Most countermeasures would be decoys to confuse BMD interceptors from distinguishing between unarmed missiles (also known as balloons) and missiles with warheads. There are two major decoy variants. One is the “saturation” option designed to overwhelm midcourse or terminal defences with balloons. “Saturation” could also mean salvo launch, which incorporates various types of missiles in synchronized launches from a wide range of azimuths in order to suppress active missile defenses and associated battle management systems. The other is deception decoys (such as fast-burn motors and boost-phase manoeuvring), which are designed to evade interceptor vehicles by complicating predictions of flight trajectory. Apart from countermeasures, China could possibly equip “medium-range ballistic missiles with manoeuvring re-entry vehicles (MaRVs) and terminal seekers” which “allow the PLA to threaten targets such as airbases, command and control centers, and even US aircraft carriers.” MaRV is capable of “independently altering their trajectories even in the terminal phase.” There have been reports that the Chinese DF-21D missile is already MaRV-capable, enabling it to “make final trajectory corrections before it re-enters the atmosphere. Other reports have suggested that the MaRV would release submunitions to increase the probability of scoring a hit.” Beijing has also developed a “cold launch” technique which delays the missile’s engine ignition and thus reducing possible detection by boost-phase BMD system. New attempts have also been made to improve China’s Anti-Satellite (ASAT) capability, which will enable Beijing to strike any space-based BMD subsystem.

Meanwhile, passive defence implies the ability to survive a nuclear first strike from the opponent in order to retaliate. This ability is predisposed upon ensuring pre-launch survivability of nuclear weapons and its delivery systems. Such measures are undertaken by hardening and faking missile silos as well as diversifying and improving nuclear delivery systems. The DF-5 missile, which is capable of striking the US, are stored in silos and protected by a large number of bogus silos that have been constructed as decoys. One report notes that China has already begun the “Great Wall
Project” – a missile complex built into the Tai-Hang Mountain Range in Northern China, designed to withstand a massive nuclear strike and ensure Chinese nuclear retaliation. Another method of passive defence is diversification of nuclear delivery systems. Realizing that its stationary land-based nuclear platforms are vulnerable from US intelligence and precision-strike capabilities, China tries to boost its sea leg of the nuclear triad. In 2004, Beijing introduced a new type of ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), the Type 094 (Jin-class) which replaced the older, noisier Xia-class. Each Jin-class vessel is capable of carrying 12 solid-fuelled JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) with a range of up to 8,000 km. Its fourth test flight was successfully accomplished in 2005, launching from a submarine off Qingdao and impacting in the western desert. However, for China to develop a credible sea-based nuclear deterrent capability, it needs to conduct strategic patrol and deploy its strategic naval assets further out to central and eastern Pacific as well as to avoid tracking and trailing by the opponent nuclear-powered submarines (SSN). China’s option for SSBN as the main leg of its strategic force is well-understood given this platform, “when properly operated and supported, provide a very robust, highly second-strike capability,” thus consistent with the NFU policy. Another in China’s arsenal is the new solid-fuelled DF-31 “follow-on” missiles deployed in land-based mobile platforms, which could have a range of up to 12,000 km, thus putting the continental United States (CONUS) well within China’s strategic reach from the mainland.

Second, China might improve and expand its future nuclear capability from strategic deterrence into tactical war-fighting capabilities. There are signs that Beijing is moving in this direction through its theatre ballistic missile (TBM) development programme. Of particular note here is the conflict scenario over Taiwan. Beijing invests heavily in missiles that can penetrate Taiwan’s theatre missile defence (TMD) system, grounded in Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC)-2 Plus and PAC-3 as well as sea-based Aegis management systems and Standard Missile-2 Block IVA interceptors. To counter Taiwan’s TMD, China has begun equipping its TBM with “manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles, which could manoeuvre in their terminal phase, 20-30 seconds before striking targets” and “multiple bombs or bomblets.” By December 2009, China has deployed between 1,050 and 1,150 CSS-6 and CSS-7 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) to unite opposite Taiwan and upgraded its current lethality with improved ranges, accuracies, and payloads. These missiles have the technical capacity to be equipped with nuclear warheads for tactical and theater use. In fact,
Beijing has fielded a considerable number of tactical nuclear weapons. One observer even notes that one-third of Chinese nuclear force constitutes low-yield bombs, artillery shells, atomic demolition mines, and short-range missiles.\textsuperscript{56}

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The BMD deployment would undoubtedly pose a risk of an unnecessary nuclear and missile arms race between Washington and Beijing. China sees BMD as an US overt attempt to increase its own security while degrading China’s own by rendering the latter nuclear deterrent capability ineffective. In response, China could shift its nuclear policy from the Blackettian logic of minimum deterrence to a Wohlstetterian one, which bent on achieving numerical parity with US nuclear arsenals and BMD interceptors. Furthermore, Beijing could reconsider or even withdraw its participation in various non-proliferation regimes, such as the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Such move by Beijing would unleash a chain reaction which makes other states to feel sceptical of these regimes.\textsuperscript{57} Although it does not mean a reversion to the Cold War situation, this development is very destabilizing indeed for global stability given that now more countries possess nuclear and missile technology than during the Cold War.

To avoid China from sliding into the Wohlstetterian logic of nuclear deterrence, Washington must reassure its BMD system is not aimed against Beijing. The US could reassure China through “costly signalling” attempts “designed to persuade the other side that one is trustworthy by virtue of the fact that they are so costly that one would hesitate to send them if one were untrustworthy.” Washington must make “costly” decisions and gestures signifying its willingness to “take greater risks for peace” than China.\textsuperscript{58} This could be done at least in three ways. First, Washington should maintain a strategic dialogue with Beijing and present a convincing case for a BMD that is aimed solely against rogue states. Washington should not even think, in any way, that BMD possesses a secondary capability to compromise on China’s nuclear deterrence. This problem is the most acute since the US is somewhat ambiguous regarding its intent of BMD deployment. For example, the 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report notes that despite China “is...not the focus of U.S. BMD,” the US is also concerned with “the growing imbalances of power across the Taiwan Strait in China’s favor” with “Chinese missiles...capable of reaching not just important Taiwan military and civilian facilities, but also US and allied military installations in the region.”\textsuperscript{59} Such statement
presents an underlying message that BMD would possibly be used in a conflict over Taiwan. Thus, for the US to make “costly signals,” it must rule out any BMD deployment covering Taiwan. This does not mean that the US must cease military assistance to Taipei altogether, but it could avoid direct presence in missile defence deployment and leave it largely to its Taiwan counterparts to deploy such system.

Second, to assure the Chinese, the US must limit the number of interceptors comparable to missiles and warheads possessed only by the rogue states. The planned BMD system would most likely be a Ground-based Midcourse Defence System (GMD), instead of the boost-phase, despite the latter is cited to be the “strongest” case since its “geographical constraints” will alleviate Russian and Chinese concerns. The GMD is already deployed in Fort Greely, Alaska and Vandenberg Air Force Base, California with a total of 30 interceptors in the end of 2010. While this number constitutes a sufficient “capacity to counter the projected threats from North Korea and Iran for the foreseeable future,” Washington maintains a “flexible approach to developing missile defense capabilities,” including “intercepting long-range missiles early in their flight, launching interceptors based on remote sensor networks.” Nonetheless, this “flexible approach” could be misconstrued by Beijing as a “blank check” for Washington to continue expanding current missile defence systems regardless of the extent of the rogues’ nuclear missile development. If left unaddressed, this could provoke China to increase its number of nuclear weapons indefinitely.

Third, Washington must accept the fact that China is gradually modernising its nuclear arsenals without ever thinking of responding similarly. This decision would undoubtedly be costly for Washington since its deterrence capability would decline in relative terms to Beijing. But, this is what deterrence is all about; that is, to ensure that both sides possess assured retaliatory capability. Even if the US deployed a limited BMD, it should be prepared to accept that China could decide it needs hundreds of reasonably survivable strategic warheads. If American elites cannot accept this, then the US is likely to greatly exaggerate the Chinese threat. But, threat exaggeration must be avoided at all cost since it could fuel sentiments leading to more hostility, if not an arms race, between the two countries.

References


Endnotes

3 Counterforce capability is the nuclear capability intended only to destroy the enemy’s nuclear and military arsenals.
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