

July 20, 2004
2,665 words

Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) Developments in South Asia – Implications for Regional Stability

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Although the debate on BMDs in South Asia in the strategic literature is limited, there is some significant thinking on this issue - and its implications for regional stability. This generally revolves around China's response to U.S. plans for a "limited" national missile defence (NMD) system and theatre missile defence (TMD) systems in the Asia-Pacific. This is followed by India's response to China's actions, and subsequently, Pakistan's response to India's actions. This paper will therefore simply attempt to answer two major questions – firstly, what is India's perspective on missile defence – what, where, and how issues - and secondly, what could be the implications of an Indian BMD for regional stability?

Questions over BMDs

There is considerable confusion – some deliberate – on the issue of BMDs in both South Asia and the U.S. What is most important to note is that there are more questions than answers – less black and white, mostly grey areas. While the debate in the U.S. on BMDs - in support or otherwise – is vocal, in South Asia it is less so. Since President George W. Bush's NMD speech at the National Defence University in Washington D.C. on May 1, 2001, there are deep divisions on its implications. There are those who feel it would destabilise the existing offence-defence nuclear relationship – the mainstay of strategic stability. Others argue otherwise – that it will provide protection from the ballistic missiles of a 'rogue' state. Amidst these differences, key questions – such as the final shape and size of the NMD, the nature and extent of TMDs in the Asia-Pacific, the total financial cost, complexities of technology, and the possibility of countermeasures – are often lost. Most important, it is not clear if a layered NMD system for the U.S. will actually work.

As a first step – in accordance with President Bush's December 2002 directive to deploy "a set of initial missile defence capabilities beginning in 2004" – an unspecified number of Ground Based Interceptors (GBI) are to be deployed and placed on alert by September 30, 2004 at Fort Greely, Alaska. This is eventually to consist of 20 GBIs employing exoatmospheric kill vehicles (EKVs), three Aegis-class cruisers/destroyers armed with Standard Missile-3 interceptors (SM-3s), and a number of Patriot PAC-3 interceptors. While this could be in place by the time of the U.S. presidential elections in November 2004, it is not clear whether a Democrat administration, if elected, will continue with Bush's BMD policy.

It is also not clear how China will react to an American NMD or TMDs? At the moment, strategic analysts are busy attempting to second-guess Beijing on this issue, although Beijing itself has opted to remain silent. There is considerable division on this issue as well – among those who feel that China will have no option but to increase its offensive long-range nuclear forces (to continue to enable the effective targeting of key assets in the continental U.S.), or begin building its own BMD system, or opt to build lethal countermeasures - such as nuclear-armed long-range cruise missiles, or a mix of all or some of the above.

Delhi's perspective on BMDs

Delhi's perspective on BMDs is characterised by six major factors.

First. Political support for the concept of BMDs.

Notwithstanding considerable concern over Washington's attempts to change the traditional offence-defence nuclear relationship – through its unilateral abrogation of the 1972 Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty – the BJP-led NDA government in Delhi welcomed President Bush's NMD speech of May 2001. This was the first clear indication that Delhi had significantly changed its earlier stance and sided firmly in support of missile defence – which came as a surprise to many. The swiftness of India's favourable response to the U.S. – a matter of days - was also notable.

Various explanations for Delhi's policy change have been provided. These include attempts to acquire U.S. military and technical assistance, support for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, possibility of a strategic tie-up with the U.S. against China, access to U.S. surveillance data on Chinese and Pakistan missile sites, the nature of India's strategic culture (not necessarily averse to missile defence), and the moral appeal of defence over deterrence. But, this decision essentially appears to have been a political one – involving Indo-U.S. bilateral relations. It was simply a political decision to attempt to transform the Indo-U.S. diplomatic relationship, which had begun to improve in the last two years of the last Clinton administration. In effect, it was a political - not a strategic or technological decision - a pragmatic response to the emerging world order, prior to September 11, 2001. Moreover, this decision appeared to stem directly from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in Delhi - in a top-down manner – hence the relative speed of transmission.

Second. Absence of policy documents on BMD.

For a major change in government policy, there is a surprising absence of written government statements on this issue, or related policy documentation. While one could argue this is related to Delhi's penchant for official secrecy, other aspects of India's nuclear policy have been well publicised. While it is not surprising that India's support for the concept of BMDs was not reflected in the Indian National Security Advisory Board's (NSAB) draft nuclear doctrine of August 1999 (as it followed two years later), a significant omission is its mention in the partial publication of the official nuclear doctrine that followed in January 2003. This may well be due to private Indian official concern over the strategic implications of Delhi's support for the concept of BMDs, especially if Beijing reacts aggressively to U.S. missile defence programmes.

Third. Absence of urgency on an Indian BMD system.

Notwithstanding Delhi's interest in a BMD system, it is simply not of a high order of priority, competing with financial resources for conventional and nuclear forces. The "driver" for Indian BMD developments – the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) – also has several immediate development programmes - including nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, the Light Combat Aircraft, and the Main Battle Tank – to complete.

Fourth. Limited Indo-U.S. cooperation on BMDs.

Following Delhi's support to the U.S. BMD – and Washington's consequent offer of assistance for the development an Indian BMD system – there has been some official bilateral interaction between the two. These include a series of official talks, joint BMD workshops, Indian participation in missile defence conferences, and the observation of missile defence exercises.

Fifth. Limited acquisitions for an Indian BMD system.

Notwithstanding Delhi's interest in acquiring a BMD system, it has made only an incremental movement towards such a capacity in the past few years. Little related acquisition has taken place so far. The only acquisition of significance is the Elta Green Pine early warning and fire control radar from Israel, procured in 2002, at an estimated cost of \$250 million. This radar is reportedly capable of detecting missiles from a distance of 300 kms and tracking targets at speeds over 3,000 metres per second. In addition, in March 2004, Delhi signed a \$1.1 billion deal with Israel for the acquisition of 3 AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control Systems) radars – to be mounted on Il-76 aircraft acquired from Russia (to be refitted in Israel). But, the AWACS have a limited role in the detection of missiles.

To add to the confusion on this issue, there have been several press reports – wholly inaccurate - that Delhi has acquired the Arrow 2 Anti Tactical Ballistic Missile (ATBM) from Israel, or the S-300 or the Antey 2500 ATBMs from Russia, or a mix of both. In addition, Delhi is reportedly upgrading its Akash Surface-to Air Missile (SAM) for an anti-missile role, as also its Rajendra phased array radar – both claims appear exaggerated. Moreover, Delhi is yet to acquire a fire control system, crucial for any future BMD system. Even if Delhi plans to acquire the Arrow 2 ATBM, it will require Washington's approval, which will not be forthcoming as its transfer violates the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). There is also an unconfirmed report that Delhi could try to integrate the Israeli Green Pine Radar with Russian ATBMs, to provide an effective BMD capability.

Sixth. The policies of the new Indian government are – as yet - unclear.

Following the surprise election victory of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in mid-May, it is not clear if Delhi will speed up BMD developments, or continue their slow pace. Although the Congress party was initially critical of both the earlier government's favourable response to the Bush speech, as well as its speed of response, this may not continue to be the case in government. Neither the Congress manifesto nor the UPA's Common Minimum Programme (CMP) makes any mention of BMDs, but, this ought not to be surprising given the little weight that foreign and defence policies generally hold in Indian electoral politics. The new government has yet to issue a public statement on the BMD. At the first U.S. defence meeting with the new Indian government in Delhi in late May – led by Douglas Feith, U.S. Under Secretary for Policy – BMD issues were apparently raised. It is also not clear what Washington's policy towards BMD assistance to foreign countries will be if a Democrat administration takes office in January 2005.

In effect, it is too early to state with any confidence the nature and extent of India's BMD developments or aspirations. In the event that the new Indian government continues the development of a BMD system, it is also not clear what its final objective would be. Would it be a point defence system, to protect a limited fixed geographical area against the threat of ballistic missiles? Would it be a "theatre" missile defence system, to protect a larger area, say a city, or cities? Or would it be a "national" system, to defend the entire territory – from the Himalayan mountains in the north to the peninsular tip of the south, and the Lakshadweep islands in the west to the eastern-most Andaman and Nicobar chain of islands in the east? Clearly, the last is too ambitious and out of the question. If the first two, how will it implement such BMD systems? What will be its financial cost? Will it work? Although these issues still remain in the realm of questions, it is important to examine the regional implications of some of their prospective answers.

Regional Implications

There are two broad arguments on the impact of an Indian BMD – whatever its final shape and size. There are those who argue that all BMDs – whether U.S., Chinese, or Indian - will have major detrimental effects on strategic stability. U.S. plans to deploy BMDs, for instance, will have a ‘cascading’ effect on China, India and Pakistan. These three countries will react aggressively and follow a mix of offensive-defensive countermeasures, which will degrade strategic and regional stability.

On the other hand, there are those who feel that BMDs will have no impact on strategic stability, and will not be destabilising; indeed, they will provide a degree of assurance against ‘rogue’ states or accidental missile launches. China, for example, will not react aggressively to a US BMD, but go in for countermeasures – far easier, cheaper, and effective. It is further argued that a BMD system does not really make a difference operationally, as it has no fundamental effect on nuclear weapons - since it cannot really protect against missiles. It can easily be overwhelmed by ballistic missiles and is vulnerable to cruise missiles and armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV).

Both arguments are flawed at various levels. Clearly, a BMD system – whatever its final shape and size – will have a major political and psychological impact on an adversary/potential adversary, whatever its operational shortcomings. In the same way that Beijing will be forced to react to a U.S. deployment, Delhi will have to take cognisance of Beijing’s policies, and Islamabad, Delhi’s. But, the nature and extent of their reactions will be determined by the shape and scope of the BMDs envisaged, and the manner in which they are finally operationalised. If Washington opts for a limited BMD capability – as opposed to a layered NMD system – Beijing’s response will differ, as consequently, will both Delhi’s and Islamabad’s.

In effect, Delhi’s perspective on a BMD will – in large part – be determined by Beijing’s response to the U.S. BMD. If Beijing opts to respond by increasing its long and medium range ballistic missiles and developing a BMD system, Delhi may well be forced into deploying a BMD system of its own. The shape and size of Delhi’s BMD would have a follow-on impact on the nature and extent of Islamabad’s response. Missile defence systems for Japan and Taiwan are unlikely to impact upon Delhi – unless Beijing overreacts – as it will not change the nature of nuclear deterrence.

With an Indian BMD system, Islamabad cannot but be forced to respond, although at this stage it is not clear what Pakistan’s reactions would be. This would largely depend on the type of BMD system Delhi adopts, though it will be difficult for Islamabad to effectively gauge the nature and extent of an Indian BMD system under development in the early stages.

Politically, Islamabad has officially expressed criticism of a prospective Indian BMD system, and raised fears of an arms race between the two countries. In a worst-case scenario, Islamabad fears that an Indian BMD system could provoke an Indian pre-emptive First Strike, with its BMD “mopping up” Islamabad’s nuclear retaliation – which remains in the realm of fiction.

In military terms, Islamabad could respond in the following ways – both quantitatively and/or qualitatively - increase the number of its ballistic missiles, change its missile status to launch on warning, build its own BMD system, attempt to counter India’s BMD by the development of cruise missile technology, or a mix of some or all the above. This would be directed – in some measure – by financial and technological limitations.

Conclusion

Clearly, there are more questions than answers on the vexed issue of BMDs in South Asia and their implications for regional security and stability. In effect, India's BMD developments are far more political – than strategic or technological – by nature. Nonetheless, at the same time, Delhi is keen to hedge its bets, and unlikely to give up its interest in BMD systems, for fear that technological solutions may well emerge in the distant future. It simply does not want to foreclose its future technological options, amidst an uncertain regional security environment. But, with ballistic missile flight times as little as 8 minutes between India and Pakistan, alternate options – including the institutionalisation of the peace process – need to be prioritised.

Indeed, these developments do provide a unique opportunity for dialogue among the key players in the region on these issues – bilaterally between China-India, India-Pakistan, and China-Pakistan; or trilaterally, if China acquiesces, among Beijing-Delhi-Islamabad. Whereas most political commentators were quick to dismiss the new Indian foreign minister's (Natwar Singh) call for a joint nuclear doctrine among China, India, and Pakistan, perhaps it could be useful for the initiation of a BMD-related regional dialogue.

Delhi also needs to provide a measure of transparency on its BMD developments to Islamabad, as well as its BMD aspirations – which, however, may not be accepted at face value by Islamabad in a climate of mutual interest. Delhi also needs to be aware that what it perceives as a measured response may not appear so in Islamabad. For example, a limited Indian “point defence” system – to protect its national and alternate command posts - could be seen as provocative by Islamabad, with the intention of ensuring the safety of the Indian leadership after an Indian First Strike against Pakistan. In this context, Delhi needs to lessen Islamabad's fears of a perceived Indian First Strike, which is truly unimaginable. Perhaps, an India-Pakistan No First Strike joint declaration could be of some limited use in this regard.

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