Although it remains uncertain whether upper-tier theater missile defense (TMD) will ever be developed and deployed, TMD is nonetheless already a significant element in the security equation in the Asia-Pacific region. For some countries, the introduction of missile defense systems is viewed as necessary to strengthen their ability to defend against a missile attack and is expected to enhance regional security and stability. The decision last fall by the government of Japan to allocate funds for TMD research in cooperation with the United States is based on such an assessment. Taiwan has also expressed interest in the acquisition and deployment of TMD in the face of a growing missile threat from the PRC. From Beijing’s perspective, however, according to Chinese officials and researchers, TMD is a destabilizing factor both politically and militarily.

Taiwan and TMD

Chinese worries about the implications of TMD for regional security, as expressed in their writings as well as to American scholars and officials, are multifold. Beijing’s priority concern in peacetime is that a decision by the U.S. to enhance Taiwan’s missile defense capabilities strengthens the belief of some, in Taiwan, that independence is a realistic option. Taiwanese confidence can thus exacerbate tensions in cross-Strait relations and set back Chinese efforts to achieve reunification.

China’s concern is heightened by two additional fears: 1) that Taiwan is in any case moving inexorably toward permanent separation from the Mainland, if not de jure independence; and 2) that the U.S. is opposed to reunification of the PRC and Taiwan for both ideological and strategic reasons and may seek to prevent it from taking place. Taiwan President Lee Tenghui’s remark in early July 1999 labeling ties between the island and the Mainland as “special state-to-state relations,” and the government’s rejection of “one China” promise to
further arouse PRC worries and shape Beijing’s perspectives on any future TMD cooperation between Washington and Taipei.

If Taiwan is chosen as a site for deployment of upper-tier TMD systems, this will enhance the island’s ability to defend against the growing number of short-range ballistic missiles that are targeted at Taiwan from the Mainland coast. The numbers of such missiles are currently estimated to be in the 100-200 range, but are forecast to increase to approximately 650 by 2005. Acquisition by Taipei of greater capabilities to defend against ballistic missiles would diminish Beijing’s ability to rely on its SRBM force as a means of political intimidation. This is precisely the tactic Beijing pursued in 1995 and 1996 when China bracketed the island with M-9 missiles to signal its displeasure with Lee Tenghui’s visit to the United States and with the growing tendency on the island to consider independence. In a future crisis, the Chinese might worry that TMD will greatly erode or even negate their sole means of holding Taiwan at risk militarily, which they view as critical to affecting Taiwanese calculations.

In 1998, the U.S. Congress mandated that the Defense Department submit a report on Theater Missile Defense Architecture Options for the Asia-Pacific Region. The unclassified version of the report was released on May 4, 1999 (http://taiwansecurity.org/IS/TMD-DOD-9905.htm), provoking Beijing to be even more vocal and explicit in its opposition to any cooperation between the U.S. and Taiwan, in the area of theater missile defense. In discussions I held in China in January, May and June of this year (1999), many Chinese experts asserted that Beijing views U.S.-Taiwan TMD cooperation as going beyond previous U.S. weapons transfers to Taipei. They reason that the complexity of the technology will involve—indeed require—a substantial strengthening of military ties between the United States and Taiwan. Senior Chinese officials even claim that U.S.-Taiwan TMD cooperation portends a possible resurrection of the U.S.-Taiwan defense treaty. From Taipei’s perspective, this is exactly what Taiwan hopes to gain from the TMD issue—the perception, if not the reality, of closer military relations with the U.S.

Chinese military analysts and officials privately note that PRC redlines on the provision of new TMD capabilities to Taiwan are still being determined. The criteria will depend on the form of concrete cooperation that any future technology sales or transfers will require between the Taiwan and American military establishments. Provision by the U.S. of early warning systems to Taiwan that are linked to U.S. space-based sensors are thus cited as likely to trigger a strong response from Beijing. Sale of Aegis destroyers—the likely platform for Navy Theater Wide (NTW) – which has been considered by the U.S. Defense Department but so far not been approved, is similarly likely to provoke China’s ire. Any decision to engage in joint research and development of upper-tier TMD systems would likely result in Chinese retribution against the U.S. and possibly stepped up Chinese military pressure on Taiwan.

**China’s Strategic Deterrent**

The Chinese also worry that TMD will have inherent capabilities to intercept strategic ballistic missiles and thus will reduce Beijing’s confidence that it has a survivable second-
strike capability. Chinese nuclear physicists say they have proven that the THAAD (theater high altitude area defense) and NTW footprint is large enough to defeat strategic missiles and that the kill probability of upper-tier TMD interceptors is about the same for theater and strategic missiles. The perceived threat to China’s ICBM force is also based on the argument that an interceptor that is successfully tested against a target missile with a range of 3,500 km traveling at 5 km/sec has an “inherent capability” of intercepting a missile with a range of 7,500 km traveling at 7 km/sec. Chinese scientists cite statistics of the Patriot’s performance in the Gulf War, which they say demonstrated an intercept capability that was 40 percent higher than its tested performance (1.7 km/sec compared to 2.4 km/sec).

China’s nuclear deterrent is perceived to be directly jeopardized by some of the U.S. national missile defense deployment scenarios that are under consideration, which include the possible emplacement of up to 250 interceptors in two U.S. deployment sites. Confronted with the prospect of a severely degraded deterrent, China may accelerate and even modify its planned nuclear modernization. To overwhelm U.S. missile defense systems, China may have to build a much larger missile force than its current no-first-use, force de frappe configuration would justify in the absence of TMD and NMD.

Beijing may opt to deploy MIRVed missiles and will certainly improve its ability to use decoys, chaff and other penetration aids. Although many of these represent paths that China would have chosen to pursue in any case, the issue is in the priority the Chinese will assign to these programs and the extent to which they will expand their missile force. If further testing is deemed necessary to develop new warhead designs, some Chinese scientists warn that China might be compelled to renege on its commitment to cease nuclear tests under the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Beijing shares Russia’s concern that TMD and NMD deployments will undermine the ABM treaty, which China has come to view as the foundation of global strategic nuclear stability. The shift from a strategy based on mutual assured destruction to one that incorporates missile defense capabilities will inject uncertainty into the global nuclear balance. Chinese experts assert that this will require the formulation of a new nuclear doctrine by the United States that they fear will be destabilizing. Moreover, the Chinese worry that U.S. decisions on development on ballistic missile defense systems will set back START II implementation and slow or even halt the process of U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear reductions.

U.S.-Japan TMD Cooperation

Beijing has strongly denounced Japan’s involvement in the TMD program, arguing that U.S.-Japanese collaboration to develop upper-tier TMD systems will enhance Japan’s offensive capabilities and fuel the “remilitarization” of Japan. The Chinese view Japan’s worries about a North Korean missile threat as a convenient excuse to engage in joint research with the U.S. on the Navy Theater Wide Program and to enhance their defense industries. The Chinese are convinced that Japan’s interest in TMD is motivated to a great extent by uncertainty about China’s long-run intentions and capabilities.
Politically, Chinese experts voice concern that Tokyo’s regional and global security role will be boosted by participation in the TMD program with the United States. Beijing’s most urgent worry, however, is that any upper-tier TMD system under Japanese control, especially one deployed on a mobile, sea-based platform such as Aegis destroyers, could be used to defend Taiwan. Again, this is viewed in China as having important implications both in peacetime and in wartime.

From a broader perspective, China is fearful that TMD is part of an U.S. strategy to strengthen its alliances and military presence in the region, in order to pressure China. In conjunction with the new U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines, the agreement in the Fall of 1998 by the two allies to collaborate in research on the Navy Theater Wide program has heightened concerns in Beijing that China is the target of the alliance and that Taiwan is included in the scope of the Guidelines. Most Chinese are increasingly doubtful that the presence of American troops in Japan constrains the development of independent Japanese military capabilities and a growing number are persuaded that a gradual, planned withdrawal of U.S. forces will best serve Chinese interests in the long run.

The Impact of Kosovo

NATO’s air strikes on Yugoslavia have had a profound impact on Beijing’s evaluation of its security environment and will shape China’s evolving perspectives on TMD. Prior to NATO’s air attack on the former Yugoslavia, Chinese leaders judged that China’s security environment was relatively benign. They forecast that the gradual emergence of multiple poles of power would inhibit the U.S. from using its sole superpower status to intervene in others’ internal affairs and otherwise exert its will in dangerous ways.

Relations among the major powers were seen as moving toward greater coordination and cooperation as China forged partnerships with the United States, Russia and Western Europe. In addition, many Chinese considered that the globalization trend, especially global economic integration, would produce a more stable world. Economic factors were identified as surpassing both military and ideological factors in international relations.

Kosovo has shattered these Chinese assumptions. There is now a consensus among Chinese experts that China’s security environment is more uncertain and less stable than previously thought. “After NATO’s attack on Kosovo, the declaration of NATO’s new strategic concept, and the passage of the New Defense Guidelines by the Japanese Diet anything can happen,” maintained one Chinese military researcher. The U.S. is seen as occupying an unprecedented strong international position to pursue policies aimed at augmenting its power and prolonging the duration of its global supremacy. U.S. comprehensive national power is estimated to be on the rise and its lead over other states, including China, is expected to increase, with dangerous implications for peace and stability both regionally and globally.
Chinese analysts and leaders agree that U.S. international behavior is increasingly hegemonist, which they define as “doing whatever it wants to do” irrespective of the impact on the interests of other states. Many civilian and military experts say that there is a general feeling that Beijing has to prepare for the worst. Asked what impact U.S. hegemonism would have on China, one analyst remarked, “If we say no to the U.S., then we will invite trouble.” China is portrayed as vulnerable, facing growing threats to its territorial integrity and domestic political stability.

In this context, TMD is viewed by the Chinese as part of a U.S. grand strategy to strengthen America’s regional and global positions while checking the emergence of China as a great power that could challenge U.S. supremacy in the next century. Many in Beijing are convinced that the U.S. views China as an adversary and that missile defense systems are just one of many efforts that the U.S. is undertaking to seek military advantage, superiority or even absolute security. China’s paranoia in the aftermath of NATO’s at least partial victory in Yugoslavia will complicate Washington’s efforts to manage its relations with Beijing as research, development, and eventually deployment of TMD proceed.

**Implications for Chinese Policy and American Interests**

Despite Chinese apprehensions about U.S. global strategy, Beijing is not likely to object strongly to the eventual deployment of upper-tier TMD systems, either land-based or sea-based, that remain under U.S. control. The possible employment of such systems to defend Taiwan in the event of a cross-Strait military confrontation is perceived as conforming to the long-standing U.S. policy of ambiguity.

On the other hand, U.S. cooperation with Taiwan in TMD development and the transfer to Taiwan of upper-tier TMD systems are likely to provoke an extreme Chinese response. This is based on the assessment that the U.S. will take whatever measures necessary to prevent Taiwan’s reunification with China. To this end, the Chinese may even covertly support Taiwanese independence. Moreover, the Chinese will closely scrutinize technical agreements between the U.S. and Japan on TMD cooperation and continue to pressure Tokyo to exclude Taiwan from the area of coverage of the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines. Beijing lauded the decision by South Korea this past spring to not participate in the TMD program and has since strengthened its dialogue with the South Koreans on non-proliferation matters.

Over the next few years, as TMD research and development proceeds (assuming its effectiveness is proven) and decisions are made by the U.S. on TMD architectures as well as deployment schedules, Chinese concerns and their associated rhetoric on the issue will likely be stepped up. Indeed, Beijing could make the issue of U.S. provision of more advanced TMD capabilities to Taiwan the litmus test in its relations with the United States. In the next few years, Beijing’s growing concerns about TMD will impact Chinese policies that affect American interests in several areas:
• Chinese cooperation with the United States on bilateral and multilateral security issues such as non-proliferation and arms control (joining MTCR, ratification of CTBT, upcoming negotiations on FMCT, strengthening export controls, controlling transfer of missiles and missile technology to Iran, etc.) as well as on regional security issues such as Korea and South Asia;

• Chinese attitudes and policies toward U.S. forward military presence in the region and U.S. alliances and its promotion of China’s New Security Concept;

• Beijing’s policy toward Taiwan, both diplomacy and military components;

• China’s relations with Japan, especially as U.S.-Japanese cooperation in TMD development deepens;

• China’s military modernization program, especially in the nuclear sphere;

• Beijing’s relations with Russia, including diplomatic coordination in opposition to TMD/NMD and the need to preserve the ABM treaty, and possible military cooperation between the two countries to share information on enhancing penetration capabilities.

Adjusting Chinese Foreign Policy

Adjustments in Chinese foreign policy as a consequence of Beijing’s new recognition of the uncertain international environment should be anticipated. On the eve of the annual Chinese leadership meetings at Beidaihe that are slated to begin in August, there is fierce debate in China about how adjustments should be made in Chinese policies and how far-reaching they should be. There are those, including at high levels of the leadership, who favor a more pro-active strategy by China in cooperation with other powers such as Russia and India to restrain U.S. hegemony. They propose that Beijing distance itself from the West and position itself closer to the Third World. Proponents of this view contend that China can bear the cost of a confrontational strategy toward the U.S. or maintain that Beijing can continue to cooperate with Washington in the economic sphere while assailing the U.S. on political and security issues.

Analysts who are close to Chinese leaders say that these recommendations are unlikely to be adopted at the top, even if they are popular with the public and the military. President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji, according to these researchers, share others’ apprehension about the global situation, but they continue to believe that China’s national interest requires preserving good relations with the United States. They know that assuming a confrontational international posture toward the U.S. would put in jeopardy China’s economic development, political stability and, in turn the survival of the communist regime. Instead, Jiang and Zhu advocate a long-term strategy to enhance China’s comprehensive national power that focuses on developing China’s economy, technological base and military capability to meet the challenges posed by the possibility of an enduring unipolar world.

Chinese Perspective On Theater Missile Defense
Thus, the main thrust of China’s foreign policy is likely to remain unchanged. Underlying this policy are two key assessments: China requires a stable, peaceful environment for economic development; and China is a weak developing country that cannot alter the main trends in the international situation. Analysts expect that leadership priorities will increasingly be domestic rather than international and will focus on reforming state-owned enterprises, improving education, developing the internal Chinese market, promoting development of high-technology and strengthening national defense capabilities.

Modification of Chinese foreign policies are nevertheless expected, in part because Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji are under attack for being too soft in their policies toward the United States and Taiwan. According to Chinese experts, critics of the Chinese government’s policies include NPC head and former Premier Li Peng, old guard conservatives like Song Ping, retired military officers and some active PLA officers, older generation intellectuals, students, and many nationalist elements in the general population. One well-connected expert remarked that “Chinese foreign policy has never been this close to domestic politics” and therefore Jiang and Zhu have to act tougher toward the U.S. to bolster their standing and reputation.

Premier Zhu’s concessions on the terms of Chinese entry into the WTO that he made during his U.S. visit were widely denounced and Zhu has been on the defensive since his return. An extremist view espoused by some students compared the 17-page listing of Zhu’s concessions that was released by the U.S. Trade Representative Office to the 21 demands imposed on China by Japan in 1915 and charged Zhu with selling out Chinese interests. Such attacks on China’s policy toward the United States combined with heightened suspicion of U.S. intentions and strategy may hamper the ability of Jiang and Zhu to cooperate with the United States even if they favor doing so.

Discussions with institute analysts and advisers to Chinese leaders suggest that the following concrete adjustments in Chinese foreign policy may be forthcoming:

• China will continue to cooperate with the U.S. where it has vital interests at stake, but it will be less amenable on issues that in the past it has worked together with Washington for the primary purpose of promoting better Sino-American relations. Experts cite the Persian Gulf, South Asia, and the Middle East as regions where Beijing has moderated its policy to accommodate U.S. concerns in the past and will be less likely to do so in the future. Cooperation on non-proliferation is likely to undergo a fundamental reevaluation, according to some Chinese analysts. Specific decisions that flow from this reassessment may include indefinitely postponing consideration of joining the Missile Technology Control Regime and delaying ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

• Beijing will increase the “independent factor” in its foreign policy. An effort is apparently already underway to strengthen ties with many states on China’s periphery, including India, North Korea and Russia. Experts are also advocating that China seek to promote
better relations with Japan, although this is complicated by increased concerns about the new Defense Guidelines and Japanese cooperation with the U.S. on development of a sea-based theater missile defense system. Boosting China’s relations with its neighbors is aimed at increasing Chinese influence in the region, protecting Chinese interests, and gaining leverage over the United States.

- China will expand defense cooperation with Russia. PLA concerns about the growing gap with the West in military technology will lead to greater efforts to narrow the gap through acquisition of advanced weapons systems and defense technology from Russia. Discussions with Moscow on political and security issues of common concern such as TMD and the role of the UN will be stepped up, with parallel actions more likely than joint responses.

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Chinese Perspective On Theater Missile Defense

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