

# CRS Report for Congress

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## China and U.S. Missile Defense Proposals: Reactions and Implications

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### Summary

The Chinese government has strongly criticized U.S. announcements that it will develop or assist in deploying missile defense systems involving cooperation with U.S. allies in East Asia, and reports of such possible U.S. cooperation with Taiwan. For those in the United States, the U.S. plans have many perceived disadvantages and advantages;<sup>1</sup> the latter include notably providing degrees of protection for the United States and its allies against ballistic missile attack. Many in China believe that proposed U.S. development and deployment of ballistic missile defenses at home and in East Asia pose potentially serious complications for China's ability to use its nuclear weapons to deter possible U.S. pressure and aggression, and to use Chinese ballistic missile capability to exert leverage over Japan, Taiwan, and others in East Asia. Beijing's options include using political means to curb U.S. efforts or to seek reassurances from the United States; military options include increasing the number of Chinese missiles and warheads, and using force to intimidate Taiwan from developing a viable missile defense system. Though the U.S. government may attempt to reassure China that it is not the target of the new systems, initial Chinese reactions suggest that the United States may face serious difficulties with China if on balance it sees U.S. interests well served by current plans and goes ahead with them, and especially if it supports ballistic missile defense efforts in Taiwan. This report will be updated periodically.

### Introduction

The Chinese government has strongly criticized U.S. announcements that it will develop or assist in deploying missile defense systems involving cooperation with U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> In March 1999, legislation favoring a national missile defense for the United States (S. 257 and H.R. 4) received close congressional attention. For a review of the arguments about these systems, see *National Missile Defense*, by Steven Hildreth, CRS Report 96-441; and *Theater Air and Missile Defense*, by Robert Shuey, CRS Issue Brief 98028. See also *Ballistic Missile Defenses*, CRS Info Pack IP496.

allies in East Asia, and reports of such possible U.S. cooperation with Taiwan. In the past few months, Chinese media and government spokesmen have warned against U.S. efforts to work with Japan to develop a Theater Missile Defense (TMD) system that would protect Japanese and U.S. forces there from the growing ballistic missile threat posed by North Korea or other countries.<sup>2</sup> They also have criticized strongly reports coming from Taiwan that the United States is considering assisting Taiwan in the face of a perceived growing ballistic missile threat from mainland China.<sup>3</sup>

The People's Republic of China (PRC) Foreign Ministry, in an unusually detailed statement by its spokesman on January 21, 1999 laid out China's position in opposition to U.S. announced or reported efforts in these areas.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the statement noted:

- China's "grave concern" over Defense Secretary Cohen's announcement the previous day of plans to develop a National Missile Defense (NMD) system for the United States, and TMD systems for East Asia and possibly elsewhere, and to seek revision of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to carry out these efforts. The spokesman said these decisions will have "wide-ranging and far reaching negative impacts on the global and regional strategic balance and stability," will promote missile proliferation, and will violate the ABM Treaty, which China strongly supports.
- China's belief that U.S. cooperation with Japan and other countries to develop TMD to protect U.S. forces and allies in East Asia or other regions will have a serious adverse impact on the security and stability of these regions.
- China's "special emphasis" on Taiwan. He asserted that any supply of TMD equipment or technology to Taiwan will be considered a move that seriously infringes on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and "will certainly meet with strong opposition from the Chinese people."

U.S. media reports note the dilemma the Clinton Administration faces in not wishing to seriously alienate China and possibly upset its engagement policy with the PRC as it pursues missile defense options supported by Japan and others abroad as well as by the U.S. Congress.<sup>5</sup> Among the many actions taken by the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress in support of greater U.S. missile defense efforts, the FY-1999 Defense Authorization Act required a Defense Department report to Congress laying out a TMD architecture to protect U.S. forces and allies in Asia and the Pacific; the FY1999 Defense Appropriations Act required a Defense Department report to Congress on the military balance in the Taiwan area. That report, released on February 17, 1999, discussed the growing PRC ballistic missile capability against Taiwan. The House also passed a resolution urging U.S. missile defense

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<sup>2</sup> See among others, "News Analysis: Japan Strikes Military Pose," *Xinhua*, January 15, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> See among others, "ARATS Official on Wang Visit, TMD, Reunification," *Xinhua*, January 19, 1999, replayed by Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Internet version.

<sup>4</sup> "Spokesman expresses 'grave concern' over NMD, TMD," *Xinhua*, January 21, 1999, replayed by FBIS Internet version.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, January 22, 1999.

cooperation with Taiwan<sup>6</sup>. Following Secretary of State Albright's early March 1999 visit to Beijing to discuss the dispute over missile defense and other issues, Chinese officials increased public criticism with the foreign minister and the premier denouncing the plans.<sup>7</sup>

### **Chinese Nuclear and Ballistic Missile Forces: Status and Intentions<sup>8</sup>**

Since the mid-1950s, China has made strong efforts within its limited economic and technical capabilities to develop a modest nuclear force and related delivery systems in order to:

- help deter superpower or regional (e.g., Indian) conflict and intimidation;
- secure a strategic retaliatory capability in case of a nuclear war; and
- demonstrate China's international power.

China's few dozen nuclear-capable bombers are too slow and technically backward to penetrate modern air defenses. Beijing relies for nuclear weapons delivery mainly on its mobile ground-based and nascent sea-based ballistic missiles (about 100 missiles). China's current mobile missiles, land-or sea-based, are not long range and generally would not be addressed by the proposed NMD system. They may be blocked by the TMD systems proposed by U.S. advocates.<sup>9</sup> About 20 longer-range Chinese ICBMs, mainly silo-based missiles may, be able to overwhelm a limited national missile defense system. But as static targets, those silo-based missiles might be vulnerable to attack by an adversary with sufficiently accurate ballistic missiles (both Russia and the United States have such missiles). China is in the final stages of developing a mobile long-range ballistic missile that would not have this vulnerability.

Against this backdrop, many in China believe that the proposed U.S. development and deployment of ballistic missile defenses at home and in East Asia pose potentially serious complications for China's ability to use its nuclear weapons to deter possible U.S. aggression, pressure, intimidation or other such actions, including the possible U.S. military intervention against a Chinese military operation against Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> If the United States were to share this system with Russia, as well as other Chinese neighbors (e.g., Japan and South Korea), the effects on Chinese nuclear strike calculations could be substantial. During the U.S.-China crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1995 and 1996, a senior Chinese general noted the PRC ability to threaten Los Angeles with a ballistic missile

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<sup>6</sup> Reviewed in *Taiwan*, CRS Issue Brief 98034 (updated regularly).

<sup>7</sup> See notably Premier Zhu Rongji's press conference remarks of March 15, 1999, carried by *Xinhua*.

<sup>8</sup> For background, see *China: Ballistic and Cruise Missiles*, by Shirley Kan and Robert Shuey, CRS Report 97-391.

<sup>9</sup> Advanced TMD systems would have interceptors that could target an incoming ballistic missile with a range of about 3,200 km or less. The longest range Chinese missiles may move toward targets at speeds that would prevent them from being intercepted by missiles currently envisioned for the U.S. TMD systems. Interviews conducted in Washington, DC, January 1999.

<sup>10</sup> For background, see *Theater Missile Defenses: Possible Chinese Reactions: U.S. Implications and Options*, by Robert Sutter, CRS Report 94-154, February 23, 1994.

attack in the event of U.S. military involvement in opposition to the PRC over Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> A National Missile Defense shield for the United States could reduce or eliminate this PRC option.

Meanwhile, Chinese military strategy has put more emphasis in recent years on the use of conventionally armed, shorter range ballistic missiles. These weapons (notably the M-9 missile<sup>12</sup> having a range of 375 miles) were featured in the military exercises Beijing launched against Taiwan in 1995 and 1996, and are widely seen as an implicit source of PRC leverage in efforts to press Taiwan to reunify with the mainland on terms acceptable to the PRC.<sup>13</sup>

## Possible Chinese Reactions

U.S. policymakers will consider many factors<sup>14</sup> in determining whether and how to develop and deploy missile defense systems at home, in East Asia and elsewhere, and whether and how to share such systems with Taiwan. Advocates see a variety of benefits for the security of the United States, U.S. forces in East Asia, and U.S. allies and friends in the region. Among possible negative factors for consideration are Beijing's possible reactions to such U.S. actions. In general, China's possible reactions are seen as following two paths. One involves possible Chinese military-political measures directly related to the U.S. actions. The other involves broader Chinese international security policy and relations with the United States.

## Military-Political Measures

- Beijing could **choose to wait** until the U.S. and its allies and associates actually develop and deploy defensive systems affecting Chinese missile forces. Chinese leaders have seen Washington and Moscow debate such anti-ballistic missile systems for a long time, going back to the 1960s. But the results have not substantially jeopardized Chinese missile capabilities.
- Beijing could endeavor to **use arms control initiatives** to halt or curb missile defense developments and/or deployment. In the process, China might be prepared to offer concessions in other areas (e.g., China's development of nuclear-capable missiles and proliferation of those missiles or related technology) deemed important to the United States and its allies and associates.
- China could **seek formal reassurances from the United States** that missile defense systems would not be directed at China, and that the United States would deploy them in ways that would be seen by Beijing as not primarily directed against Chinese missiles. (This may be hard to do, and could prove to be especially difficult if Japan and South Korea were to receive TMD systems. Such deployments would

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<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, January 25, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> This missile can be armed with a conventional or a weapons of mass destruction warhead.

<sup>13</sup> See among others, *Taiwan*, CRS Issue Brief 98034.

<sup>14</sup> See sources noted in footnote 1.

presumably work in protecting these countries against most Chinese missiles as well as North Korean missiles. Of course, any U.S. support for missile defense in Taiwan would be seen as directed solely against the PRC.)

- Beijing could **increase proliferation of weapons** of mass destruction technology, delivery systems, or other such sensitive material in unstable areas of keen interest to U.S. policy (e.g. the Persian Gulf).
- China could **pursue military measures** to counter missile defenses. This could involve developing a greater number of and more capable missiles, using decoys and so-called penetration aids, developing multiple warheads for existing or future Chinese missiles, increasing the mobility of China's longest range missiles, and other steps. Beijing may feel compelled to resume nuclear testing in order to develop warheads better able to penetrate missile defenses.
- China could **launch military actions near Taiwan and possibly Japan** as a warning against developing missile defenses. Such actions could include a repeat of the live-fire artillery and ballistic missile exercises seen in the Taiwan area in 1995 and 1996.<sup>15</sup>

## Chinese International Security Policy

U.S. action on missile defense may affect an on-going debate in China over international security policy and relations with the United States.<sup>16</sup> Even if U.S. intentions were otherwise, Chinese leaders could conclude from such U.S. development and deployment that the United States and its partners see China as a real or potential adversary that cannot be trusted and needs to be checked with missile defenses. Others in China argue that China's interests are best served through closer economic, political and other interaction with the United States and its allies.

The outcome of this debate will probably be among the factors determining how accommodating China is prepared to be on the wide range of bilateral, regional, and global issues important to the United States. Issues range from Chinese policies on nuclear and missile proliferation, trade questions, and human rights conditions, to Beijing's role in dealing with the danger posed by North Korea's nuclear program, global arms control efforts, and other issues.<sup>17</sup>

## U.S. Implications and Options

This brief review of possible Chinese reactions suggests that the United States may face serious difficulties regarding China if the U.S. develops and deploys missile defense systems at home and East Asia, and especially if it supports ballistic missile defense efforts in Taiwan. Most notably, China might see little choice other than to increase nuclear-

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<sup>15</sup> Reviewed in *Taiwan*, CRS Issue Brief 98034.

<sup>16</sup> For background see *Chinese Policy Priorities and Their Implications for the United States*, by Robert Sutter, CRS Report 98-802, September 23, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> See Dumbaugh, Kerry, *China-U.S. Relations*, CRS Issue Brief 98018 (updated regularly).

capable and conventional missile testing, development and deployment--thereby challenging U.S. interests in curbing missile development, and reducing the numbers of nuclear arms. Beijing may even feel compelled to resume nuclear testing in order to develop weapons better able to penetrate missile defenses. There is a distinct possibility of military tension in the Taiwan area.

U.S. concern with these possible developments will be weighed against the many perceived benefits for the United States, U.S. forces overseas, and U.S. allies and associates of the proposed NMD, TMD, and possible U.S. sharing of such systems with Taiwan. U.S. advocates of these approaches likely will urge going forward as a means of increasing protection of the United States and its allies despite Chinese criticism and opposition. Some in this group also believe that current high-level PRC criticism is designed to intimidate the United States and therefore judge that giving in to PRC pressure would send the wrong signal about U.S. determination to play a leading strategic role in Asian affairs. Others may seek to reassure China that it is not the target of the new systems, perhaps even offering to share information about the system with China. Although Beijing is thought to be interested in learning about missile defenses, this benefit may not be sufficient to offset the negative impact of the missile defenses system in the United States and East Asia on Chinese missile forces and missile modernization. Some observers suggests the United States could endeavor to offset China for this impact on Chinese security concerns with gestures in other areas. Possibilities include more liberalized U.S. civil technology transfer policies, easing Chinese market access to the United States, stronger support for China's entry into World Trade Organization (WTO), stronger U.S. backing for Beijing's position vis-a-vis Taiwan, and other steps. Of course, each of these gestures would have consequences for other kinds of U.S. interests and opposition from certain sectors.