China’s approach toward ballistic missile defense is shifting. This area has long been regarded as a bastion of U.S.-Russian power politics and nuclear dynamics by Beijing. However, China has recently become a participant rather than an observer with its inclusion, along with Russia, as a dominant factor in the 2010 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, and with its ground-based midcourse missile interception test in the same year.

While the United States and Russia are currently in the position to shape the dynamics of the debate, this is bound to change. In this context, it is important that Washington and Moscow take steps toward compromising on ballistic missile defense (BMD) cooperation now as a foundation for effective engagement with Beijing in the future.

The evolution of Chinese analysis and technology on missile defense-related issues has undergone a significant progression. Attitudes have evolved from criticism of U.S. and Soviet policy, to countermeasures against U.S. BMD, and ultimately to conforming through China’s development of its own BMD capabilities. The question is how to reach the fourth “c”, comity.

To this end, it is instructive to look at the most recent stage of this evolution. China’s 2010 missile defense test demonstrated the very same technology that it once denounced—much like China’s nuclear test in 1964, and its anti-satellite test in 2007. This continuity offers some valuable insights into three issues often raised when discussing China: transparency, predictability, and engagement.

First, the number of strategic and technical articles on missile defense has increased exponentially within Chinese databases over the past decade, offering some of the greatest transparency available on any given security-related issue.
Second, when unofficial articles are viewed in the context of official actions, China’s technical and strategic communities offer invaluable insights into China’s response pattern.

Third, China’s development of BMD may be just what compels it and the United States to greater exchange. By integrating China into a system of relations from which it was once excluded and threatened, it will be in a much stronger position to engage and to be engaged.

This analysis reviews these three findings and does so with reference to more than 2,000 articles on missile defense in Chinese journals in order to provide recommendations as to how to better engage China on ballistic missile defense.

Criticism

Despite the permeation of ballistic missile defense into the strategic, space, and conventional realm, early accounts within China link BMD squarely to nuclear concerns and to the U.S.-Soviet power dynamic. Within open sources, these articles range as far back as 1975, when the U.S. and Soviet systems were as nascent as the Chinese consciousness of their utility. The majority of these early articles appear in technical journals and offer a laundry list of missile defense-related capabilities with little in the way of nuances or insights into how China sees itself affected. Nonetheless, there are exceptions.

Early articles referring to both China and missile defense in their titles frequently pair China with Russia, as the two countries most likely to be affected by U.S. ballistic missile defense. Lengthy technical papers released in the mid-to-late 1970s offer insights into a Chinese scientific community with a budding interest in the capabilities underpinning U.S.-Soviet missile defense and strategic missile development. By the 1980s, this dynamic was cemented with the U.S. announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative and the Soviet response.

Despite this early focus on the U.S.-Soviet and later U.S.-Russian power dynamic, these writings are just as revealing about China—whether they mention it or not. From the start, journal articles within China have expressed a strong interest in the Soviet, and later Russian, countermeasures taken to defeat U.S. ballistic missile defense. These analyses were most frequent around the time of the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002.
Soviet and Russian countermeasures inform Chinese policy when responding to U.S. ballistic missile defense. On the one hand, studying these countermeasures offers Chinese experts the chance to learn from Russia’s achievements and challenges when facing U.S. technical advances and policies. On the other hand, Chinese analysts remain well aware of the constraints faced by China, as opposed to Russia, particularly in arsenal size. Areas in which Russia was unable to constrain U.S. actions, whether political or technical, are internalized as lessons to be learned by China.

For example, while a few Chinese analysts refer to the Russian political countermeasure of pulling out of the START II treaty two days after U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, far more note that Russia ultimately did not abrogate the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and was impotent in constraining U.S. actions. As argued by countless Chinese experts, Russia is the one country able to effectively maintain a “strategic balance” (zhanlue pingheng) when it comes to the United States. So its inability to stem unilateral U.S. withdrawal means that no country can.

Moreover, U.S. President Barack Obama’s previous reassurances to Russia that the latter’s missile forces are significant enough to overwhelm U.S. missile defenses offers little comfort to a country like China with a much more restrained nuclear posture and deployment structure. As a result, after 2002, Russia’s active military countermeasures have received increasing attention within China, including ballistic missile advances and missile defense-related adjustments. If passive countermeasures are not enough, then active capabilities are seen to offer greater leverage.

In addition to Chinese attention paid to Russia’s declaration that it was no longer bound by the START II treaty, thereby allowing it to pursue its PC-18 and PC-20 intercontinental ballistic missiles, there is a strong focus in these writings on nearly every possible related countermeasure and military development within Russia, including space-based missile forces, long-range ICBMs, multiple warhead ballistic missile submarines, SS-27, SS-25, SS-19, guided missile cruisers, PC-22, PC-23, space-based early warning satellites, "Volga" early warning radar station deployment, A-135 missile defense system, S-400 defense systems, low-altitude supersonic cruise missile, X-111 and X-555 long-range cruise missiles, 3M carrier rockets, nuclear submarine, strategic bombers, etc.

In other words, improved ballistic missile systems, nuclear submarines, space-based assets, and a host of both passive and active countermeasures are part and parcel to mounting a
coordinated response to the United States. It is, therefore, not surprising that China’s nuclear modernization has included a number of these facets, whether in strategic ballistic missile pursuits or nuclear submarines. These platforms offer a degree of the assured retaliatory capability that Chinese experts have witnessed Russia using as leverage vis-à-vis the United States at strategic arms reductions negotiations and elsewhere.