by Brad Glosserman

The United States has scaled back plans to deploy a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe. While that decision reflects a new assessment of the Iranian threat to Europe, most attention is being paid to its impact on relations with Russia. But the decision has equally important implications for Asia. It underscores two critical facts: first, the notion of discrete "theaters" is a fiction; second, the U.S. has to closely engage its Asian allies as it develops its strategic doctrine.

In a response to an Iranian missile threat, the Bush administration had planned to deploy ground-based interceptors in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic. The program became a major irritant in U.S-Russia relations: Moscow complained that the missile defense shield could be used to neutralize its own deterrent and that it undermined Russian influence in its "near abroad."

According to President Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the new deployments better respond to Iranian capabilities. (The original plan was best against long-range missiles, while the Pentagon believes the real threat comes from short- and medium-range missiles.) Announcing the new plans, Mr. Obama said, "Our new missile defense architecture in Europe will provide stronger, smarter and swifter defenses of American forces and America's allies." He added that Russian "concerns about our previous missile defense programs were entirely unfounded."

There is intense speculation about what this decision "really" means. For some, it is as advertised: a better response to the Iranian threat. To others, it reflects a deeper skepticism about the efficacy of missile defense in general and is a more rational use of limited defense dollars. Yet others see it as part of continuing effort to "reset" relations with Moscow. In particular, it aims to win Russian backing for U.S. policy in Afghanistan or to get Moscow to agree to tighten the screws on Iran and get Tehran to rein in its nuclear ambitions.

Little attention has been paid to the Asian dimension of this decision. That isn't new. In the 1980s, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union were sparring over deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, a Soviet pitch to move its missiles east of the Urals triggered a mini-crisis with Japan (which is remembered in Tokyo as a big deal). In recent discussions with Japanese experts, we were warned that any U.S. decision on missile defense in Europe that appears to accommodate Russian concerns could send the wrong signal to China, which has its own concerns about the aim of missile defense deployments by the U.S. and its allies in Asia. Beijing's concerns look a lot like those of Moscow.

Two lessons are clear. First, U.S. strategists have to think globally about doctrine and force deployments. There is an inclination to think about regions, discrete theaters, and their

particular circumstances, but decisions involving one can impact another. North Korea learned from the global response to the 1998 decisions by India and Pakistan to detonate nuclear weapons; Pyongyang's demand that its nuclear capability be accepted by the rest of the world is an aspiration to match Pakistan's status, if not that of Delhi. And Iran is surely using Pyongyang's nuclear negotiations as a benchmark for its own talks with the West.

U.S. nuclear decision makers need to be more alert to these connections and anticipate the more distant effects of their policies.

The second lesson is that U.S. strategists have to actively consult allies and security partners in Asia. We hear a lot of unease in discussions with policymakers and analysts throughout Northeast Asia. Those anxieties spring from a variety of sources – North Korea is a big contributor – and they ebb and flow (sometimes with the news cycle). President Obama's embrace of disarmament, while welcome in general, also raises fears among allies that balancing defense, deterrence, and disarmament may prove impossible. Calls from Tokyo and Seoul for the U.S. to publicly reaffirm its commitment to their defense are an expression of this concern.

Statements by government officials, no matter how senior, are welcome, but they aren't sufficient. Washington has to engage its Asian allies and more systematically explore nuclear issues with them, as it does with its European partners. It is especially important now as the administration prepares the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which will lay out its thinking about strategic policies and systems. There are formidable obstacles to this undertaking – domestic political sensitivities surrounding these topics and a lack of expertise are the most obvious – but they can be overcome.

To its credit, the U.S. is reaching out to its Asian allies. Nuclear issues and the extended deterrent are being discussed at the assistant secretary level; those allies' views are being solicited as the NPR moves forward. In fact, there appears to be more of an emphasis on Asia than ever before in that drafting process.

Missile defense will continue to be a contentious issue. Its expense and its reliability will make it a lightning rod for criticism and a target for budget cutters; it has already been criticized by defense specialists in the new government in Tokyo. Potential adversaries will complain about any program that can block their weapons. Active engagement won't eliminate all those problems, but it will ensure that our discussions focus on critical issues, rather than irritants that have been allowed to fester.

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