US to expand anti-missile systems in Asia

Peter Symonds
24 August 2012

As part of its build-up in Asia, the US military is planning an extensive ballistic missile defence system that will only exacerbate tensions throughout the region, especially with China. According to the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday: "The planned build-up is part of a defensive array that could cover large swathes of Asia, with a new radar in southern Japan and possibly another in Southeast Asia tied to missile-defence ships and land-based interceptors."

North Korea is the purported reason for constructing the anti-missile system, but the real target is China. Steven Hildreth from the US Congressional Research Service told the *Wall Street Journal*: "The focus of our rhetoric is North Korea. The reality is that we're also looking longer term at the elephant in the room, which is China."

Two US officials confirmed to *BusinessWeek* that the Pentagon had held discussions with Japan over a new radar installation on a southern Japanese island and that a similar installation in Southeast Asia was being considered. But they said that no decisions were imminent and described the system as "a possibility in view of the North Korean threat."

The lengthy *Wall Street Journal* article, however, points to the internal discussions within the Pentagon and the White House, as well as the talks that are taking place with key allies—South Korea and Australia, as well as Japan. The immediate focus is the establishment of an early-warning X-band radar in southern Japan, to supplement an X-band installation established in the north of Japan in 2006. US defence officials told the *Journal* that the radar could be installed within months of Japan's agreement.

Officials from the Pentagon's Pacific Command and Missile Defense Agency have also been evaluating sites in Southeast Asia for a third X-Band radar that would allow greater precision in tracking ballistic missiles launched from China as well as North Korea. A senior American official confirmed that any system aimed at North Korea would also cover China. "Physics is physics," he said. "You're either blocking North Korea and China or you're not blocking either of them."

The *Journal's* sources named the Philippines, a formal US ally, as a potential location. Encouraged by the Obama administration, the Philippine government has been ratcheting up tensions with Beijing over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The US is already engaged in discussions with the Philippines over basing arrangements similar to that reached with Australia last November. The US military has begun stationing Marines in Darwin, and American warships and warplanes will have greater access to bases in northern and western Australia.

US Assistance Defence Secretary for Global Strategic Affairs Madelyn Creedon told the media in March that the Pentagon's push for anti-missile systems in Asia involved two sets of trilateral dialogues—one with Japan and Australia and another with Japan and South Korea. Recent tensions between Tokyo and Seoul have cut across US plans. The South Korean government has delayed signing an intelligence sharing agreement with Japan that is considered essential to a regional missile defence system.

The new X-Band radar installations will undoubtedly raise tensions with China. Jeffrey Lewis, an analyst at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, told the *Wall Street Journal* that China would be particularly alarmed if anti-missile systems are designed to cover Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a renegade province.

© World Socialist Web Site

“If you’re putting one in southern Japan and one in the Philippines, you’re sort of bracketing Taiwan,” he said. “So it does look like you’re making sure that you can put a missile defence cap over the Taiwanese.”

The X-Band installations are only one part of the planned anti-ballistic missile system. Once the radar has identified a missile’s trajectory, ship-based or land-based missile interceptors would attempt to shoot it down. The US navy has plans to expand its ship-based systems from 26 to 36 vessels by 2018, a majority of which would be allocated to the Asia Pacific region.

Reuters reported last week that the US and Japan have discussed upgrading two Japanese destroyers, the Atago and the Ashigara, with the latest anti-ballistic missile systems. Under the plan, the modernised warships would be able to fire an updated SM-3 missile that is being developed jointly by the two countries.

The build-up of anti-ballistic missile capacity is one aspect of the Obama administration’s aggressive strategic and diplomatic offensive throughout the region that is aimed at undercutting China’s influence. Defence Secretary Leon Panetta announced in June that the US navy would station 60 percent of its assets in the Asia Pacific by 2020—up from the current 50 percent. Over the past three years, Washington has been strengthening regional military alliances and strategic partnerships.

Washington has promoted its anti-ballistic missile systems in Europe and Asia as purely defensive, aiming to prevent attacks from so-called rogue states such as Iran and North Korea. However, the real purpose behind the weapons is to undermine the effectiveness of the nuclear arsenals of Russia and China, which have both opposed the US plans.

Far from being purely defensive in character, the anti-missile systems are an integral component of the Pentagon’s strategy to achieve overwhelming nuclear superiority over any potential rival. Unlike China, the US has never made a “no first strike” pledge. Indeed in recent years, evidence has emerged that the Pentagon is seeking to achieve “nuclear primacy”—that is, the ability to launch a first strike to wipe out an enemy’s nuclear arsenal and thus its ability to retaliate. The anti-ballistic missile systems are not designed to prevent a first strike by China or Russia, but to shoot down any nuclear missiles not destroyed in a US attack.

The *Wall Street Journal* indirectly acknowledged that the missile defences could not cope with a large-scale Russian or Chinese attack. But as a senior US official told the newspaper, the new missile defence deployments would be able to track and repulse a limited strike from China. If that is the case, the anti-missile systems will only heighten the danger of a catastrophic all-out nuclear exchange. In the event of conflict, Russia and China will be more likely to unleash their nuclear missiles if their governments believe that they are about to be completely destroyed by a US first strike. The X-Band installations would, of course, be prime targets.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site