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Missile Defense: Problems and Opportunities in NATO-Russia Relations

Michael Paul

On the first day of his third term as Russian President, Vladimir W. Putin directed the Foreign Ministry to push for guarantees that US missile interceptors planned for fielding in Europe would not be aimed against Russia's nuclear facilities. A few days before at an unprecedented international conference in Moscow hosted by the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Chief of the General Staff, General Nikolai E. Makarov, repeated warnings that Russia might opt to station short-range missiles in its Kaliningrad exclave to counter the missile defense system. He added that Russia might consider a preemptive strike on the system in Europe if the situation were to worsen. Despite the NATO summit declaration of Chicago – that NATO missile defense is not directed against Russia – the dispute with Moscow goes on. Although fears of a Russian-US strategic arms race are unwarranted, concerns about Russian misperception and mistrust are not. Therefore, it is in the interest of the United States and its allies to convince Moscow that the missile defense system is not part of a larger American effort to gain strategic nuclear domination by depriving Russia of its ability to deter a nuclear attack. The best approach to overcome misperceptions would be to start cooperation by sharing information and combining capabilities.

At the NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012, the commitment to a strategic partnership between the Alliance and the Russian Federation was once again confirmed. NATO does not see Russia as a threat and some view Moscow's threatened countermeasures to the Alliance's missile defense deployment as an unjustified waste of resources on Moscow's part. But it is not pure rhetoric: Russia's ongoing military modernization could provide fodder for those who argue for a more Eurocentric

NATO, reorganized around its classic Article 5 function, thus keeping cooperation with Russia in limbo. At first sight, hampering deeper NATO-Russia cooperation would be a more comfortable option for both sides, namely because full cooperation in missile defense would mean giving Moscow a real chance to participate in NATO projects while Russian facilities would have to become part of NATO's defense system. At a deeper glance, there is now an excellent opportunity for coopera-

tion, which could be used for a long-term and strategic improvement in NATO-Russia relations. Putin's decree also says Moscow aims to bring cooperation with Washington "to a truly strategic level." And which project would be more ambitious and suitable to that aim?

Ballistic missile proliferation and the European Phased Adaptive Approach

Ballistic missile proliferation is the decisive factor for establishing a missile defense system. That a number of countries are in fact acquiring both ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) suggests that they have become weapons of choice in the 21st century. The availability of these weapons and their medium- to long-range means of delivery have a direct impact on regional affairs even if they exist only in small numbers. According to Russian General Vyacheslav Trubnikov: "Even if none of Iran, Pakistan and North Korea becomes Russian enemy, the already existing and would-be missile-nuclear potential of such countries is in a position to destabilize the regional situation." The likelihood that WMD-tipped missiles would actually be used is also very small. But the threat that they *might* be used could erode the will of the United States, or of its allies, to confront aggression. Clearly the United States would act – even if facing a WMD threat – if vital national interests were endangered. However, threats to international peace will not necessarily present direct risks to US vital interests, in which case public fear of WMD could loom large in US and NATO decision-making. Such a scenario is not new and was described in a 2001 paper by David C. Gompert (RAND) and Klaus Arnold (SWP). Concerning arms control and nonproliferation, legal barriers for acquiring WMD and missiles are porous: the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Missile Technology Control Regime have not prevented the spread of WMD and missile technology.

Therefore, missile defense offers another option to protect against blackmail and threats from states possessing WMD and ballistic missiles.

The European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), announced by US President Barack Obama on 17 September 2009, responds to the evolving threat. A year later in November 2010, the heads of state and governments of the Alliance decided at the NATO summit in Lisbon to develop a ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability whose aim is to protect NATO populations, territory, and forces against the increasing threats posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles, and they invited Russia to cooperate.

Four deployment phases are planned: Phase 1 addresses regional ballistic missile threats to European allies and US personnel through the use of a land-based AN/TPY-2 radar and existing Aegis BMD-capable ships equipped with Standard Missile (SM)-3 Block IA interceptors. In March 2011, the United States announced the deployment of the USS Monterey to the Mediterranean to begin a sustained deployment of Aegis BMD-capable ships in support of the EPAA. At the Chicago summit, the Alliance declared an interim ballistic missile defense capability, marking the first step in the development of the NATO missile defense system. On 21 May 2012, Headquarters Allied Air Command Ramstein, Germany, took over the command and control systems required to exercise operational command of NATO's interim capability. This capability allows NATO commanders to conduct limited ballistic missile defense planning and to exchange information with national ballistic missile defense assets.

In Phase 2 (2015 timeframe) – after appropriate testing – a more capable version of the SM-3 interceptor (Block IB) will be deployed. There will also be a land-based SM-3 missile defense interceptor site in Romania, in order to expand the defended area against short- and medium-range missile threats (150–2400 km). In Phase 3 (2018 timeframe) – after development and testing

are complete – a more advanced SM-3 interceptor (Block IIA) will be deployed and an SM-3 site will be developed in Poland to counter short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missile threats. Phase 4 (2020 time-frame), again after development and testing are complete, the SM-3 Block IIB interceptor – a completely new missile – will be deployed to enhance the ability to counter medium- and intermediate-range missiles (2400–5500 km) and potential future threats from intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) to the United States.

From phase to phase, there will be more advanced SM-3 interceptors as well as more radar and other sensor technology integrated by linking in with current NATO and European (and possibly Russian) missile and air defense programs. Thus, assuming that the plans for missile defense are feasible (and assessments of its technical feasibility remain heavily politicized and controversial), Russia's concerns are less about the first two phases and more about the 2018 – and especially the 2020 – time-frame, when capabilities against ICBM threats are planned. This concerns Russia because silo-based and mobile ICBMs will remain the mainstays of Russia's nuclear strategic forces.

The threat, according to Moscow

Moscow is concerned that next-generation interceptors planned for fielding in Europe will be secretly aimed at Russian ICBMs – if not now, then under future US leadership. Washington and Brussels maintain that their missile defense is focused on deterring a possible ballistic missile attack from other regions. Clearly there is a difference between a missile defense architecture focused against regional threats and a missile defense designed to negate the Russian deterrent. Even the 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) gave no realistic hope that the United States would ever be able to protect all American cities and that Moscow would lose its ability to retaliate in the improbable case of a US first strike.

Nevertheless, there would be some theoretical overlap between the two of them. US expert Ted Postol has argued that whether or not the planned EPAA was *intended* against Russia, the salient point was that it will have some inherent *capability* against Russia's strategic forces, especially in Phases III and IV. Thus, it was stated at the Moscow conference by the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General **Valery V. Gerasimov**, that Poland-based BMD shooters featuring third-phase performances would pose a threat to the Russian strategic nuclear forces (while failing to assure protection of the entirety of Western Europe against the threat of missile strikes from the south, according to Gerasimov). From that perspective, President Obama's EPAA looks to be far more dangerous than the plan of George W. Bush, as Russian experts have remarked. Clearly, the dispute concentrates on future capabilities, which are difficult to assess now. But there are several points concerning Russian threat perceptions that are quite obvious.

First, there will be no impregnable “shield” against missiles (and there will be no second coming of SDI), but missile defense would be essential for reducing the amount of destruction in case of an attack, thus forming a damage-limitation option.

Second, the planned missile defense is not directed against Russia, which has much faster and more highly sophisticated missiles than countries like Iran and North Korea, which are the main focus of the defense system. Even combined with a total of 30 more capable ground-based interceptors at Fort Greeley in Alaska (26) and at Vandenberg Air Force Base (4) in California – according to the Pentagon, they are the backbone of a continuous operational capability to protect the United States against intermediate range and intercontinental ballistic missiles – there will not be a sufficient number of interceptors to negate the Russian deterrent.

Third, Russia is concerned that interceptors deployed in northern Europe, either on

the ground in Poland or on Aegis ships in the North Sea, could reach Russian nuclear missiles headed for the United States. Flight trajectories over the Black Sea or the Norwegian Sea (as shown in a digital presentation at the Moscow conference) make the interdiction of a single missile theoretically possible. But to translate that into a threat to the Russian deterrent is based on false assumptions, considering the small size and limited quality of the missile defense system. Thus, concerning the Poland-based interceptors, an intercept is impossible due to the lags inherent in missile defense engagement. The burnout velocities of SM-3 Block II variants could change that, although Russian experts point to modeling that demonstrates that even these faster (5.5 km/sec) SM-3 Block 2B planned for deployment in Europe will not undermine Russia's strategic deterrent capability.

Fourth, to oppose missile defense because of the overlap of a regional and a global missile defense architecture is to invite further proliferation: States that feel threatened could – in the absence of missile defense – pursue their own hedging strategies, that is, build their own, potentially nuclear-armed, deterrent force. By raising doubts about the efficacy of attacks, missile defense could discourage WMD and missile proliferation.

Fifth, missile defense will indeed magnify the impact that US conventional military superiority already provides. But cooperation would mean a Russian ability to anticipate and respond to evolving US capabilities.

Sixth, as it engages a growing number of NATO allies, the EPAA – from the Russian perspective – “cements NATO.” That may be indeed a by-product of missile defense. But NATO is not just a military treaty and much more a political alliance; it is time to break down the Cold War stereotypes that linger on both sides.

Finally, what looks like – from the Moscow perspective – a threat to strategic stability is for Washington an endeavor to strengthen it: Missile defense neither eliminates the strategic rationale of nuclear

deterrence nor the Russian deterrent, but supports its endurance by raising doubts about the efficacy of WMD attacks, thus complementing the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence.

Furthermore, a NATO-Russia missile defense would support arms control and non-proliferation. But the next years must be used for substantial progress.

Cooperation can provide the best assurances

Russian capabilities could enhance the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the combined territorial missile defenses, and at the same time provide Russia with greater security. As an initial step, NATO and Russia agreed in November 2010 on a joint ballistic missile threat assessment and that the NATO-Russia Council would resume theater missile defense cooperation.

Now the talks between Russia and NATO have deadlocked over US reluctance to give Moscow legally-binding guarantees that the missile defense system will not be used against Russia. At the Chicago summit, the Alliance gave the strongest political statement yet that NATO missile defence is not directed against Russia and will not undermine Russia's strategic deterrence capabilities. But traditional Russian (and NATO) military thinking concentrates on capabilities rather than intentions. So why paper over the differences instead of cooperate? Military capabilities of both the United States and the NATO missile defense system will be severely limited by costs and a narrow focus on regional threats. Defending the United States and NATO against hundreds of highly sophisticated Russian strategic missiles and their nuclear warheads is far beyond the scope of the planned system. The objective of the phased adaptive approach of the Obama administration is to retain some sort of flexible missile defense surge-capacity to deploy around the world (in addition to the stationary system in the United States). It is this adaptive uncertainty that most concerns Russia. But again,

this is essentially not a means to counter the Russian deterrent and even Russian experts are skeptical that the US BMD and EPAA present threats due to the potential for advances in technical ability or size of the planned system.

President Dmitry Medvedev's "sectoral" missile defense proposal of November 2010 – with parts of NATO territory in its "sector" – is even seen by Russian experts as unrealistic because it would essentially delegate to Moscow the responsibility for protecting parts of Europe. Missile defense is a means to pursue NATO's core task of collective defense and is based on the principles of the indivisibility of Allied security and NATO solidarity. Thus, it is impossible to give Russia the right to act like a member of the Alliance, and – via a joint system of combat control for target distribution – to get a kind of veto position in NATO's decision-making process. Also, NATO cannot accept Moscow's proposal for a single combined European missile defense system, as it would involve placing some Alliance member states' missile security in the hands of Russia. Thus, it is clear how co-operation should not look, but what are the alternatives?

Cooperation should begin with small steps and follow a pragmatic approach, flanked by trust-building measures and clear statements on direction. Sharing information may be an easier path forward than combining hardware. Joint NATO-Russia and US-Russia intelligence assessments of the missile threat have already been successfully completed. Furthermore, NATO and Russia have resumed joint theater missile defense computer-assisted exercises, with the last one having been hosted by Germany in March 2012 (a Russian general called that the only positive moment after Lisbon). First steps could include: creation of "Cooperation Centers" for fusing and sharing information and data, as well as the resumption of joint command-staff exercises on ballistic missile defense, as proposed by the trilateral Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative.

The United States and NATO prefer two separate but linked missile defense systems in Europe (one for NATO territory, the other for Russia). Both will be operated under the respective Alliance or national rules, but they will exchange early warning data and signals. The linked radars and sensors would fuse data on threats as well as ballistic missile launches from other states, like Iran.

As a first step, the Chicago summit declaration calls for establishing a joint NATO-Russia Missile Data Fusion Centre, and a joint Planning Operations Centre to cooperate on missile defense. The Alliance proposed to develop a transparency regime based upon a regular exchange of information about the current respective missile defense capabilities of NATO and Russia. Such concrete missile defense cooperation was the best means to provide Russia with the assurances it seeks regarding NATO's missile defense plans and capabilities. This process could be accompanied by further actions to ensure transparency – from sharing of missile threat information to an exchange of information about future plans so that Russia could have a clearer sense of how many systems are likely to be deployed and what their capabilities will be.

In the long term, Moscow might even permit its Sofrino-based Don-2NP radar facility to be incorporated into a Russia-NATO missile defense system. During a tour of the radar base organized by the Defense Ministry for participants of the Moscow conference, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said that if Russia makes an agreement with NATO and the United States, then the Don-2 could be part of the potential system and could be used against potential medium and long-range missile threats. There is also a new proposal by US expert Dean Wilkening that suggests establishing a joint upgraded early-warning radar in central Russia.

Under President Putin, Russia is committed to seeking firm guarantees that a global missile defense system is not aimed against Russian nuclear forces. Indeed, President

Obama cannot offer a legally-binding guarantee, because when he sought ratification of the New START treaty in 2010, he promised to accept no limits on US missile defense – a situation US Senators like Jon Kyl remember quite well. Thus, assuming that Moscow will wait and see who will become the next US president, a compromise seems to be possible after November 2012 and, instead of guarantees, maybe a legally-binding treaty about missile defense cooperation, including specific military-technical criteria that will enable Russia to judge whether the system squares with its stated aim. With or without treaties, cooperation can provide the best assurances.

There is now an excellent opportunity for a long-term and strategic improvement in NATO-Russia relations. Whether the potential for more cooperation will be used – from sharing technical information to the interconnection of surveillance and defense systems in various areas – is still a point of intensive discussion. But it should be clear that cooperation in missile defense is the decisive test for the future of NATO-Russia relations.

The arms control nexus

Army General Vladimir Yakovlev, then commander-in-chief of the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces, said in November 2000 that the US program to develop a missile defense system was “likely to prove unstoppable,” due to major financial, scientific, and technical resources already invested. At that time, President Putin tried to keep the ABM treaty alive by coupling it with a reduction of strategic nuclear weapons. Now, the New START treaty seems to be in danger due to the linkage between the reduction of nuclear weapons and missile defense. Only if the missile defense problem is solved will another new start for deeper cuts in nuclear arsenals be realistic. The deeper the cuts, the more important that missile defense becomes. A new world of cooperative missile defense could really become a “game changer” (Special Envoy for Strategic Sta-

bility and Missile Defense Ellen Tauscher), eventually making even bilateral strategic arms control obsolete.

Cooperation in missile defense could facilitate the withdrawal of both US and Russian sub-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe in the future. There is no doubt that in the current security environment, tactical nuclear weapons serve no meaningful military role for the defense of NATO members in Europe. On Russia’s side, the lack of transparency contributes to widely varying estimates of the number of Russian non-strategic weapons that are deployed or stockpiled. Reciprocal transparency regarding numbers, types, locations, and operational status on tactical nuclear weapons in Europe could pave the way toward concrete reductions.

If the Kremlin agreed to a new innovative approach by addressing *all* nuclear weapons, the next step could be to pursue a proposal like the one made by Steven Pifer, director of the Arms Control Initiative at Brookings. The proposal calls for putting a limit on all strategic and non-strategic nuclear warheads of no more than 2,500 per side, and a sublimit of no more than 1,000 deployed strategic warheads per side. Such a warhead limit and sublimit would allow each side the freedom to choose between non-strategic nuclear weapons and non-deployed strategic warheads. Russia might retain more of the former, while the United States would likely prefer more of the latter.

Furthermore, Moscow could keep – and Washington could eliminate – land-based ICBMs, thus balancing the offense-defense relationship and enhancing crisis stability. The best way for Russia to save its deterrent is through deep cuts, but this would mean another round of complex and lengthy negotiations. But, again, there will be no prospect for deep cuts in nuclear arsenals without US-Russian cooperation in missile defense.

German perspectives

Germany is currently not exposed to any direct threat, as stated during the Moscow conference by State Secretary Rüdiger Wolf from the German Ministry of Defense. But in light of technological developments, the range of ballistic missiles will extend to German territory and also all European NATO territory in the future. Since Germany is surrounded by allies and friendly nations, the threat posed by these means of delivery is “one of the last remaining to German territory.”

But what is Berlin’s approach concerning missile defense? As a NATO member, Germany follows the Alliance principle of equitable sharing of risks and burdens and hosts the operational command of NATO’s Missile Defense in Ramstein. Over the long term, Berlin might designate German F 124 frigates for SM-3-interceptors. As a partner of Moscow, Germany can help to reduce Russia’s concerns about the real intent of missile defense – namely that it is not, and will not, be aimed against Russia’s nuclear facilities – and support confidence-building measures. Problems and obstacles in the way of establishing full-fledged cooperation between Russia and NATO in building BMD are indeed – as Russian General Vyacheslav Trubnikov has observed – “largely attributable to the Cold War-left mistrust of the parties.” But trust and cooperation are interacting factors that should be used to overcome these leftover sentiments.

From a transatlantic perspective, missile defense is much more a question of political architecture of European security than a military solution for an evolving threat. But as US expert Catherine Kelleher has observed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, neither the West nor Russia has identified an appropriate institutional framework that assures regular negotiations, bargaining, and the exchange of information beyond bilateral channels. NATO, the EU, the OSCE, and the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe regime all placed Russia in the unenviable position of being the one against all the rest, the

focus or the target of action of the others. Russian generals clearly acknowledge that missile defense cooperation can play a decisive role for “a real strategic partnership.” Why not use NATO-Russian “Cooperation Centers” in Brussels and Moscow as a new organizational framework for a future security architecture, providing a maximum of inclusion and interoperability?

Back to the future?

Four years ago, a high-ranking general in Afghanistan declared that NATO did not need any help from Russia. Now Russian support for the International Security Assistance Force is of vital importance. From a German perspective, the necessity of an enduring NATO-Russia cooperation that is as deep as possible is clear. But there are still misperceptions and mistrust to overcome. Thus, the Russian approach of branding missile defense as a threat to strategic stability is a simple instrument to delegitimize it, to portray NATO as menacing, and to weaken support in NATO countries. The other side of the coin is marked by the notion that currently there is no missile threat. Many believe that this is basically a spoiler position to paralyze or slow down the deployment of the US missile defense systems in Europe, or at the very least, that it will be used as a bargaining chip.

Moscow has a national missile defense system, so there is no need to build another one. But cooperation would mean an opportunity for Moscow to participate in the process of establishing a NATO missile defense and to get access to the technological and operational capabilities of US and NATO forces. Furthermore, Moscow would not have to invest in more intelligence (to increase the number of information sources in order to assure target identification) because cooperation means also transparency, trust, and knowledge of how US and NATO capabilities will evolve.

Cooperation clearly is in the interest of both Russia and NATO, as NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has

argued: “Politically, it would be a clear demonstration that the missile defence system is not directed against Russia. And militarily, it would also make the whole system more effective.” Over the long term, NATO-based missile defense can only strengthen European security if Russia is on board. Yet it depends much more on political decisions rather than on military considerations as to whether there will be cooperation.

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