

# Illusive Visions and Practical Realities: Russia, NATO and Missile Defence

Richard Weitz

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO Secretary-General, has repeatedly urged European and American leaders to collaborate with Russia in developing a comprehensive missile-defence architecture that would be jointly built and managed by Moscow and its new partners. He has pointed to continuing improvements in Iran's potential capacity to launch ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads as an emerging threat to all European countries, including Russia, and has warned that a failure to undertake a vigorous response could endanger Europeans' security. He has further argued that pursuing a joint NATO–Russia initiative could build a foundation for concrete security cooperation among the parties in other areas. Rasmussen's vision of 'one security roof that protects us all' extending 'from Vancouver to Vladivostok' is certainly bold, and his pessimistic threat assessment regarding Iran is now shared by many Western and Russian analysts. In principle, he is also correct that having 'one security roof would be a very strong political symbol that Russia is fully part of the Euro-Atlantic family ... not outside, but very much inside'.<sup>1</sup> But past experience suggests that such extensive NATO–Russian cooperation on ballistic-missile defence (BMD) is highly unlikely, notwithstanding the recent upturn in NATO–Russia ties. Even the more limited BMD collaboration outlined in the article by Nikolai Sokov in this issue would be hard to realise unless several factors that have repeatedly disrupted past Russian–American attempts to sustain joint BMD initiatives can be overcome.<sup>2</sup>

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As Sokov's article shows, one long-standing barrier to Russian–US collaboration may be weakening: more Russian policymakers now seem to concur with the traditionally more pessimistic US and NATO threat assessments regarding Iran.<sup>3</sup> Most Russians would not welcome Tehran's acquisition of nuclear-armed long-range missiles, but in the past their experts have denigrated Iran's security ambitions and defence capabilities. Now some

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Russian experts and policymakers seem more convinced, though perhaps still less so than many of their NATO colleagues, that Iran is developing an effective ballistic-missile arsenal, that Tehran's nuclear capabilities are substantially improving, and even that some Iranian leaders are seeking nuclear-weapons options. That said, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently characterised Russia's policies toward Iran as 'schizophrenic', suggesting unease among US policymakers regarding the extent to which they can

count on further Russian assistance in countering Iran's potential nuclear threat through missile-defence collaboration and other cooperative efforts.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, many long-standing barriers to NATO–Russian cooperation, including impediments to information sharing and limited capacity for rapid decision-making, persist. Indeed, achieving multilateral control over BMD systems is an inherently difficult task, even for close allies. NATO governments have so far been unable to deploy an alliance-wide missile-defence system despite more than ten years of work. The technology is exceptionally complex and the financial costs high, and BMD management entails challenging command-and-control issues. Participants must craft an arrangement that would permit timely launch decisions in situations where even a few minutes' delay in authorising an interception attempt could prove fatal. In the case of NATO–Russian missile-defence collaboration, the diverging technical standards and operational procedures of the parties' respective BMD systems would compound this problem. Whereas Russian policymakers rightly want to exercise control over how Russian assets might be used, Western commanders have made clear that they could never rely on an architecture that required urgent Russian authorisation for its use.

Restrictive technology-transfer policies, moreover, have disrupted multi-national defence projects even among NATO Allies. The barriers to sharing sensitive technologies with Russian companies, or missile-threat data with the Russian military, are considerably greater. Proposals to integrate NATO and Russian missile-defence efforts must overcome the reluctance of the parties to reveal their vulnerabilities in an arrangement that would give all sides a much deeper understanding of the capabilities and operations of one another's systems. In addition, NATO policymakers fear that intelligence about their BMD systems and tactics might find its way to Iran, North Korea or other states of proliferation concern. These countries might then exploit this intelligence to develop more effective counter-measures. Russia's military cooperation with China has also induced caution among NATO governments about sharing missile-defence technologies with Moscow. Not only could China use any technical knowledge it obtained in this area to circumvent US and Japanese systems, but Chinese experts might share such insights with Tehran or Pyongyang.<sup>5</sup>

#### A history of failure

Recurring US attempts to create national missile defences have long divided Russia and the West. These problems arose in the early 1980s when President Ronald Reagan embarked on a quixotic quest to construct a space-based missile shield (the Strategic Defense Initiative) over the United States. Despite the end of Cold War antagonisms, BMD-related tensions persisted during the 1990s, when the Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin administrations struggled to delineate acceptable limits on the capabilities of US theatre missile defences (TMD) that would allow US forces to intercept North Korean short- and medium-range ballistic missiles but would not threaten Russia's longer-range missiles. Most recently, the dispute over the George W. Bush administration's plans to construct a 'third site' for US national missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic contributed to the most serious downturn in Russian-US relations in decades. Even after President Barack Obama relocated the initial phase of the planned deployments closer to Iran and further away from the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) based in central Russia, which Moscow considers a vital element of its stra-



ucts, including batteries of Russian S-300 and S-400 air- and missile-defence



European deployments. They responded by launching a comprehensive campaign to convince their Russian colleagues that these systems aimed only to counter an emerging Iranian missile threat and, due to their limited number and capabilities, could only threaten Russia if they were greatly expanded in the future. As Russian opposition continued, however, US officials became convinced that Russian leaders objected to the planned deployments even though they actually understood that the proposed systems could not threaten Russia's large arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles. US observers began to emphasise other reasons for Russian objections to the deployment. Some US analysts speculated, for example, that Moscow's sabre rattling aimed to justify increases in Russian defence spending and to mobilise nationalist forces behind the Putin regime. They also perceived Russian protests over the planned Polish and Czech missile-defence deployments as motivated partly by Russian objections to NATO's continued enlargement into former Soviet-bloc territories. Senior ministers of the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic, the two countries that had committed to hosting US systems under the G.W. Bush administration, also characterised Russia's hostile reaction as an attempt to establish that their countries still fell within Moscow's sphere of influence.

For their part, Russian officials complained that briefings given by US officials on the proposed deployments were insufficiently detailed, a problem that would need to be overcome in any effort to pursue comprehensive NATO–Russian BMD collaboration in the future. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov characterised US actions as reflecting 'an old approach when our American colleagues decided something and then implemented their decisions proceeding from the assumption that others will have to accept something that has already happened'.<sup>16</sup>

Russian analysts also expressed concerns about the open-ended nature of the evolving US global BMD architecture. Like other Russian commentators, Nikita Petrov complained that 'Washington has never said when it intends to stop the deployment of its missile defense system'.<sup>19</sup> Although Russian defence experts acknowledged that their country's vast strategic missile arsenal could overwhelm the small number of interceptor missiles planned for Poland, they claimed that the United States could easily deploy additional systems in the future. They were especially worried that the United States would seek to deploy systems in other regions near Russia besides Poland and the Czech Republic. The Russian media speculated that

the US government wanted to deploy a BMD radar in the Caucasus, where it could monitor both Iranian and Russian territory. Various American statements stressing the need to preserve US options to respond flexibly to changing threats exacerbated these concerns.<sup>20</sup>

Russian policymakers apparently hoped that their protests and threats would induce NATO to abandon the proposed deployments. By showing that US policies were provoking a major East–West crisis, Russian leaders might have anticipated that their NATO counterparts would pressure the United States and potential host governments to resist Washington's plans. These aspirations were not without foundation. The missile crisis revived long-standing transatlantic differences over the value

the Czech Republic. American officials belatedly sought to shore up Allied support for the system by redefining the proposed deployments as complementing related NATO efforts in this area and helping defend North America from long-range missile strikes. Although they initially envisaged the proposed deployments primarily as forward-based elements of the US National Missile Defense system aimed at countering possible ICBM launches against the continental United States, US government representatives soon began to depict these systems as intended also to help defend US allies from missile strikes originating in Middle Eastern countries.

Some US and NATO analysts saw Russia's confrontational posture as an attempt to bargain for much greater influence in any European missile-defence architecture than Western governments would like to provide. Russian defence leaders certainly made statements affirming Russia's right to participate as a core member of any European BMD architecture. For example, the chief of the Russian General Staff, General Yury Baluyevskiy, indicated that Russia would only fully support a NATO missile-defence system that was jointly developed with Moscow. NATO must choose, he wrote, 'whether the missile defense system in Europe will be developed jointly with Russia, or whether it will be a segment of the U.S. national system without Russia's participation'.<sup>22</sup> The head of the Russian Air Force, Vladimir Mikhailov, told Europeans that deploying US BMD assets on their

kind of BMD architecture NATO countries would establish to defend their security.

### Ongoing challenges

Throughout 2007 and 2008, Russian and American officials discussed a

radar station in return for Washington's promise to freeze its planned Czech and Polish deployments. At the July 2007 Kennebunkport summit, Putin additionally told Bush that the United States could also use a nearly completed BMD radar located in Krasnodar Territory in southern Russia, about 700km northwest of Iran.<sup>32</sup> The Russian president also proposed establishing an ambitious pan-European BMD architecture that would integrate NATO and Russian defences against common missile threats. Putin further called for the revival of the Joint Data Exchange Center in Moscow and the establishment of a similar joint early-warning data centre in Brussels in order to more fully involve other NATO governments. Putin's comment that 'the deck has been dealt, and we are here to play' implied a willingness to consider additional initiatives that would meet US, NATO and Russian security needs.<sup>33</sup> A member of the Russian delegation said at the time that 'we are proposing global strategic partnership and the choice is with our American partners'.<sup>34</sup>

Although the G.W. Bush administration expressed interest in accessing the information from the Gabala and Armavir radars, it was unwilling to accept Putin's condition that the United States suspend its East European deployments in exchange. White House representatives maintained that, while these Russian early-warning radars might be able to supply data useful for assessing Iranian missile launches, they lacked the battle-management capabilities of the X-band radar planned for the Czech Republic or the ability to intercept any missile directed at Europe, as the Polish interceptors were designed to do. Although Putin's Kennebunkport proposal aimed to overcome some of the technical objections raised by US defence analysts regarding the Gabala site, it did not address two other factors that American policymakers understandably decline to highlight in public.

Firstly, many people in Washington doubt that a truly multinational BMD system could work. As noted above, intercept decisions must be made quickly: even a few minutes' delay in transmitting information would prevent a timely launch. These concerns are particularly relevant

in the case of Putin's proposals for a joint Russian–American command-and-control system for a radar in Azerbaijan or southern Russia. The fear is that Moscow might use any dual-key arrangement to impede future measures that Washington might wish to take, such as tracking or intercepting a suspicious Iranian missile launch. These considerations also explain the initial US reluctance to give NATO an operational role in the deployments planned for Poland and the Czech Republic. Given the stakes involved, the American government wanted autonomy in decision-making.

Secondly, many US officials worry about the opportunities for Russian intelligence gathering that would be presented by any joint missile-defence initiative. Putin himself observed that his proposal envisaged the unprecedented integration of the US and Russian BMD architectures. This arrangement would give both parties a much deeper understanding of the capabilities and operations of their respective national systems. An unspoken US concern is that such intelligence might find its way to Tehran, Pyongyang or other actors of proliferation concern, where it would facilitate the development of counter-measures. In contrast, the Czech and Polish facilities were planned to be largely American-run enterprises, which would have facilitated the rapid transfer of data to the US BMD command and would have minimised opportunities for intelligence leakage.

The failed effort to develop confidence-building measures that would have satisfied the security needs of both Russia and NATO provides a cautionary example of the difficulty in converting such proposals into concrete, operational arms-control limits. Likewise, the extent to which Moscow should play a role in deciding whether Iran was capable of threatening Europe with missile attacks (a major justification for the planned missile interceptors in Poland) proved exceptionally difficult to determine. Russians and Americans have differed for years on the question of whether Iran presents a genuine threat to NATO's security. Russian analysts have long accused their American counterparts of exaggerating Iranian capabilities to justify placing BMD systems in Europe that actually seek to counter Russia's own nuclear deterrent. Attempts to

architecture,<sup>35</sup> while US officials insisted (as they continue to do today) that they would never give the Russian government a veto over when and how the United States could employ its missile defences.<sup>36</sup>

Moscow's insistence that Russian personnel enjoy a permanent presence at any BMD facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic to monitor their operations has presented another stumbling block. Immediately after the

Enforcement of confidence-building measures would also have presented practical problems. Many US officials resist agreements that would limit Washington's ability to respond rapidly to emerging threats. In contrast, Eey8iia policymakers have, in Etheir Earms-on negotiations Ewith Ethe IUnite States, insisted on formal, legally binding treaties. Lavrov has said

### Obama's missile-defence priorities

The Obama administration released its Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report on February 27, 2010. Consistent with other administration statements, it outlines the White House's fundamental plans and priorities for US ballistic-missile defences. Among them:

- x The administration has stressed the need for flexible plans and capabilities that can adapt as threats and technologies evolve. The BMD programmes associated with this 'phased adaptive approach' aim to defend against the currently limited ballistic-missile threats, while hedging against the emergence of more substantial challenges in coming years.
- x The administration aims to defend the American homeland, US military forces and foreign partners from ballistic-missile threats. In contrast to the growing number of US TMD systems protecting forward-deployed American troops as well as other countries, US national missile defence will continue to rely exclusively on the ground-based mid-course defence systems at Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Air Force Base, California.

missile-defence programmes to obtain greater Russian support against Iran.

Russian officials continue to offer to collaborate with NATO on missile defence, but they want to focus first on developing a shared understanding of potential missile threats. The next step would be to pursue political and economic measures to avert them. Moscow insists that, if Russia and NATO countries perceive a genuine threat, they should undertake a joint

response, which could include deploying BMD systems.

Sokov observes that 'a key condition for Russian participation is full-scale integration into any early-warning

and defence system – not just the provision of data, but

actual involvement in decision-making and operation

of the system'. The Obama administration and other

NATO governments want to cooperate with Russia

on missile defence, but like their predecessors are not

willing to give Moscow a potential veto over their BMD

operations, or over Washington or NATO's future BMD plans for Europe.

In thinking about future strategic arms-control possibilities, it is important to note that there is no consistent pattern in how closely Moscow and Washington link strategic offensive forces with strategic defences. The connection was tightest during the first Soviet–American strategic arms-control dialogue, the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT), in 1969–72. The agreement that emerged from the talks (SALT I) consisted of both an Interim Agreement on Offensive Arms, which froze the American and Soviet ICBM forces at existing levels, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which severely limited the location and size of each country’s national ballistic-missile defence systems. The Soviet Union and the United States agreed to the pairing because one factor driving both countries to increase their offensive nuclear forces was a determination to overcome the other’s missile defences. The linkage was also evident in the mid-1980s, when Soviet of -

tious goals to establish a jointly run missile-defence system for the Northern Hemisphere. Pursuing such an unrealistic goal risks generating yet another round of mutual recriminations resulting from frustrated expectations. Joint BMD projects cannot be used to create a political consensus on missile defence when it does not already exist.

It would be more profitable at this point to focus on harmonising Russian–NATO threat assessments, pursuing shared early-warning capabilities, strengthening barriers against accidental or unauthorised missile launches, and expanding joint initiatives to curtail the proliferation of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons rather than to seek to construct a comprehensive NATO–Russia missile-defence architecture. It might even be possible to establish a few jointly run TMD systems, but these facilities, which may not be available during a genuine crisis if one party objects to their use, should only be seen as optional supplements to the parties’ core BMD architectures. The Obama administration’s BMD Review, completed earlier this year, noted that ‘one of the benefits of the European Phased Adaptive Approach is that it allows for a Russian contribution if political circumstances make that possible. For example, Russian radars could contribute useful and welcome tracking data, although the functioning of the U.S. system will not be dependent on that data.’<sup>45</sup> One possibility under this approach would be to convert the Gabala radar into a shared Russia–NATO early-warning system that could enhance both parties’ BMD capabilities but that would not be indispensable to the functioning of either party’s European missile defences. Even so, NATO and Russian officials should recognise that the value of this collaboration would be primarily political, helping to reconcile their differences over BMD in general and, ideally, reinforcing the message to Iran that its missile programmes are alienating important countries.

## Notes

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