

Scrapping the missiles – a tipping-point?

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President Obama's recent announcement to scrap plans for a radar installation in the Czech Republic linked to missile defence installations in Poland may herald a tipping point in US and EU relations with Russia. But which way? Will it usher in a new era of genuine cooperation with Russia on strategic matters, or will Russia's geo-political hawks feel emboldened to proceed with their quest for hegemonic power in the former Soviet space?

First, President Obama's short speech should be supported by more detailed information. His argument was that new information about Iran's capabilities and new defence technologies rendered the Czech-Polish plan no longer fit for its original purpose, and that more flexible systems based at sea or other locations to the south would be preferable. That being so, there would be no point in going ahead with the Czech-Polish plan, irrespective of the Russia factor. The plea to look at technicalities rather than geo-political arguments does not seem to have been heeded, certainly not in Moscow, where commentaries are proclaiming a great political victory, nor within conservative Republican circles in Washington, which exclaim "appeasement" and "weakness". The technical arguments should certainly be presented credibly, and heard alongside the predictable banging of geo-political drums by cold-war warriors.

Whatever the strength of the technical arguments, it is obvious that the reversal of this Bush initiative carries both a cost and a risk. The original plan may have been misconceived technically and poorly deployed diplomatically, but its reversal could not be without import for US-Central Europe relations, or the risk of misinterpretation by Russia. Much of old Europe would consider that new Europe, i.e. the new members of NATO and the EU, is somewhat paranoid about the threat of Russia, but new Europe feels its instincts to be confirmed concretely by what it witnessed in Georgia a year ago. And Russia persists with extraordinarily arrogant initiatives that deepen these concerns further.

The new NATO Secretary General, Fogh Rasmussen, views this moment as a propitious one in which to switch NATO-Russia relations back onto a track of deepening cooperation, notably over Iran and Afghanistan. But the EU could also follow through with ideas to test Moscow's preparedness to turn the page on a recent catalogue of mutual irritations,¹ and engage in real cooperation in the wider European neighbourhood, with Eastern Europe and Central Asia in particular. Several domains – energy, transport, environment, border management and crisis

¹ For details, see M. Roth, *Bilateral Disputes between EU Member States and Russia*, CEPS Working Document No. 319, August 2009.

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management –present opportunities for mutually-beneficial, multi-regional cooperation between the EU and different segments of the post-Soviet space.²

The EU has been developing its regional policies in wider Europe in the last few years: the Northern Dimension, the Eastern Partnership, the Central Asia Strategy – only one of which – the Northern Dimension, involves Russia. The Eastern Partnership was launched to bolster the six European former Soviet states, including Belarus, but not Russia. Only Russia is to blame for this state of affairs, since it reflects how its crude ‘diplomacy’ of recent years has upset all of its neighbours.

The EU itself would be more than willing to turn the page with Russia, if it received a signal of interest in genuine cooperation, seeking synergies between all, rather than intensified competition over spheres of influence. How might this be done? Perhaps the EU should think about proposing the missing component of its wider Europe policy, to be called, for example, a ‘EurAsia Strategy’, which would encompass several strands of the EU’s multiple eastern policies (Russian strategic partnership, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia Strategy), and go on to link up with projects in Central Asia of common interest in either China or South Asia, as well as Russia. This connects with but goes beyond the idea of a new *Ostpolitik* as favoured by the German EU Presidency of 2007, which got lost amidst the tensions of several EU-Russia friction points and further discredited by the war with Georgia. Now might be the time to look at it again.

² See M. Emerson, *Synergies vs. Spheres of Influence in the Pan-European Space*, CEPS Paperback, 2009