

BULLETIN

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Prospects for Joint Russia-NATO Missile Defence System

by Beata Górka-Winter, Robert Śmigielski

Mutual interest in improved relations between Russia on one hand and NATO and the U.S. on the other has provided conditions for a discussion on Russia's possible participation in NATO's missile defence (MD) system. But an integrated system, complete with joint command, would require not only political will, a joint assessment of threats and the overcoming of technical obstacles, but—most importantly—the restoration of trust in one other—something which may pose problems in the short run.

President Obama's policy of reset with Russia and modification of the MD architecture in Europe, as announced in September 2009, have opened prospects for cooperation with Russia in building NATO's missile defence system. Under the Phased Adaptive Approach, some of the existing missile defence systems of the U.S. and several European countries, including NATO's Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence, would be merged—and Russia's hypothetical participation in the creation of NATO's MD would become a major component in building the Alliance's strategic partnership with that country.

Russia-NATO-USA Cooperation in the MD Field. The experiences so far have hardly been encouraging. In the 1990s, the United States had approached Russia with proposals of cooperation in the field of missile defence, and two programmes were launched as a result in order e.g. to exchange information about ballistic missile launches: the Russian American Observation Satellite (RAMOS) and the Joint Data Exchange Centre (JDEC). Their implementation was suspended, however, reflecting fears about a leak of state-of-the-art technologies and lack of mutual trust. In 2001 Russia presented a proposal to create a Russia-Europe-U.S. system of defence against short- and medium-range ballistic missiles (Euro-Pro). The idea was discarded because the U.S. opted to build its own system of global MD, and European countries were not interested in the Russian proposal due to political reasons and pressures from local armaments producers interested in collaboration with their U.S. counterparts. After the formation of the Russia-NATO Council in 2002, a working group for theatre missile defence was set up to examine the possibility of operational cooperation between Russian and NATO missile defences; joint war games for command were also held (the latest prior to the Russia-Georgia war of 2008). And according to decisions of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest (2–4 April 2008), the architecture of the future system, to be provided by the Alliance, should be capable of integrating systems created by NATO, the U.S. and Russia.

Russian Reservations towards American MD. Russia links the MD issue with its status as a nuclear superpower and pursuit of a strategic equilibrium with the U.S. It fears that the U.S. system may reach a level which will put in question the nuclear deterrence function of its own nuclear forces. As it is, an effective missile defence may give a country's offensive forces a retaliatory-strike edge, or give rise to a strategy that is founded not on deterrence but on an almost complete certainty of defence against missile attack. Russia has insisted that the MD in the form promoted by the Bush administration created direct threat to Russia's security (e.g. by permitting interceptor base expansion in Poland, or interceptors' re-arming and use them as medium-range missiles).

In September 2009, the U.S. modified the design of Europe-protecting MD, focusing on the development, in the first stages, systems capable of intercepting short- and medium- range ballistic missiles (sea-based Aegis and land-based THAAD). But in the last stage, by 2020, the system will be

equipped with anti-ballistic missiles SM-3 Block II B, capable of intercepting intercontinental missiles. This raises Russia's fears that a missile defence system of such capability can be turned against it.

Prospects for Russia-NATO Collaboration. In a situation where Russia can neither block the MD's emergence in Europe nor restrict its capacity by means of treaty constraints, the only way for the country to influence its shape is to join the MD programme on as favourable terms as can possibly be snatched. And contrary to Russia's declarations about readiness to build its own MD system, the country is short of financial resources to do so. Such plans are also put in question by the decision to close the Academy of Space Defence and by the absence of missile defence among the priorities of armed forces reform. The Russian response to the threats from U.S. missile defence takes the form of upgrading its own systems of strategic offensive weapons.

In practice, the MD problem may either provoke a crisis in Russia's relations with the U.S. or lead to strategic cooperation. For such cooperation to materialise, however, the parties must reach a strategic understanding and abandon the approach whereby two-way relations are based on mutual nuclear deterrence, as confirmed by the new START treaty. The emergence of a common MD would, in practice, be tantamount to almost ally-like relations. It would require resolving a host of problems of not only financial or technological nature (e.g. technology exchange) but also political and strategic—and this is by no means a short-term process. The level of distrust remaining between the parties is too high for an integrated global MD system to be created in the present conditions. And there is no shortage of opinions in Russia that such an arrangement would pose the threat of losing control of the national security system.

Russia is prepared to consider participating in a joint system if its architecture is confined to neutralising the regional threat from Iran and if it poses no challenge to the country's strategic force potential. Russia proposes to start work on the system with a joint analysis of threats resulting from the proliferation of missile and WMD technologies and, proceeding from that basis, to develop a response to those threats. Such a procedure has actually been opened already, both at the Russia-NATO level (Joint Review of 21st Century Common Security Challenges) and the Russia-U.S. level (Russian-American BMD Threat Assessment).

The key confidence-building element would be provided by JDEC implementation, as mentioned in the Russian-American declaration on strategic stability of 24 June 2010. Another step could come with the inclusion of the Russian early-warning stations in Gabala and Armavir into the Iranian-space monitoring effort. A prerequisite for the latter would be full integration of early-warning systems, including participation in management and control. The JDEC could ultimately provide a basis for a joint command structure of an international missile defence system. Russia's MD-linked cooperation with NATO would open up new vistas for the country's armaments industry, which still commands a considerable potential, as exemplified by the S-400 and, in the future, S-500 missile systems and Voronezh-M radiolocation stations. These could be incorporated into the joint system, and cooperation with Western manufacturers could prod the development of Russian technologies. That, however, would require a U.S. policy revision, probably towards removing constraints on technology transfer to Russia—a rather unlikely prospect at present.

Russia's participation in the system would also have a political dimension, by dispelling fears that the system is directed against it—something of importance for those countries in the West that are calling for as close security cooperation with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic area as possible. But NATO member states have yet to develop a consensus on whether there is a need for Russia to participate in MD building, and what its hypothetical role should be. Without reaching such a consensus, talks about Russia's participation are pointless. There is no shortage of fears that at a critical moment Russia could paralyse Alliance operations by opposing the use of some of the MD system's elements.

NATO's Lisbon summit will confirm the emphasis on a rapprochement with Russia and is likely to produce an offer of dialogue on participation in MD creation. But without defining the final shape of the system, this dialogue will focus in the coming years on confidence-building through developing a joint position on threats evaluation, developing early-warning data exchange programmes, and cooperation in the non-proliferation area. But even a cooperative effort of such limited proportions would be instrumental in reducing MD-related tensions. Eventually, however, cooperation with Russia in this field may provide the most effective way for building an authentic strategic partnership between Russia and NATO and the country's integration with the European security structure.