

Russia-NATO Missile Defense

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VOLHA CHARNYSH, MAY 27 2010

Floated on both sides of the Atlantic by high officials for at least a decade, the idea of joint Russia-NATO ballistic missile defenses remains controversial and far-fetched. Experts say going beyond a limited exchange of early warning data to genuine cooperation would require resolving numerous military, diplomatic and technical issues and take another decade, during which the NATO-Russian rapport could wither. Just last week, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said the “daring” proposal to establish a joint NATO-Russia short-range missile defense system would become “mainstream” – when “Russia starts to feel the effects of proliferation.” How big are the obstacles to a genuine Russia-NATO missile defense cooperation and is overcoming them worth the trouble?

The most obvious issue with bringing the idea into reality is of technical nature: the incompatibility of NATO and Russian radar and interceptor components complicates intelligence sharing and requires a considerable number of technical adjustments on both sides. However, the main obstacle to building a joint missile defense shield and, more broadly, to moving the NATO-Russia relationship to a new level is their mutual mistrust. Even when the nuts and bolts of integrating the NATO and Russian systems are resolved, collaboration is impossible while the NATO and Russian lists of threats include each other.

Hastings Ismay, the first secretary-general of NATO, famously said, “NATO is created to keep Russia out, Germany down and Americans in.” While the situation has changed considerably with the end of the Cold War, Russia still feels left out. Even though it does not aspire to become a member of the alliance — as it did for a brief period under Boris Yeltsin — Moscow wants NATO to take heed of its interests. The alliance, on the other hand, is wary of giving Russia a veto over its decisions.

Today, the Kremlin obsesses over NATO expansion and US missile defense plans in Europe and, long after the end of the Cold War, holds military exercises simulating an invasion of a NATO member state. In a similar fashion, NATO’s *idée fixe* is that Moscow longs to restore the lost empire and schemes to sow discord among the allies. Even though they claim that the alliance no longer views Russia as a threat, the experts tasked with drawing recommendations for NATO’s new Strategic Concept said Moscow’s politics toward NATO were unpredictable and there was no guarantee that Russia would be inclined to cooperate with NATO in the near future.

This mistrust is reflected in the views on joint NATO-Russia missile defense: Moscow suspects the idea is a Western ruse to undermine Russia while the alliance worries that sharing critical technology will weaken NATO.

To build trust and make a higher level of cooperation possible, both sides should increase the transparency of their strategies and doctrines and engage in a more frequent dialogue openly sharing their concerns with each other. The ideal forum for addressing the issues related to creating a joint missile defense system is the NATO-Russia Council. In fact, it is under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Council that the first steps toward making a joint missile defense system possible were taken. Tasking the Council with facilitating missile defense collaboration between NATO and Moscow could help it reach its full potential becoming the institution where the individual NATO member states and Russia work as equal partners – what its founding documents envisioned and what it has failed to become so far.

Building trust also requires clarifying the relationship between the future NATO-Russia joint missile defense system and the US missile shield in Europe. While Russia seems to welcome missile defense cooperation with NATO, it

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continues to agonize over the US missile defense plans in Europe. Were Washington to unexpectedly start building ICBM interception facilities in Russia's neighborhood, the Russia-NATO collaboration would be undermined.

Of course, joint missile defense with Russia is not an instant solution for NATO's troubles, but overcoming the above-mentioned obstacles would not only protect from Iranian missiles, but also contribute to redefining NATO-Russian relations, facilitate NATO's transition into a 21st century alliance, and possibly even help resolve the problem of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

A joint missile defense system could also be an important step toward the creation of a European security zone, envisioned by Russia's draft European Security Treaty. While Russia has a history of security cooperation with European nations, the United States tends to be excluded from the security discussions between Russia and the European Union. Russia-NATO collaboration on missile defense provides an opportunity to meaningfully engage the United States in the EU-Russia security dialogue.

Upgrading the relationship with Russia by cooperating on missile defense would also improve NATO's readiness to deal with the 21st century challenges. An attack on its members that Article V of the NATO treaty envisions is unlikely today; the alliance that was created in 1949 and had developed its mission during the Cold War must adapt to the new security environment where threats range from nuclear proliferation to cyber attacks.

Finally, progress on NATO-Russia joint ballistic missile defense system could make the removal of US tactical nuclear weapons from the European territory a less controversial issue. Replacing the forward-deployed US nuclear weapons with ballistic missile defenses would improve the security of the NATO members that are most threatened by Iranian missiles and are therefore most wary of the weapons' withdrawal.

Given Moscow's opposition to US missile defense plans, building European missile defense architecture with Russia's participation seems to be the only viable option today. And while the technical merits of missile defense system are disputable, the political benefits of collaborating on the issue with Moscow are clear.

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