Interview

Anatoly Antonov

MISSILE DEFENSE IS THE LITMUS TEST OF READINESS FOR EFFECTIVE COOPERATION

What are the prospects for U.S.-Russian military-political relations? What are the problems that hamper the continued process of strategic offensive arms reductions? And how has the Russian proposal on building a united missile defense system been met in the West?

We have spoken to the Deputy Russian Defense Minister for International Military Cooperation and Head of the Russian delegation at the New START talks, Anatoly Antonov.

SECURITY INDEX: What are the implications of the “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations for disarmament? How would you assess the significance of the New START treaty?

ANTONOV: The “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations can be understood in the narrow sense of the New START treaty. The broader definition can also include the 123 Agreement, as well as Afghan-bound transit via Russian territory. I believe the “reset” also includes our cooperation on Iran and the WTO. Some of our colleagues believe that the “reset” is over, and that the goal now is to keep U.S.-Russian relations at the level they have now achieved. The question then is, if we believe that the “reset” is over, does that mean that the frictions and differences in U.S.-Russian military-political ties have disappeared? I believe the correct answer is that some differences still remain, and that the two sides continue to work towards resolving them - or at the very least towards limiting their negative impact on U.S.-Russian relations.

As someone who has taken part in negotiating the New START treaty, I am not in a very good position to provide assessments of its significance. But I can refer you to the statements made by the Russian political leadership. Speaking about U.S.-Russian relations, President Dmitry Medvedev has always listed the problem of strategic offensive arms as the top priority. So the new treaty really is a major achievement. During the U.S.-Russian talks on the New START treaty we have produced, in the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the golden standard of how negotiations should be conducted and how agreements should be achieved on very complex and controversial issues.

Much has already been said about that treaty. Nevertheless, our experts have yet to
understand the full implications of all the provisions of that document. The time will come when we can discuss without prejudice all the details and nuances of the talks, and all the things that can sometimes be read between the lines of the treaty.

SECURITY INDEX: What are the problems that remain unresolved after the signing of the New START?

ANTONOV: The New START talks have put into stark relief a number of important issues that need to be resolved if we are to make any further progress. Those problems have emerged during the talks, and both sides have recognized the need to find a resolution.

Obviously, the topmost of them is the link between strategic offensive and strategic defensive weapons. The problem was discussed in great detail during the talks. Indeed, sometimes we were on the brink of halting the talks because of that very problem. Nevertheless, we have managed to find a compromise. We found a temporary solution to that problem, which enabled us to continue the New START negotiations.

The second problem is the future of weapons in space. I don’t think anyone relishes the prospect of space weapons hanging above their own capital. We don’t want that, either.

The third problem is the existing imbalance of conventional forces. There have been several waves of NATO enlargement. The balance of conventional forces in Europe has changed accordingly. We are aware that NATO now has a strong superiority over Russia in conventional weapons. All Russia wants is to live peacefully, without having to face any military dangers or threats on its borders. Let us take, for example, the so-called substantial combat forces. In 1997 NATO and Russia reached an agreement that, simply put, there must be no substantial NATO combat forces appearing in the vicinity of the Russian border. But in the 14 years since the agreement was reached, the definition of substantial combat forces has not been agreed. So why have our NATO counterparts been unwilling to talk to Russia during those 14 years? Why are they unwilling to resolve this straightforward matter and calm Russia's fears, by producing a simple definition of what constitutes substantial combat forces? Meanwhile, they want to know everything about what is going on in the Russian armed forces. They want us to provide them with detailed information, maybe all the way down to battalion level.

SECURITY INDEX: Would it be safe to say that Russia is not ready to discuss radical nuclear cuts because of the weakness of its high-precision weapons systems? Can you see any prospects of Russia transitioning to high-tech weapons?

ANTONOV: It is said that Russia is not ready for radical nuclear disarmament. But who is ready for radical nuclear disarmament at this time? Why are we pointing at Russia? Has President Obama ever talked about the possibility of radical disarmament? Was it not President Medvedev who proposed lower nuclear ceilings during the talks? Have France, Britain or China ever said they are ready for radical – and I stress, radical – nuclear disarmament, let alone all the other participants of the international process in that area?
Even the non-nuclear-weapon states agreed at the 2000 and 2010 NPT review conferences that nuclear disarmament must be conducted in such a way as to guarantee undiminished security of every participant in that process, including countries such as Iran, Britain, Russia or the United States.

SECURITY INDEX: In an interview with our journal Russia’s permanent envoy to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, said that the European missile defense system will exist not as an independent element but as part of the American system, and that “the button that controls that system will be located in Washington”. Would you agree that it would therefore be more logical to discuss these problems in the Russia-U.S. rather than the Russia-NATO format?

ANTONOV: I think it is not really a matter of where the button is. The missile defense control system is much more complex and intricate than a simple matter of pressing some launch button. I believe that Mr. Rogozin had a broader context in mind. He was talking about the Russian proposal made at the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). We just need to sit down together and discuss certain problems. Everyone has a voice at the NRC, it is not a matter of NATO against Russia or Russia against NATO at the council.

Nevertheless, we do have problems in our work with NATO. In my opinion, our NATO counterparts are sometimes too hasty. We say to them, “Let us not rush into things headlong! Please do not be hasty! Let us sit down together and talk. What will be the consequences if America deploys the European segment of its missile defense system on the European continent?” Unfortunately, our NATO friends do not hear us. On the contrary, decisions are being made too quickly by NATO on implementing the American four-base plan for the adapted missile defense system.

There should be no haste on this issue. We propose to sit down and talk about the problems that exist in this area. We argue that without a clear understanding of the architecture of the missile defense system, it would not be right to build some system that is aimed against we don't know whom. It would be like proposing to start building a house without knowing what kind of foundations that house should have, or without knowing what kind of climate that house is being built in. Is it a hot and humid climate, or a harsh continental climate? Should be build from concrete, or will bamboo suffice? All we want is to sit down at the same table with the European countries and discuss these problems, to produce a rough sketch, the mere outlines of the building. But they say to us, “No, we are not ready for that! We are going to do this thing ourselves, without Russia. If you want to join us, you are welcome to do that, even though you do not understand what exactly it is we are building. But if you refuse to join, that means that your policy is not constructive, that it is aggressive, and that you do not want to live as a family with the European countries.” We are ready. But what we are ready for is to have a serious conversation, not some slogans about peace, friendship and love. We want to have a conversation about what Russia and NATO are doing to protect our common European home from some potential missile threat.

God forbid that what is going on in the Middle East now affects Pakistan. God forbid that similar events happen there - nobody wants that! It is going to be a huge problem
for Russia as well as the NATO countries, given the capabilities that exist in Pakistan. Now that is a really serious problem! That is a problem that needs to be discussed together. We need to discuss the really serious problems, not the imaginary ones.

SECURITY INDEX: Has there been any progress in the joint work of the groups of experts on military-political issues? Are they always able to find a common solution to these challenges?

ANTONOV: There are several groups in Russia working on these issues. There is an MoD group, a Foreign Ministry group. They completely coordinate their work with all the agencies involved. For example, the Foreign Ministry group includes representatives from the Defense Ministry. And the Defense Ministry group will include at some point representatives of other agencies responsible for national security.

Following a visit by Anatoly Serdyukov to Washington, working groups have been set up on military issues. They have already achieved some results, but additional instructions are need for the groups to step up their activity. The group on military-political issues has made a good start. We would like to make this conversation between specialists more productive and more focused on searching for solutions to concrete problems.

One area that holds a lot of potential is military exchanges. We can send our servicemen to Annapolis, and receive cadets in our own academies. At the military-political cooperation group we must meet each other halfway so as to complete very shortly our work on the agreement on defense technologies.

SECURITY INDEX: Has there been much progress in the dialogue between Russia and the NATO countries, Russia and the United States on missile defense and on the question of the link between strategic offensive and strategic defensive weapons?

ANTONOV: Many experts are now working on these issues at the security ministries and in the academic circles. This is a very serious issue. When the Americans signed the treaty with us, they recognized the importance of how strategic defensive weapons affect strategic offensive weapons. The Americans have recognized that link, and that is clearly stated in the preamble of the treaty. We can argue ad infinitum whether the preamble of the treaty is legally binding or politically binding. But the important thing is that the entire treaty has received the support of the United States, and that President Obama has put his signature under the text of the entire treaty. It is now clear that the more progress America makes in implementing its missile defense plans, the more problems Russia will have in ensuring its national security.

Speaking about cooperation between Russia and the NATO countries on missile defense, the implication of phrasing it like this is that Russia and the NATO countries will agree on the need for such cooperation. I do not necessarily accept such an implication. Every cooperation needs some basis, and a certain set of conditions. We insist that by developing any missile defense system we should not create problems for one another.

In my opinion, there is no European missile defense system, and there never will
be. What we have now is plans for the American missile defense system, and for the European segment of the American missile defense system. The Americans have given, or are proposing to give their defense system to the European allies as a gift. They say it is going to cost only €200mln for all the NATO countries. But experts in this area say such figures are unrealistic. Our European colleagues often tell us that they are going to cooperate with the United States only if Russia's concerns are resolved. But they prefer to say this to us only unofficially, in most cases.

In our discussions with NATO we say that Russia's concerns need to be resolved. In reply they just slap us on the shoulder and say everything is going to be resolved as we go along. But that is not how it works. If we help someone to create a weapon, we need to be sure that this weapon will not be used against us. And that is the situation that we face on every problem on which Russia has its own point of view regarding its national security.

But despite all these difficulties, we are going to do everything we can so as not to miss the existing opportunity for genuine equal dialogue with the Western countries, with the NATO states. In Lisbon President Medvedev proposed to create a united missile defense system. What could be better than such a system? If we are strategic partners, if we are friends, then let us together defend each other, and let us not create security problems for each other. But it turns out that the NATO countries are not ready to such far-reaching cooperation on missile defense. There has been a lot of criticism of the Russian proposal in the media. The critics are asking, how can we expect the Baltic countries to entrust their security to the Russians? How can the Eastern European countries entrust their security to Russian missile defense systems? So are we friends, partners and allies, or not? Are we still smiling to each other while holding a knife behind our back? We need to decide whether we are all ready for genuine and equal cooperation.

The United States clearly plays a leading role in formulating the NATO defense concept. That is why Russian-American relations in the military-political area certainly have a major impact on Russia's relations with the rest of the NATO countries.

If we truly want to implement in practice the agreed principle of shared security, then let us do it. And I believe that the situation with missile defense will very soon become the litmus test that will demonstrate whether each country is truly ready for effective and equal cooperation between us.