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THE “RESET” IN U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AND MISSILE DEFENSE

A Policy Memo

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Introduction

Despite the “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations, missile defense remains a difficult issue. As of late 2011, discussions on possible NATO-Russia missile defense cooperation were at an impasse over Moscow’s insistence on a legal guarantee that U.S. missile defenses would not be directed against Russian strategic missile forces.

In contrast, discussions of practical cooperation reportedly have found significant convergence, including on transparency, joint exercises and joint NATO-Russian missile defense centers. A cooperative missile defense would yield transparency that could assure Russia regarding U.S. missile defense capabilities, bolster European defenses against ballistic missiles, and prove a “game-changer” in ending Cold War stereotypes.

Moscow should accept Washington’s offer of a political assurance in place of a legal guarantee. The United States and NATO should offer maximum transparency on their missile defense plans and stop saying that a cooperative missile defense would have no impact on those plans; it may be possible to adopt some Russian suggestions without sacrificing NATO’s ability to protect its member states. The United States, NATO and Russia should move to design and implement a cooperative missile defense system.

The “Reset” and “Phased Adaptive Approach”

When U.S.-Russian relations hit their nadir in 2008, differences over missile defense posed one of the most contentious issues on the agenda. The Obama administration adopted the “reset” policy in February 2009. It later decided to reconfigure U.S. missile defense plans for Europe based on a reassessment of the Iranian ballistic missile program. Instead of the ground-based interceptors and X-band radar proposed for deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic by the Bush administration, Washington adopted a “phased adaptive approach” based on the Standard SM-3 missile interceptor.

Russian officials seemed more relaxed about the new plan. The SM-3 has a range significantly less than the ground-based interceptor. The X-band radar—which could have covered Russia to the Ural Mountains—is to be replaced by an AN/TPY-2 radar in Turkey that looks just toward Iran. Russian rhetoric against U.S. missile defenses cooled.

The Current Impasse

President Medvedev and NATO leaders agreed in November 2010 to explore possible NATO-Russian missile defense cooperation. Discussions began in 2011; the locus of the talks shifted quickly to bilateral U.S.-Russian channels. In the spring, U.S. officials hoped a joint statement on principles for cooperation could be agreed by Obama and Medvedev at their May meeting in Deauville but could not finalize the statement. Bilateral discussions continue but appear to be at an impasse.

The impasse stems from a Russian demand for a legal guarantee that U.S. missile defenses would not be directed against Russian strategic missiles. (Russian officials also have sought “criteria” that resemble limits on numbers and velocities of interceptors.)

The Obama administration has not accepted the Russian demand, as any legal agreement would have to be ratified by the U.S. Senate. There is no chance of the Senate ratifying anything that looks like a limit on missile defense. U.S. officials have instead offered a political assurance that American missile defenses would not be directed at Russian missiles, which could be reflected in a written statement signed by the president.

U.S. officials also contend that the SM-3 interceptor—including Bloc IIB, which in 2020 is planned to have some capability against rudimentary ICBMs—poses no threat to Russian strategic missiles. Pentagon officials have given their Russian counterparts briefings to illustrate this, and the Missile Defense Agency has offered Russian experts the opportunity to observe SM-3 tests in order to demonstrate that the interceptor lacks the range and velocity to pose a serious threat to Russian ballistic missiles.

Moscow thus far has not been persuaded by Washington’s arguments and continues to insist on a legal guarantee. U.S. officials sound less optimistic about the prospects for concluding an agreement on missile defense cooperation than they did in the spring.

Practical Missile Defense Cooperation

Although the sides appear stuck over the question of a legal guarantee vs. a political assurance, their views reportedly converge significantly on what practical NATO-Russia cooperation would entail: transparency regarding missile defense systems; joint NATO-Russia missile defense exercises; a jointly manned NATO-Russia “data fusion center” which would receive radar and other sensor data from both sides, combine it, and transmit the enhanced data back to both; and a second jointly manned “planning and operations center” to explore deeper cooperation.

It is not clear how the current impasse will be broken. In the meantime, the United States and NATO are implementing the “phased adaptive approach.” Moscow has consistently expressed a desire to be in at the beginning as the missile defense architecture is designed and implemented, but the impasse means that Russian officials are not yet involved and thus have no chance to influence or shape the architecture.

Advantages of Cooperation

A cooperative NATO-Russia missile defense would yield important advantages. Transparency and joint centers could give Russia more insights regarding U.S. missile defense capabilities that could assure Moscow regarding the lack of threat to Russian strategic missiles. A cooperative system would bolster the ability to defend Europe against ballistic missile attack. This kind of interaction could prove a “game-changer” in ending lingering Cold War stereotypes. Finally, for Russians concerned that the upcoming U.S. election might result in a new president who would want to take missile defense in a radically different direction, embedding U.S. missile defenses in Europe in a cooperative NATO-Russian arrangement would mean that a major proposed change would need to be discussed and agreed with NATO as well as Russia.

Policy Recommendations

For the Russian government: Drop the demand for a legal guarantee and accept a political assurance. If Moscow later concludes that U.S. missile defense capabilities do pose a threat to its strategic forces, it can always withdraw from the arrangement.

For the U.S. government and NATO: Offer maximum transparency about planned missile defenses, leave the door open for cooperation, and stop saying that missile defense cooperation with Russia will have no impact on U.S. or NATO missile defense plans. While that may reassure the Senate of the administration’s commitment to missile defense, it may also reduce Russian interest in cooperation. There may be Russian suggestions for a cooperative missile defense system that could be adopted without weakening NATO’s ability to defend its members against ballistic missile attack.

For the United States, NATO and Russia: Move to agree on and implement practical cooperation arrangements, including:

- transparency regarding missile defense plans and systems; the sides might consider an arrangement under which, for each major element of its missile defense system, a side

would inform the other well in advance of any planned increase in numbers (for Aegis class warships, “well in advance” would be measured in years)

- joint NATO-Russia missile defense exercises
- a jointly manned NATO-Russia “data fusion center” to combine data from NATO and Russian radars and other sensors and make the enhanced data available to both
- a jointly manned “planning and operations center” to explore how to deepen cooperation; this could include development of a joint protocol—or joint computer algorithms—that could integrate a NATO decision to launch a NATO interceptor with a Russian decision to launch a Russian interceptor.

Finally, if an agreement on missile defense cooperation is not possible in the near term, the United States, NATO and Russia should work to contain the fall-out so that differences over missile defense do not undermine their broader relationships.