

The European Missile Defense System and Russia

CAN THERE BE DIALOGUE RATHER THAN AN ARMS RACE?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No.
February 2017

Polina Sinovets¹
Odessa Mechnikov National University

The official inauguration of a European missile defense (MD) site in Romania in the spring of 2016 triggered a new wave of anti-Western rhetoric in Russia. President Vladimir Putin declared that the system being deployed in Romania and Poland was not defensive, but part of the U.S. strategic nuclear capability. Therefore, he [said in May 2016](#), Moscow “will be forced to think about neutralizing the emerging threats to Russia's security.”

Assessing the seriousness of Russian concerns and therefore the chances for East-West dialogue on the issue requires a clear differentiation between the political and technical elements of the Russian position. The political elements are primarily the increasingly confrontational relationship with the United States and NATO that Russia had pursued during the U.S. presidency of Barack Obama, with which, Russia's leadership apparently concluded, dialogue was impossible and useless. Russian domestic politics have been a factor in the Russian stance; the Kremlin has a need to present the public with an external enemy. The technical element is the apparent adherence of the Russian military to the fundamentals of strategic deterrence theory – paying attention to whether the future system (including the US-based component) is capable of undermining Russia's deterrence capability, with this latter parameter determining the degree of urgency of the concern. A new feature of the technical military relationship is the increasingly important non-nuclear stand-off between Russia and NATO over whether Russia and NATO can intercept precision-guided conventional weapons launched by the other side. This new element represents a “wild card” in the decades-old stand-off around missile defense.

In order to explore the credibility of Russian threats and possible actions and the ways of addressing them, it is necessary to unpack the Russian position. This can lead to an understanding of whether dialogue between Russia and the United States is possible.

¹ [Polina Sinovets](#) is Associate Professor at Odessa Mechnikov National University.

Although much depends on the new U.S. administration, MD continues to be an issue that unites Congress (Democrats and Republicans) in its determination to resist foreign pressure and binding agreements over the future placement and capabilities of the MD system.

The Sources of the Russian Position

Confrontation between Russia and the United States over MD is more than 35 years old. Friction began with the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, also known as “Star Wars”) that was launched by former president Ronald Reagan and has continued unabated during several iterations of the MD program. Throughout those years, the Russian position was informed by the logic of mutual deterrence that underlined the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which Moscow always calls “the cornerstone of strategic stability.”²

The current stage of the U.S.-Russian argument began in the late 1990s when Washington launched internal discussions about a national MD system. The situation went from exacerbation to full-fledged enmity (on Moscow’s part) when the United States abrogated the Soviet-era ABM Treaty in 2002 and the George W. Bush administration then set forth a plan to deploy strategic missile defenses (Ground Based Interceptors, GBI) in Hungary and Poland in 2004-2008. Moscow never believed the official reasons for this deployment – the threat of Iranian missiles – and considered it an effort to neutralize Russia’s deterrence shield. U.S. assurances that the system would remain limited were not believed and Moscow insisted on legally binding guarantees that would put official limitations on the capabilities and placement of the European MD system.

The situation somewhat abated in 2009, when the United States rejected a plan for GBI strategic MD deployment in Europe and switched to a Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA), which presupposed theater missile defense and theoretically would not be usable against Russian strategic ICBMs. The first three phases of the plan (Aegis systems in Romania and Poland as well as on ships in the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea) apparently encountered relatively less resistance from the Russian military. The controversy centered on the fourth phase (deployment of Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) IIB interceptors in Poland), which, Moscow claimed, could have capability against its strategic missiles. In 2013, because of a North Korean nuclear test, the United States abandoned the fourth stage of the plan and decided instead to deploy additional interceptors on U.S. territory and limit the European component to SM-3 IIA interceptors with non-strategic capabilities. Moscow expressed its disappointment again. The main reason remained the absence of officially binding limits on MD capability,

² Igor Ivanov, *Novaya Rossiyskaya Diplomatiya. Desyat let vneshney politiki strany* [New Russian Diplomacy. Ten Years of Foreign Policy], Olma Press, Moscow, 2002, p. 72.

which could guarantee that in the future it would not be able to undermine Russian offensive capability vis-a-vis the United States.

Russian efforts to “restore strategic stability” have been predictable. Moscow is actively developing a new generation of missiles capable of penetrating the MD system. Most of its programs have been resurrected from the Cold War, when the Soviet Union invested in the development of missile defense penetration systems in response to the SDI program. In particular, the new Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), such as the *Yars* or *Sarmat*, feature multiple independently targetable vehicles, each able to alter its trajectory. Russia also plans for the *Sarmat* to use a new type of fuel that provides high-speed performance, reducing the time the missile is in the active stage of its trajectory. These types of missile developments, along with the use of decoys on ICBMs, make them far more capable of confusing MD systems.

Whereas the military-technical component of the Russian position (concern about the stability of strategic deterrence) has remained virtually unchanged through the years, political tensions have grown considerably, with Western capabilities initially appearing as a distant, almost theoretical challenge but now appearing to constitute an immediate threat of apocalyptic proportions. This anxiety can be traced to several reasons. One is that high Russian threat perceptions are based on a deep feeling of insecurity and a generally geopolitical interpretation of international affairs. Russians are still very fond of the geopolitical concepts of Halford Mackinder, who theorized Eurasia as “heartland,” or strategic territory, the possession of which can be the key to world dominance. Moscow therefore harbors ideas that as soon as Russia gets weaker, it might be blackmailed (by the threat of overwhelming power) or even invaded by the West in an effort to take over the heartland. The other reason comes from the Kremlin’s efforts to maintain domestic stability by presenting NATO, and especially the United States, to its public as an enemy. In fact, NATO’s military deployments in Europe inadvertently strengthen Putin’s regime, feeding Moscow’s propagandistic declarations that it was the West who first started aggressive preparations along Russia’s borders. Therefore, today all problems of domestic and international development (including the arms race and Russian military adventures) are justified by the Kremlin’s “struggle with the American drive for world dominance.”

New Developments

Russia is deploying high-precision weapons that are capable of defeating the European and potentially US-based MD components. This idea is elaborated by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s speech [describing](#) the deployment of offensive systems in southern and western Russia as a possible response to European MD so as “to ensure Russia’s capability to take out any part of the U.S. MD system in Europe.”

On the surface, the logic of Russian opposition to the new MD sites is the same as that regarding strategic defense—those sites could theoretically deny Russia the capability to strike targets in European NATO. This contingency is becoming more tangible as Russia is deploying long-range conventional weapons that can thwart the scenario (long a central concern for the military) of the United States and NATO using precision-guided conventional assets from long distance. While the MD sites in Poland and Romania can be used effectively against Russian strategic missiles remains contested, they are certainly usable against Russian theater-range systems. Russian officials suggest that the MK-41 vertical launchers for the SM-3 system are capable of launching cruise missiles, which could in the future affect Russian long-range conventional capability.

Countering the Russian long-range conventional capabilities could present a challenge to NATO: existing missile defense systems were not designed to intercept cruise missiles, such as *Kalibr* submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCMs) or Kh-101 (conventional warhead)/102 (nuclear warhead) ALCMs (Airfield lighting control and monitoring system), both of which were successfully demonstrated by Moscow during its military operation in Syria. In particular, the location of the MD site in Deveselu, Romania is theoretically well suited to intercept *Kalibrs* deployed from the Black Sea (from which they can reach targets across most of Europe), but such a mission would require serious research and development work before SLCMs could be intercepted. For now, it is expected that Russia will deploy *Kalibr* at its naval bases in Sebastopol and Novorossiysk to overcome the MD SM-3 site in Deveselu. A successful *Kalibr* deployment can be supported by the deployment of new ALCM Kh-101/102 (conventional/nuclear) systems and the deployment of *Iskander* missiles in Kaliningrad. The latter can reach almost all of Poland and parts of Germany, which means the European MD sites will be endangered and can be potentially destroyed.

For its part, Russia has long pursued its own missile defense capability. Its S-300 and S-400 as well as lower-level systems (such as *Redut*, which still has several construction [problems](#)) are designed to [deny](#) NATO the ability to strike targets inside Russia. Russia has successfully tested these systems against aircraft and missiles, including against cruise missiles (the Soviet Union began work on this in the early 1980s), and Moscow believes that the systems are now at least as efficient as those of NATO. Russian missiles and air defense systems were created to protect against U.S./NATO long-range conventional superiority. This has been much more urgent for Moscow than the MD issue. For now, both sides have similar conventional long strike assets and defensive capabilities.

It is worth mentioning that there are no current treaties limiting the development of long-range conventional missile capabilities or missile defenses, so in these conditions the potential for a future arms race is very high. There is the potential, therefore, for the United States and Russia to engage in bargaining about missile defenses and long-strike

conventional capabilities in one package, which could help both countries (and other states) avoid a massive arms race.

What Can be Done to Reduce Friction?

The current level of dialogue between Russia and the West allows two options to be considered.

The first one addresses a gradually unfolding arms race, which is developing now and which can be aggravated if Russia deploys its missiles or defensive systems along NATO's southern and western flanks (in Crimea and Kaliningrad) NATO is likely to contribute to the race by enhancing the offensive and the defensive elements of its deterrence posture.

There are three moves that could potentially be used as bargaining tools in the West's dialogue with Russia, though each with a significant measure of risk:

(a) NATO could enhance its MD capabilities in Poland to be able to intercept Russian conventional long-range missiles (which are aimed at Europe). This potential capability could be helpful as a bargaining chip to influence further Russian military deployments.

(b) Russia might be influenced by a threat to move American tactical nuclear weapons eastward (to the territories of Poland or the Baltic states, for example) to confront the deployment of *Iskanders*, for example.

(c) Ukraine and Georgia could be invited to participate in NATO military preparations, such as providing territory for the Alliance's military deployments. In this case, military cooperation with these two states could be used as a bargaining chip with Russia.

The risk is that any of these potential actions could trigger more assertive Russian policies and deployments. Military initiatives by both sides, at present, seem prone to fostering an arms-race scenario.

A second broad option is to resume arms control efforts, which happened in the 1960s when there was a spiraling nuclear arms race.

There is the distinct possibility that a high level of NATO-Russia military preparedness creates a stability-instability paradox, whereby a major war becomes impossible due to the growing conventional offense and defense capabilities of both sides (a Cold War-like situation).

An arms control regime is missing at present. If this situation remains unregulated, there is a high probability of a full-scale arms race and an unintended "hot" conflict. Moscow

continues to demand meaningful limitations on missile defenses and long-range conventional strike weapons—the West could leverage this interest in negotiations. Russia could lose this interest in the near future, however, as it goes about rapidly pursuing capabilities of its own. The first step would be to put long-range conventional strike assets on the table before they are massively produced and deployed by Russia. This concerns not only the *Kalibr* and “Kh - 101/102” families, but also the future destiny of tactical nuclear weapons, in the realm of which Russia retains a major advantage in Europe. If NATO officially defines some limits on the development of missile defenses, Russia might be more prone to dialogue and the negotiating table.

Conclusion

At present, the prospects for arms control look bleak. Neither side is prepared to seriously engage in such discussions. NATO seems concentrated on deterring Russia and has been providing only lip service about cooperation. For its part, Russian calls for arms control, based on concerns about the deployment of European MD, appear half-hearted, with Moscow concentrating on enhancing its own deterrence capacity. Moreover, Russia’s successful conclusion of a series of research and development programs makes it less interested in arms control. In the past, Russia loudly insisted on including long-range conventional weapons in negotiations, but these demands have lost intensity. Reversing the trajectory of today’s budding arms race, which has been gathering steam over a long period of time, and which sharply accelerated due to the Ukraine conflict, appears slim. However, both sides can calm the situation if either chooses to do so.

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
E U R A S I A ● TO RESEARCH AND
● SECURITY IN EURASIA

Elliott School of
International Affairs

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

© PONARS Eurasia 2017. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of scholars advancing new approaches to research on security, politics, economics, and society in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at the George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. www.ponarseurasia.org