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The Kremlin's Bold Missile Defense Gambit

By Andrew Weiss

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A year ago, General Staff chief Nikolai Makarov railed against the revamped European missile defense plan proposed by the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama. Makarov claimed that "the development and deployment of missile defenses is aimed against the Russian Federation" and "without question weakens our potential nuclear deterrent." Yet on Wednesday, Makarov visited NATO headquarters in Brussels for Russian-initiated discussions on the development of joint NATO-Russian missile defenses. Moscow's proposal is presumably based in part on the very system — the Obama administration's so-called phased adaptive approach — that Makarov once lambasted.

So why Russia's sudden change of heart?

In November, President Dmitry Medvedev told NATO members in Lisbon that he wants to create a joint NATO-

Russian missile defense system based on what Medvedev called a "sectoral" approach — one that could protect both continental Europe and Russian territory from threats emanating from Iran and other countries of concern. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's envoy to NATO, tweeted about creation of a "common missile defense perimeter." He said the system would be "reminiscent of two knights who, defending themselves from attackers, stand back-to-back."

Unfortunately, Russia's proposal has received a stunning lack of attention from the U.S. media and security experts. One reason is that the Kremlin has proposed this idea in one form or another since the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, Russia's proposal for joint missile defense represents a potential game-changer for the Kremlin's relations with the West.

A joint system could completely transform NATO-Russian cooperation, which has long failed to live up to either side's expectations. It could bury once and for all the Russian security establishment's outmoded yet self-serving portrayal of NATO as a threat to Russian security. Greater transparency about U.S. missile defense capabilities also might help alleviate Russian worries about the fourth phase of Obama's missile defense strategy — that is, the planned deployment of sea-based missile interceptors known as the SM-3 Block IIB system by 2020. Moscow has been deeply concerned about the danger that this system, designed to hit missiles at a very early stage in their ascent, might pose for its deterrent.

In addition, joint missile defense could have a major positive impact on the next round of strategic arms control talks. The New START treaty is due to expire around the time the SM-3 system is deployed. Agreement on a joint system could help Washington and Moscow get comfortable with more dramatic reductions in their forces, say, below 1,000 deployed strategic warheads, versus 1,550 set by New START.

A change in atmosphere in U.S.-Russian relations would likely help overcome some of the obstacles that currently stand in the way of any such agreement. The Kremlin might have more confidence about the survivability of a much smaller force, and the system might create new willingness on the U.S. side to consider possible forms of limitations on future missile defense deployments. The recent Senate debate on New START showed that any potential limits placed on U.S. missile defense will be among the most politically charged topics facing any follow-on treaty. In the current environment, such a provision would be politically wounding for a future U.S. president and kill any chance at Senate ratification.

For their part, Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have emphasized that the joint missile defense proposal is a key litmus test of whether Russia is taken seriously as a partner on European security. Putin drove this home during his interview in early December with Larry King. Unfortunately, the cooperative part of Russia's new message on missile defense has been marred by ominous threats from both members of the ruling tandem to initiate a new arms race if Russia's proposal for sectoral missile defense is rejected by the United States and NATO. Quick to raise concerns about the impact that U.S. missile defense could have on Russia's national security, Putin and Medvedev are overstating the county's ability to respond given the high-profile test failures involving the next generation of Russia's strategic weapons systems and the defense complex's limited production capacity. This makes it implausible that a new system could be tested and ready for deployment by the end of the decade.

As NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen put it, NATO and Russia should not be outsourcing security to each other. Still, NATO and Russia need to avoid the temptation to litigate their positions publicly. It is far too early for NATO and Russian representatives to be squabbling in the media, as they have done in recent days.

The Obama administration's reset policy has significantly changed the mood in Brussels and key NATO capitals. But too many earlier attempts at missile defense cooperation have withered or died. For example, a modest 1998 U.S.-Russian agreement to create a joint center to share early warning data on missile launches still awaits implementation.

In 2007, Putin offered to create a joint early warning facility at the Soviet-era radar base in Gabala, Azerbaijan, but he was summarily rebuffed by the Bush administration, which feared that it might slow down controversial missile defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic. A joint assessment of the U.S.-Russian ballistic missile threat announced at the June 2009 Moscow summit has been hung up by disagreements about the status of Iran's and North Korea's missile programs.

Against this backdrop, both sides need to keep an open mind about how to fashion a joint effort. Let's hope that Medvedev's bold proposals get the serious and thoughtful scrutiny they deserve.

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