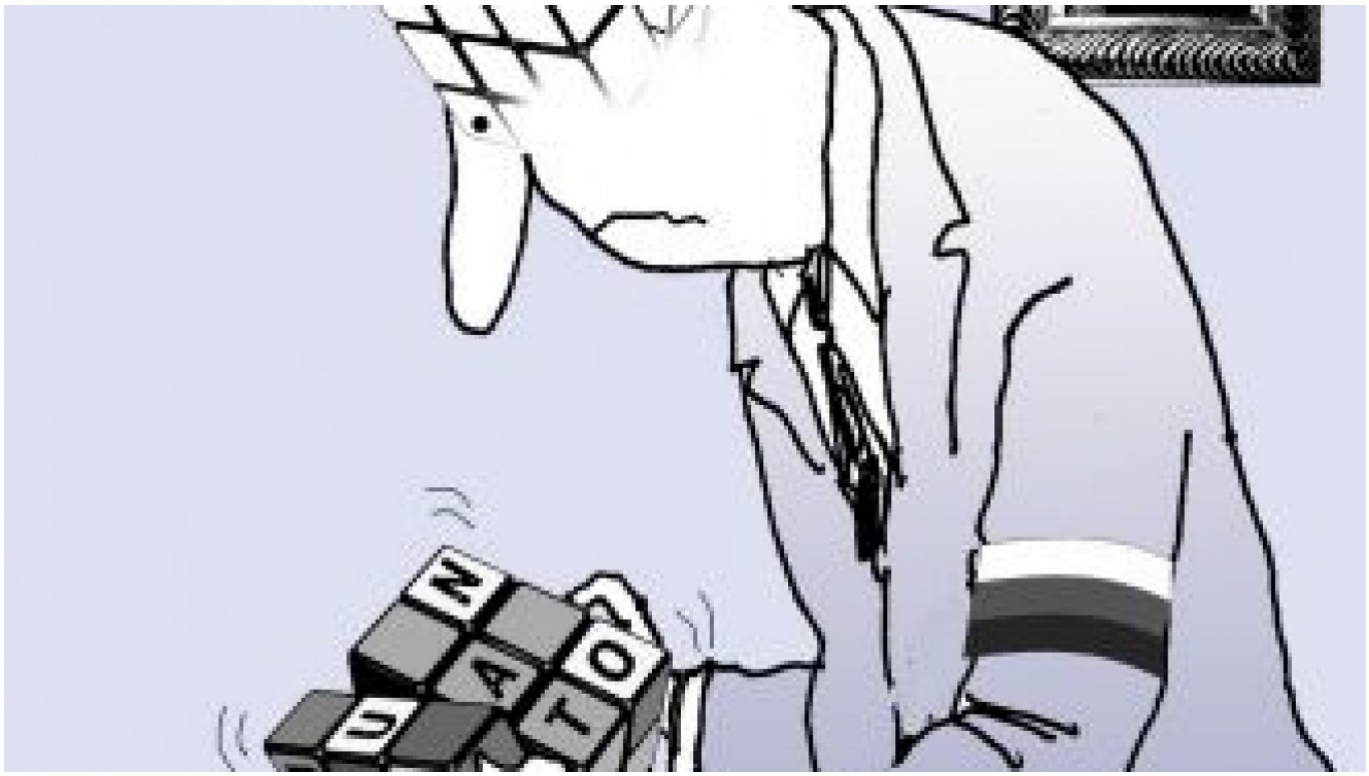
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Getting to 'Yes' on Missile Defense

By Richard Weitz

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The recent visit by Dmitry Rogozin, the Kremlin's special envoy for missile defense cooperation with NATO, to the U.S. State Department highlights one of the many obstacles to U.S.-Russian cooperation on ballistic missile defense. Russia's diplomats have generally, but not always, adopted a harder line, while Rogozin has been pushing his own missile defense agenda.

Another complexity is uncertainty over who will rule Russia. Given the differing views of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, many bureaucrats prefer to avoid offering bold initiatives regarding missile defense or other strategic arms control issues until they know who the next president will be. Medvedev seems less fearful of NATO than his predecessor, but Putin has in the past shown surprising flexibility on some strategic issues.

The joint missile threat assessments that the Russian government recently concluded with NATO and the United States revealed considerable overlap among participating technical experts but some fundamental differences between the policy strategists. For example, while Western representatives generally view Iran as an emerging threat, many Russians still insist that the Iranian regime remains a proliferation challenge that can be managed through means

other than missile defense, such as diplomacy and limited international sanctions.

For reasons of pride and history, many Russians refuse to believe that U.S. policymakers have become more concerned about Iran's minimal strategic potential than they are about Russia's robust nuclear forces. They therefore presume that, despite U.S. professions to the contrary, Washington seeks missile defense capabilities that can negate Russia's strategic deterrent under the guise of protecting the United States and its allies from Iran.

In bilateral negotiations with Moscow, U.S. officials have been offering four concrete missile defense collaboration projects:

1. Binational and multinational jointly manned centers where Russian personnel can see the nonthreatening nature of U.S. and NATO missile defense activities;
2. Joint U.S.-Russian expert studies regarding how missile defense might affect Russia's nuclear deterrent and what steps can be taken to minimize any problems;
3. Expanded NATO-Russian theater-level missile defense exercises that build on earlier collaboration — disrupted by the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war — and that rehearse how deployed NATO and Russian forces can jointly defend against missile threats;
4. An underlying legal framework to support these and other cooperative projects.

Russian officials have expressed some interest in these projects, but they have insisted on first achieving consensus with the United States on underlying strategic principles. Above all, they want Washington to sign a legally binding agreement affirming that U.S. missile defense will never threaten Russia's strategic deterrent.

U.S. officials stress that they will not try to negate Russia's strategic deterrent — an impossible effort, given the size and sophistication of its offensive nuclear forces. But the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama cannot sign an agreement stating that it will deliberately constrain the United States' ability to protect itself and its allies from foreign missile attacks.

Beyond these specific missile defense discussions, U.S. arms control efforts with Russia currently focus on strategic stability talks and other dialogues designed to establish a favorable conceptual foundation for the next round of formal arms control negotiations. These negotiations might address many of the issues set aside in the rush to conclude the New START treaty. Besides missile defense, topics could include tactical nuclear weapons, reserve nuclear warheads that have been removed from operational arsenals but have yet to be destroyed, and refitting strategic delivery vehicles, such as long-range ballistic missiles, with conventional munitions.

These discussions are occurring on a bilateral basis between Washington and Moscow, as well as multilaterally within the context of the so-called P-5 talks that involve all five permanent United Nations Security Council members.

Recent U.S.-Russian dialogues have addressed ways to move from a world characterized by mutually assured destruction to one based on mutually assured stability. But these efforts have encountered difficulties. Only a small group of Russian specialists, primarily nongovernmental experts, embrace and employ U.S. strategic concepts. Many Russians still employ negative and outdated Cold War constructs when discussing U.S.-Russian nuclear

relations.

Although constraining future U.S. missile defense programs with legally binding agreements is politically untenable, U.S. officials could inform their Russian counterparts of their long-range missile defense plans without much difficulty. The U.S. Defense Department regularly includes such data in its budget and planning documents. Support also exists for jointly manned centers and visits by Russian politicians and military leaders to NATO missile defense facilities, as well as exchange of early warning information from Russian and NATO radars regarding potential missile launches.

One hopeful sign is that Russian officials have recently acknowledged the impracticality of the sectoral missile defense plan that Medvedev proposed at the NATO-Russian Council summit in November. The idea was that Russia would protect NATO from attacking missiles traveling over its territory, with the expectation that the alliance would then forego developing defenses capable of engaging missiles over Russia. NATO officials persuasively argued that their collective-defense commitment could not be delegated to a non-NATO member. A more practical problem is that Russia lacks the capability to destroy ballistic missiles traveling through space.

Russian officials need to retreat from their politically impossible demand for legally binding limitations on U.S. missile defense. They should instead consider cooperating on concrete projects. Better still, they should redirect their cooperative efforts to easier but important issues, such as securing stability in Afghanistan after NATO's military withdrawal. In that case, productive collaboration on other issues might become easier.

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