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Russia Can Be a NATO Ally

By Steven Pifer

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U.S. and Russian officials have for many months discussed possible NATO-Russian missile defense cooperation, but agreement has eluded them so far. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recently poured cold water on the prospect, and U.S. officials seem less optimistic than in the past. Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev discussed the question on Saturday during the APEC summit in Honolulu, but they appear to have made no headway. Is an opportunity about to be missed?

Moscow worries that U.S. missile defenses could threaten Russian strategic forces. Although the administration of former U.S. President George W. Bush sought to delink strategic offense and missile defense, the interrelationship has been widely recognized for 50 years, including by the administration of President Barack Obama. If the United States or Russia were to develop effective missile defenses capable of defeating the other side's intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, it could achieve a decisive advantage.

It is difficult to see, however, how the Standard SM-3 missile interceptor — the basis for U.S.

missile defenses in Europe — poses that kind of threat. The current SM-3 interceptor Bloc IA has a range well less than 1,000 kilometers and is too slow to engage intercontinental ballistic missiles. The head of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency has invited Russian experts to observe SM-3 test shots, using their own sensors, to confirm this.

True, the U.S. military plans to upgrade the SM-3's capabilities. If everything goes as the Pentagon hopes, the SM-3 Bloc IIB in 2020 will achieve a capability to intercept only rudimentary intercontinental missiles — the kind Iran might develop — but not the far more sophisticated Russian missiles.

The major obstacle blocking missile defense cooperation stems from Moscow's demand for a legal guarantee that U.S. interceptors would not be directed against Russian strategic missiles. The Obama administration is prepared to offer a written political assurance at the highest level, but a legal guarantee would not work. Any legal agreement that even hinted at a limit on missile defense would have zero chance of ratification in the U.S. Senate, where for many Republican support for missile defense is as axiomatic as opposition to tax increases.

The frustrating irony is that the two sides reportedly have found considerable convergence in their views about what practical NATO-Russian missile defense cooperation would entail: transparency on missile defense programs, joint NATO-Russian missile defense exercises and the establishment of two jointly manned missile defense centers. One would combine data from NATO and Russian radars and other sensors and share the enhanced product with both sides. A second planning and operations center could discuss issues such as how the sides might integrate a NATO decision to fire a NATO interceptor and a Russian decision to fire a Russian interceptor.

NATO-Russian cooperation along these lines would provide better protection from the Atlantic to the Urals against ballistic missile attack. By making NATO and Russia more like allies in defending Europe, it could prove to be a game-changer in breaking down the Cold War stereotypes that linger on both sides.

Washington should continue to offer Moscow maximum transparency about its missile defense systems and, along with NATO, keep the door open for cooperation. For its part, Moscow should drop its demand for a legal guarantee that the Obama administration cannot provide and turn to practical cooperation.

That kind of cooperation would mean transparency and daily interaction between NATO and Russian military officers that would give Russia key insights into the capabilities of U.S. missile defenses and whether or not they could threaten Russian missiles. It would give Russia a voice in the missile defense architecture now taking shape. It would also embed U.S. missile defenses in Europe in a cooperative NATO-Russian arrangement. This would mean that if a future U.S. administration takes missile defense in a dramatically different direction, it would have to discuss that not just with Russia, but with other NATO members as well.

Nothing would prevent Moscow from withdrawing from cooperative arrangements if it later concluded that its nuclear deterrent was at risk. But sitting on the sidelines will mean missing an opportunity — one that could move broader U.S.-Russian and NATO-Russian relations to a more positive level.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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