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Freeze Missile Defense in Europe

By Vladimir Kozin

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Resolving arms control issues have proven a lengthy and difficult process in the past. Take, for example, the fact that Washington and Moscow officially exchanged views on anti-satellite systems in the 1970s, but their negotiations were interrupted and have never resumed. On tactical nuclear weapons, talks have yet to begin at all. Now Moscow and NATO have hit a stumbling block in efforts to reach a mutually acceptable agreement on the creation of a joint or cooperative missile defense system in Europe.

The impasse is not for a lack of trying. In the latest flurry of talks, Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama discussed the U.S.-led NATO shield on the sidelines of a nuclear conference in Seoul last week. Then Rose Gottemoeller, acting U.S. undersecretary of state for arms control, arrived in Moscow on March 28 for a five-day visit that included missile defense talks.

But the best solution for now is to leave negotiations in a holding pattern until after the U.S. presidential election in November to give U.S. and Russian technicians and diplomats extra opportunities to explore the necessary details.

Negotiators have many options to consider, with former senior government officials and academics floating some creative ideas on how to overcome the deadlock.

One such proposal was presented in a report titled "Missile Defense: Toward a New Paradigm" that was introduced at the Munich Security Conference last month. The report's authors suggest that Russia and NATO reach a "compromise" by creating a "cooperative" European missile defense system based on the exchange of data but using interceptor missiles at their own discretion. The parties could enter into a separate protocol permitting them to destroy ballistic missiles flying over their own territories that are aimed at other states.

But the report does not impose any quantitative or qualitative limits on the deployment of the NATO-backed European missile defense system. It anticipates that all U.S. interceptor missiles slated for deployment in Europe will remain at their positions in close proximity to Russia's borders and that U.S. warships armed with interceptor missiles and the multifunctional Aegis system will cruise the waters of the Baltic Sea, North Sea and Mediterranean Sea. The United States could even relocate its sea-based missile defense resources to other waters such as the Black Sea or Barents Sea.

The report's silence on the withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe is of fundamental importance for Russia because U.S. and NATO military doctrine foresees the use of nuclear weapons in a preventive and preemptive first strike. In this regard, it is worth noting that any missile defense system, although ostensibly defensive in function, also works in tandem with strategic and tactical nuclear weapons systems. The more advanced a country's missile defense system, the more opportunity it has to carry out a first strike against another nuclear power while protecting itself from a retaliatory strike. That is why Prime Minster Vladimir Putin, in an article published in Rossiiskaya Gazeta before this month's presidential election, reaffirmed that Russia's response to any strike against it would be effective and asymmetrical.

Meanwhile, U.S. researchers have offered two other ways to resolve the missile defense quandary. One proposal, called "Forward Active Defense," suggests replacing the European missile shield with heavy unmanned drones equipped with interceptors and deployed over Russia and several other countries.

Under the other proposal, NATO and Russia would agree to cooperate on missile defense for a fixed period of, say, four years. (See "A Trial Marriage on Missile Defense" by Steven Pifer in The Moscow Times' op-ed pages on March 21.)

Unfortunately, none of these ideas can be accepted by Moscow because they fall short on three major points. First, there is no dual key allowing Russia to join NATO in pressing the button to launch the interceptors. Second, the proposals do not envisage the withdrawal of current missile defense deployments near Russia's borders. Third, Moscow still insists on obtaining specific, legally binding guarantees from the United States not to undermine Russia's strategic nuclear arsenals in the long run.

Under these circumstances, the only simple, inexpensive and constructive way to cut the Gordian missile defense knot would be for Washington to freeze the deployment of its missile defense system at the current stage and to stop implementing the remaining stages until presidents assume new terms of office in Russia and the United States later this year.

Medvedev told Obama at their meeting in Seoul last week that the United States and Russia still have time to negotiate.

"Our respective positions remain the same, but dialogue on this issue is not only possible but also necessary," Medvedev said after the talks. "Speaking very bluntly, we still have time to negotiate and reach a balanced decision, bearing in mind the good experience that Barack and I have gained during the preparation of the START treaty."

So the door leading to an accord on a joint missile defense system in Europe involving Brussels, Moscow and Washington remains open.

But Russia's patience is not limitless. Every attempt must be made by all sides to make sure that Russia's relations with the United States and NATO are not held hostage to the creation of an unbalanced missile defense system.

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