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Russia and the US: a New Military Confrontation?

Today there is a clear economic, political and military revival of Russia which is striving to re-gain its previous status of key and independent force on the international scenario. At the Munich Conference on Security Policy (February 2007) and at the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation summit (August 2007), Vladimir Putin showed an assertive attitude openly criticising the US "hegemonic unilateralist" conduct on the international arena which, in his opinion, jeopardises other great powers' interests.

But there are many other examples of his aspiration to re-assert his country's position as a military force in the international system so as to counter the US force, and thus to restore a balance of power of a sort. Briefly, these include testing of new strategic weapons and systems, inclusive of a vacuum bomb, the resumption of long-distance patrol flights of strategic bombers with simulated bomber raids and missiles launches, the successful test-fired of a short-range anti-ballistic missile, the announced 10-year weapon modernisation program, the centralising of defense industry under Kremlin's direct control, the possibility to adopt a new military doctrine in response to NATO expansion eastward, and lastly the newly appointed Premier Viktor Zubkov's first public discourse, pledging to boost defense industry and

armed forces. Meanwhile the US is concentrating its efforts to counter international terrorism and countries sponsoring it, especially those striving to acquire nuclear weapons, the so-called "rogue states": Iran and North Korea. Relying on NATO members, in January 2007 the US announced its plans to station components of the US missile defense program on the territory of Poland and the Czech Republic. These installations are the ground on which Russia and the US are flexing muscles: Russia blames the US for destroying the balance of strategic forces in Europe and for posing a direct threat to its national security, while explicitly challenging its current strategic capabilities. The US, instead, continues to reassure that the anti-missile plan is not aimed at Russia. After months of ineffective negotiations the issue is still at the top of the political agenda of both countries.

The legal framework on arms control as the basis of the current debate

Although current strategic confrontation between the two countries has apparently different goals, the debate is rooted in the geostrategic configuration and regulation of the Russian-US legal framework regarding arms control.

The arsenal capacities and national defense programs' ob-

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Summary

Recently US-Russian relations are strained again after a period of relative relaxation following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent deep Russian economic crisis. Today, Russia adopts an assertive attitude in defending its interests and trying to re-gain its previous international role. This approach is also assumed in relation to current US plans to install elements of its national missile defense program in Central Europe, which Moscow perceives as a threat to its security.

Behind US claims on defending itself and NATO allies from international terrorism, the missile debate relates to the long-standing bilateral discussions on the arms control process and consequent Russian and American national defense scenarios in view of current and future strategic configuration.

Bilateral negotiations vary from co-operative tones to explicitly antagonistic ones but this ambiguity in US-Russian relations must be re-considered through the lenses of upcoming US presidential election, which ultimately will determine the course of regional and global missile defense.

jectives of both countries have changed over the past 30 years so as to comply with the developments of international relations. The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) between the former USSR and USA limited strategic defensive systems (that is to say, a system targeted at countering strategic ballistic missiles or their elements in flight trajectory, comprising ABM interceptor missiles, ABM launcher and radars) in each party's territory and restricted any base for such defense systems in other regions¹. In 2001 George W. Bush launched, notwithstanding Russia's continuous objections, a plan to test and build a new *National Missile Defense* (NMD) shield to protect the country from nuclear blackmail by "rogue states" (thus contravening ABM Treaty core objective), which ultimately led to the 2002 US withdrawal from the Treaty. This move may be interpreted as the first attempt to build-up a global defense system and test new strategic weapons.

Meanwhile, the US and Russia signed the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-I), which is due to expire in 2009. Its importance stems from the reduction and not mere limiting (as was the case of the ABM Treaty, revealing perhaps its weakest element) of strategic offensive arms, e.g. weapons of intercontinental range, not short- or intermediate-range ones. In addition, START-I is extremely valuable due to its highly effective inspection-based mechanisms, aimed at creating high levels of confidence and transparency in strategic defense activities between the two parties. The

Treaty limits land and sea-based missiles and heavy strategic bombers to 1.600, deployed heavy intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)² and their associated launchers to 154, and the aggregate number of warheads to 6.000³.

Shortly after the signing of the Treaty the Soviet Union began to collapse and lacked any idea of future development of strategic defense. The following transformations in international affairs provided conditions to negotiate the far deeper cuts of the 1993 START-II Treaty. The pact mandated a reduction of strategic nuclear warheads attributed to deployed ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and heavy bombers up to 3.000-3.500 for each party⁴. The fate of this Treaty was tightly linked to AMB Treaty preservation given the US plans on NMD but also on the consequent delayed ratification on the part of Russia. START-II indeed never entered into force, leaving START-I provisions unchanged⁵.

In 2002 a new Russia-US Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions (SORT) came into force reducing and limiting, by the end of 2012, each party's aggregate number of strategic nuclear warheads to 1.700-2.200⁶. The pact was largely criticised for its total lack of provisions guaranteeing its

observation, instead of referring to START-I terms, and for the possibility of re-deploying stored warheads. START-I and SORT Treaties are due to expire shortly and their fate is currently being discussed. It is likely that some terms will be modified because deemed obsolete, but the question is which ones and how. Some analysts argue that President George W. Bush's administration is not eager to extend START-I Treaty. As long as the Treaty does not prohibit deployment of conventional warheads on ballistic missiles, the new generation Trident submarine-launched strategic missiles equipped with non-nuclear warheads and used in the program *Global Strike Solutions*⁷ (a crucial element for the Pentagon in the war against terrorism) will be fully permitted.

The problem arises from the fact that to be effective, the program implies that a greater number of Trident missiles compared to START-I limits should be deployed. In this sense extending the START-I Treaty and its inspections' regime may result harmful to US flexibility in converting strategic delivery systems into conventional platforms. It is this flexibility that could pose serious threats to Russian national security since the system gives the US the potential of delivering the first strike and preventing possible counterstrikes⁸. Therefore, the

¹ Article 2, ABM Treaty, <http://www.nti.org/db/nisprofs/fulltext/treaties/abm/abmtry.htm>.

² The ICBMs have ranges greater than 5,500 km and may enable a country to break out of a regional context and move toward potential global impact. See <http://www.fas.org/nuke/intro/missile/icbm.htm>.

³ See <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/start1/text/abatext.htm>.

⁴ See Article 1, START-II Treaty, <http://www.dod.mil/acq/acic/treaties/start2/text.htm>.

⁵ See <http://www.state.gov/t/ac/trt/18016.htm#12>.

⁶ See <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/2002/10471.htm>.

⁷ The program envisages the possibility of hitting enemy targets from any point on earth within a few minutes. To this end quicker, more precise and more powerful alternatives to conventional nuclear weapons are currently being studied.

⁸ *American Smash through Treaty with Russia*, Kommersant, August

US “emphasizes unilateral action and [is] willing to discard arms control mechanisms perceived as outdated”⁹. In addition, 2008 American presidential elections limit the time-frame for adoption of a new treaty to replace START-I to less than a year. Unlike the US’ non legally binding formula, Russia is pushing for a legally binding option on START-I that envisages its replacement or extension¹⁰. The country is trying to address a concept of strategic stability in a broader context, including offensive and defensive strategic arms, space weapons, anti-submarine warfare – all perceived as potential threats to its future deterrence capability.

As regards tactical weapons, the 1987 Short-and-Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty is currently in force¹¹. The Treaty obliged both Russia and the US to eliminate all of their intermediate-range (1,000-5,500 km) and shorter-range (500-1,000 km) ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles by 1991, banned the possession, production and flight-testing of such missiles, and foresaw an extensive inspection regime, which ended

in 2001. Its future is however, highly uncertain too. At a time when the US is not a party to the ABM pact (hence, capable to extend its national defense system outside its territory) and is likely to scrap the START-I verification regime, the last resort in Russian-US strategic defense relations pertains to the INF provisions, which are of unlimited duration. Russia has already stated that the pact no longer serves its national security because it limits and consequently weakens its defense capabilities compared to growing defense capabilities of other nuclear countries.

Finally, the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)¹², seen as the guarantee against re-militarisation in Europe, has been recently considered by Russia worthless and unable to ensure an equilibrium of military forces in view of NATO enlargement eastwards. In mid-July the Russian President signed a decree, formally notifying NATO governments that Russia would suspend its obligations under the CFE Treaty from next December 12, due to “exceptional circumstances that affect national security”¹³. The unilateral suspension means Moscow will no longer be

obliged to mutual monitoring and exchange of information, nor will it have to accept inspecting teams on Russian territory or preannounce its troops’ movements. Consequently the other signatories will have no means to obtain this data. Russia’s suspension is due to two overlapping reasons: on the one hand, displeasure with the slow pace of ratification of the 1999 Adaptation Agreement by the other parties’ (NATO members, including former Soviet Union states), justified by Russia’s continuous military presence in Georgia and Moldova and, on the other hand, a reaction to US efforts to install an anti-missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. There are two elements to confirm that Moscow has no intention to scrap the pact: suspension is not equivalent to withdrawal¹⁴, and Kremlin’s repeatedly stated willingness for dialogue with the other signatories. The country, in fact, is rather keen to re-negotiate the pact.

From October 10-12 Moscow was the seat of another round of consultations between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense of the US and Russia dealing with the missile dispute and the critical legal framework of bilateral relations. The meeting however failed to produce any concrete results. In relation to the CFE pact, it

2, 2007, http://www.kommersant.com/p791826/arms_reduction.

⁹ R. GOTTEMOELLER, *Looking back: The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty*, Carnegie Endowment, June 2007, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19419>.

¹⁰ T. McNUTT, *Re-START: Legal Options to Extend a Nuclear Verification Regime*, July 30, 2007, http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=4038&StartRow=1&ListRows=10&appendURL=&Orderby=D.DateLastUpdated&ProgramID=32&from_page=index.cfm.

¹¹ Consult the Treaty text at <http://www.armscontrol.org/documents/inf.asp>.

¹² The Treaty introduced comprehensive limits on key categories of conventional military equipment, reduced the military forces, imposed the destruction of excess weaponry in Europe, and introduced a regime of mutual verification. Consult Treaty text at <http://www.dod.mil/acq/acic/treaties/cfe/text.htm>.

¹³ Consult Presidential decree at <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2007/07/137839.shtml>. The State Duma was to discuss a bill, designed to suspend Russia’s obligations under the Treaty, on October 9 but later on it was postponed to November 6.

¹⁴ The State Duma Head of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev, declared the bill regulating the CFE Treaty suspension did not have an irreversible character and the postponement of its parliamentary discussion is meant to give Western partners a chance to review their position on the Treaty. In case this occurs, Russia is ready to continue to respect its obligations.

was decided that discussions should continue. As regards the INF Treaty, President Putin stressed the need to extend the terms of the pact globally, otherwise its limitation only to the US and Russia, could lead to his country's withdrawal. Ultimately, after the failure of US attempt to relieve Moscow's concerns on the anti-missile shield, it was agreed to meet again in Washington next April. US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, declared that in the short-term the installations did not pose a threat to Russia, but in the long-term they might do so¹⁵. On October 4 the State Duma issued a statement on the "Consequences of US anti-missile installations' deployment in Europe", stressing that the missile system has to be backed by the European public, rather than by executive and military authorities only, as US plans significantly modify American military presence in Europe and affect European and Russian strategic stability. Former Russia's Security Council Secretary and current MP, Andrei Kokoshin, hinted that the failure to find a common solution of the missile dispute may mean Russia's withdrawal from INF and CFE pacts and implementation of asymmetric political and military measures to counter and neutralise US threats¹⁶. But let's have a closer look at the details of the debate.

The US plans and Russia's opposition

The Bush administration has stated that today the most direct threat to US national security and that of its allies are

nuclear, biological, or chemical (NBC) weapons delivered through ballistic missiles¹⁷, developed by "rogue states" such as Iran and North Korea. Both countries possess short- to medium-range ballistic missiles, but are striving to acquire longer-range ones that could hit targets far beyond their national borders. Furthermore, Pyongyang and Teheran have a significant bilateral trade relationship, which strengthens their links¹⁸. The USA estimates that Iran's medium-range missile Shihab 3 can reach southeastern Europe and by 2015 it is likely that a long-range ballistic missiles, capable of hitting the US territory, might be developed by Iran.

To avoid this threat, America has implemented the so-called national *Ballistic Missile Defense System* (BMDS), a network of sensors and missiles stretching from Japan to Alaska, programmed to defend the US territory¹⁹. In

¹⁷ A ballistic missile is a missile that follows a sub-orbital, ballistic flight-path with the objective of delivering a warhead to a predetermined target. Its trajectory consists of three parts: the powered flight portion, the free-flight portion, and the re-entry phase. See <http://www.fas.org/nuke/intro/missile/basics.htm>.

¹⁸ Regarding limiting North Korea missile threat, on October 12 the USA announced the deployment in Japan of a mobile anti-missile system in accordance with bilateral US-Japan agreement for joint defense.

¹⁹ The predecessor of the BMDS is the NMD, comprising of a "network of missiles, as well as land- and space-based sensors, ... intended to intercept enemy missiles directed at civilian areas in the mid-course stage of their ballistic curve. [Today's BMDS] is a system of systems, incorporating components of the original NMD but amalgamating them with ... intercepting missiles in other

January 2007, the US made a proposal to Poland and the Czech Republic: to start stationing two additional elements of the existing BMDS by 2011-2013 on their respective territories. An X-band radar, known as *European Midcourse Radar* (EMR), would be deployed in the Czech Republic and ten missile interceptors in Poland, carrying no explosive warheads, purely for defensive, not offensive purposes. A third, undisclosed site for an early-warning radar should be located closer to Iran.

The defensive shield configuration stems from the assumption that the first strike will be delivered by Iran and that the hit would come from a certain type of missiles, which could be detected by the interceptors in Poland. US withdrawal from ABM pact makes these installations feasible. Moreover, such a defensive formula seems more persuasive to European NATO allies as well as less costly for the US Congress compared to an offensive program. Bush's administration has continuously stressed that current NATO defense efforts offer protection against short-range missiles only, but not against longer and intermediate-range ballistic missiles launched from the Middle East and directed to Central or Western Europe. Therefore, the US proposal fits both the US territory and most of Europe, where it would be complementary to national defense schemes and those of NATO. The anti-missile shield is declared as not directed at Russia's national security. As Gen. H. Obering, Director of the US Missile Defense Agency, put it, "the proposed European

stages of flight". See IISS, *US missile defense*, in «Strategic Comments», 13, 2007, 3.

¹⁵ See <http://www.rian.ru/politics/20071012/83667784.html>.

¹⁶ See <http://www.er-duma.ru/news/24728>.

ground-based interceptors would have no capability to defend the United States from Russian launches²⁰ of ICBMs.

On its part, Russia is deeply suspicious on the real goal of the US, believing the anti-missile shield is directed at it. It should be observed that the US has not defined Russia an enemy or a country to be militarily opposed (as it was during the Cold War), which may ignite serious confrontations between the two. However, Bush's administration objective to counteract Iran's nuclear weapons has a twofold impact: on Iran and, indirectly, on Russia. Given the uncertain fate of the main Russian-US treaties (START-I, CFE and INF), deploying missile defense installations ensures US security both from "rogue states" and Russia, if in the future the latter decides to strike at the US and its allies. Treaties' limitations are gradually losing their force as the parties withdraw or delay ratifications.

Moscow's decisions to suspend CFE Treaty and the possible withdraw from the INF are symptomatic of Russian foreign policy position at present. On the one hand, it needs to overcome the "isolation" from the majority of former Soviet republics and current NATO members, previously under its traditional sphere of influence²¹,

²⁰ H. OBERING, *European Missile Defense: The View From The Pentagon*, Arms Control Association, October 2007.

²¹ The Baltic states are an example. These NATO members are not parties to 1990 CFE Treaty and thus constitute a kind of "free zone", where NATO allied forces may be deployed at any time. Russia is striving for their accession to CFE Treaty so to guarantee some stability at Russian-Baltic states borders. If

but as well as from such a global security design as the US proposal, as long as the country is not able to act alone. On the other hand, Russia is likely to pull out of those treaties that do not any longer serve its national security so it can amend and formulate an adequate defense policy. It is plausible that Russia is waiting for a more substantive progress on the development of the US anti-missile defense scenario in Central Europe to take a consequent decision regarding Treaties' fate. Meanwhile, the only viable approach is to call for a restoration of international balance of power, where Russia may re-gain the prior relevance, show a co-operative spirit towards other international major players (the US included), and continue modernising its national defense capabilities.

In line with this, came the June 2007 President Putin's alternative to the US plans proposal to jointly use the data available from Gabala radar that Russia leased from Azerbaijan. As the radar is placed very close to the border with Iran, it may perform very detailed observations on launches of both cruise and ICBMs in Asia, Australia, and parts of Africa. For Russia, its joint use is much more useful than the construction of an anti-missile shield, but for the US Gabala alternative is obsolete with regard to current military needs and hence by itself it will not be capable to guarantee the same optimal degree of missile defense from "rogue states" as the Czech Republic's radar

this aim is not achieved, it may be more convenient to pull out of the CFE pact. Thus Russia will not have to respect any limits on its forces on the northern and southern flanks, allowing it to augment them.

would do²². Therefore, a simple replacement is excluded. Instead, the Gabala radar might be complementary to the US installations. Washington underlined that even placing the radar in other sites²³ the configuration would not be optimal as the current proposed one is. Later Russian proposal to use the much more modern Russian early-warning radar in Voronezh (southern Russia), as well as to set up an early-warning missile data exchange centers in Moscow and Brussels, found only a lukewarm response, with the principal negotiations focused on Gabala radar. However, all these suggestions show Russia's intent to co-operatively assess and share information on the Iranian missile threat. In fact, some experts regard the Gabala option, and Azerbaijan in general, as a point of convergence of interest for both Russia and the US. On the one hand, Azerbaijan was a former Soviet Republic, therefore under Moscow's geopolitical influence. On the other hand, Azeri geographical closeness to Iran makes the country and its internal stability a key factor against the Iranian threat, to the extent that in 2006 the US diplomats defined it the "US Islamic ally in the region"²⁴.

²² This was the conclusion of the US military experts after their October visit to the radar. They also pointed out that Gabala radar is not capable to guide the missile interceptors at enemy's targets.

²³ Some political analysts suppose a positioning of anti-missile installations in Turkey or other southern Europe sites. See G. LEWIS, Th. POSTOL, *European Missile Defense: The Technological Basis of Russian Concerns*, Arms Control Association, October 2007.

²⁴ S. MARKEDONOV, *Azerbaijan – eto udachnai vaibor*, June 9, 2007,

Besides, a closer look at Russia's proposal reveals Moscow's core issue of concern, namely that the planned exclusively European configuration of the US missile defense (and as such placed up to the borders of European Russia) might be able to challenge Russian capability to counter the US when it strikes at it first. In that case, country's nuclear strategic arsenal would be significantly reduced and weakened against Poland's much faster interceptor missiles, eliminating Russia's efforts to retaliate. The radar based in the Czech Republic should be able to track Russia's ICBMs (shot from Russian sites situated west of the Urals) soon after their launch, guide the interceptors missiles in Poland against them, and catch Russian ICBMs from behind. Moreover, it is likely that US installations' capabilities will be improved further in the future, through, for example, the increase of the number of interceptor missiles. Such scenario is indeed viewed as the very threat to Russian national security, especially if the missile defense components in Central Europe are connected with other elements of the American defense system, as those in the Western US, posing a possible threat to Russia's Far East²⁵. On the contrary, "placing missile defense radars and interceptors south and west of Russian ICBMs would eliminate any potential missile threat to Russian ICBMs from US interceptors in Europe. Missile defense radars would not be able to observe and track Russian ICBMs, and inter-

ceptors would be too far from Russian ICBMs to catch them after a launch"²⁶. Russian military analysts also point out that even in the case that Russia reacts to a US attack by launching strategic missile at the shortest trajectory path to the US territory over the North Pole, avoiding the scope of the anti-missile shield, the missiles are likely to come under the operating range of the anti-ballistic Alaska radar. Its functioning is linked to the *High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program* (HAARP), that is the possibility, exploiting some physical alterations occurring in the ionosphere fluxes of electric charged particles in the North Pole, to negatively impact on the ordinary functioning of the electronic equipment of the missiles, destroying in some cases the latter²⁷.

Leaving apart Russia's criticisms, the proposed US defense configuration may not be able to cover all the territory of Europe, requiring thus the development of additional defense sub-systems: ground-based short-range interceptors (located in Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, or Albania) and *Aegis* sea-based interceptors (the sea-based component of the BMDS), in addition to a radar placed closer to Iran²⁸. Related to this issue is the question of a greater involvement of all European NATO members so to preserve the alliance unity. Bush's administration showed a preference towards a bilateral approach with its partners but experts signal this may

compromise the future stability of defense plans.

However, it seems the US Congress too is rather cautious on the missile debate. There are three facts to back this assumption. First, the recent request (October 13) by Bush administration to have refunded the \$160 million from the House of Representatives and \$85 million from the Senate, requested for the anti-missile shield in Europe. Second, the Senate has urged the Administration to suspend any construction activities until a final affirmative confirmation is given by the Polish and Czech governments. Lastly, in order to allocate around \$4 billion for the project in the next several years, the Congress has requested a thorough political, technical, and operational review given the current lack of reliable test targets and uncertainty whether the program would work effectively²⁹. Moreover, the Senate Armed Services Committee report on 2008 legislation doubts Iran's potential to develop missiles capable to strike at Europe, ultimately concluding that construction and deployment of a defense system is premature.

Conclusion

Summing up, the plans to deploy an anti-missile shield in Central Europe give no clear evidence that such missile defense schemes will dissuade future missile build-ups and will appropriately contribute to an efficient arms control process. Instead, it is more likely the opposite outcome. In addition,

²⁶ G. LEWIS, Th. POSTOL, *European Missile Defense*, cit..

²⁷ See B. CHUKOV, *Zvezdni vojni trevozhat Moskva*, in «Standard», February 26, 2007.

²⁸ G. LEWIS, Th. POSTOL, *European Missile Defense*, cit..

²⁹ E. TAUSCHER, *European Missile Defense: A Congressional Perspective*, Arms Control Association, October 2007.

<http://www.politcom.ru/article.php?id=4688>.

²⁵ See Y. PRIMAKOV, *Who Is Muscle Flexing?*, Moscow News, September 14, 2007.

given the aforementioned uncertainty of the legal framework, there is less ground for co-operation between Russia and the US and, on the contrary, greater possibility to act individually eliminating chances for compromise. Russia is likely to retain its fears as to Washington's decisions and actions in its neighbourhood and therefore to keep the pace of its military build-up. But the US may change its policies after the upcoming presidential elections and overturn the current dispute by moving away from the program just as it happened when Clinton came to the White House after Reagan. US Congress hesitant behaviour highlights this possibility.

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