STRATEGIC STABILITY AND MISSILE DEFENSE – A VIEW FROM RUSSIA [1]

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The notion of strategic stability

The emergence of the strategic stability concept goes back to the first decades of the Cold War, and was interpreted at that time as mutual nuclear deterrence (or mutually assured destruction – MAD) with the view of avoiding a military conflict between the USSR and the USA. Such a deterrence was based on the assumption that even during a sharp crisis a preventive nuclear strike by one side would not give an advantage since the other side would anyway preserve a retaliatory strike capability under any circumstances of the beginning of the war.

However with the end of the Cold War and the advent of radically new geopolitical, military and technical conditions the concept of strategic stability began to expand under the influence of new challenges such as proliferation of missile technology, development of missile defense and conventional global prompt strike systems and eventual deployment of space weapons.

One of the modern and commonly accepted definitions of strategic stability states that strategic stability is a robust strategic nuclear balance that is maintained over a long period of time despite the impact of destabilizing factors.[3]

The impact of missile defenses on strategic stability

Ballistic missile defense systems can either undermine or enhance strategic stability.

When they protect the intercontinental ballistic missiles bases, strategic nuclear submarines, command and control systems and nothing more they are conducive to maintaining strategic stability. But they can undermine strategic stability if they create an increased risk of a disarming strike by protecting a country that initiates it against a massive retaliation by intercepting a substantial portion of the incoming missiles and warheads.[4] The US European missile defense program called Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA) apparently falls under this category.

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[1] Presentation at the International conference ”Arms Control and Strategic Stability” (Beijing, August 8-9, 2013).
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[3] Vladimir Dvorkin, ”Deterrence and Strategic Stability”, in the book ”Nuclear Reset: Arms Reductions and Nonproliferation”, ed. by Alexei Arbatov and Vladimir Dvorkin, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2012.
[4] *Ibid.*

Missile defense has become nowadays one of the most contentious factors in the US-Russian relations obstructing the way to further nuclear arms reductions and consequently the way to enhancement of strategic stability.

In June 2002 the United States unilaterally withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty after which it formed the US Missile Defense Agency adding to Russian mistrust of the West growing after NATO 1999 military action against Serbia in the absence of a UN Security Council resolution and after NATO eastward expansion to the former Warsaw Pact USSR allies despite the US assurances that this will never happen. It may appear paradoxical but it was the United States which undertook 40 years ago substantial efforts to convince the Soviet Union that the ABM Treaty was crucial for strategic stability. Nowadays the two parties have swopped the roles and it is Russia, which insists on the importance of a fair settlement of the missile defense discord.

Moscow's current concerns regarding missile defense have been repeatedly voiced at the official and expert levels: the US PAA European ABM system would compromise the Russian nuclear deterrent potential especially in the context of further treaty-defined nuclear reductions. These concerns have been heightened by eventual threat from US cruise missiles and other conventional prompt global strike systems, which are capable of a disarming strike against Russian strategic nuclear forces.

It would be appropriate to remind at this point the provisions of the preamble to the New START Treaty signed in April 2010 in Prague which speak for themselves: "…Recognizing the interrelationship between strategic offensive arms and strategic defensive arms, that this interrelationship will become more important as strategic nuclear arms are reduced and that current strategic defensive arms do not undermine the viability and effectiveness of the strategic offensive arms or the parties…"

The scope of the US European PAA missile defense program impresses indeed – 500 interceptor missiles on 43 US Aegis Navy destroyers and two land sites in Europe by 2018. With respect to Aegis-based antimissiles Russia is especially concerned with their potential massive deployment in the Northern seas, which would represent a danger to the Russian ICBMs.[5] A recent announcement by the US Secretary of Defense that plans to install the fourth phase of Missile Defense interception system in Poland have been abandoned got a mixed reaction in Russia but a view predominated that this American initiative was a positive but not a sufficient step in the right direction. Moreover doubts were expressed to what extent binding such a commitment was, that is can't it be reversed by future US administrations.

Overcoming the discord over missile defense

The question arises how to find a potential way out the current "missile defense deadlock".

[5] Eugene Miasnikov, "Precision-Guided Conventional Weapons", in the book "Nuclear Reset: Arms Reduction and Nonproliferation", ed. by Alexei Arbatov and Vladimir Dvorkin, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2012.

I sympathize with a proposal of the recent joint US-Russian study to this effect "From mutual assured destruction to mutual assured stability," which asserts that it would be possible to create a cooperative missile defense system.[6]

Such a system would allow to use the capabilities of national missile defense systems within the framework of interoperability and carry out joint assessments of threats at a shared center interoperable with regional defensive launch systems.

Moreover the joint report recommends to conduct US-Russia consultations on the role of missile defense in relation to the tasks of further reductions of nuclear weapons. Since the lack of assurances, transparency and cooperation on missile defense puts at risk progress on nuclear weapons reductions and since currently there is no common understanding and guidance on the relation between offensive and defensive missile forces such consultations are all the more important.

A proposal that such consultations should involve China whose nuclear program impacts the US as well as the Russian nuclear policy looks reasonable as well. Involving China would also set the stage for eventual multilateral agreements on nuclear arms limitations and reductions.

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[6] "From Mutual Assured Destruction to Mutual Assured Stability", a joint report by the National Resources Defense Council (USA) and the Institute for USA and Canadian Studies (Russia). NRDC Report R:13-03-A, March 2013.