

# Missile Defense System Negotiations: Washington-Warsaw-Moscow Triangle

Written by Richard Rousseau, Contributor | 07 June 2012

When in March 1983 Ronald Reagan announced the initial plans to build a missile defense system purported to be able to “intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our [U.S.] own soil or that of our allies,” he in reality proclaimed the end of the deterrence and so called “balance of terror” doctrines which had formed the basis of the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during what is known as the Cold War.

The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), more commonly known at the time as "Star Wars," reformulated the power equation that had underpinned the “détente” period (1971-80). This project was abandoned with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1991, which marked the end of the Cold War.

However, more than ten years later, President George W. Bush reactivated it, signing bilateral agreements with the Czech Republic and Poland for the deployment of a radar system and advanced land based missile interceptors.

With the election of President Barack Obama, the missile defense system was transformed from a bilateral project to a multilateral one, directly involving European allies and the very structure of the NATO alliance. The Kremlin strongly opposed the Euro-American missile deployment project, first in the 1980s and again into the 21st Century. Today as in the past, Russia’s complaints and rhetoric remain basically unchanged. It claims that the shield would compromise the effectiveness of the Russian long-range nuclear arsenal, thus drastically alter the balance of power with the West.

A turning point seemed to have taken place at the NATO summit in Lisbon in November 2010. Following a lively debate among diplomats, the European allies unanimously signed an agreement for the deployment of a missile defense system, which would provide “full coverage” of the Alliance area by 2020. More importantly, the final declaration of the summit heralded the birth of “cooperation with Russia in a spirit of reciprocity, maximum transparency and mutual confidence.” However, such good intentions and noble sentiments are regarded as mere words by some, as there is no serious likelihood that both sides will cooperate on a joint defense project of this nature.

In early May 2012, on the eve of the NATO summit in Chicago, Nikolai Makarov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and First Deputy Minister of Defense, explicitly stated that, given the “destabilizing nature of the missile defense system,” Moscow does not exclude a preemptive attack against such NATO missile installations. These pungent words were quickly backed up with threats: In November 2011 the Kremlin said Russia will deploy Iskander tactical missiles in Kaliningrad, the strip of Russian territory lying between Poland and Lithuania.

On the Atlantic side, from the top Portuguese generals to Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO Secretary General, conciliatory statements to assuage Russian fears have regularly been released,

However, these attempts to appease Russia have not borne fruits so far and NATO has not give up the option of pursuing the project, unilaterally if need be.

Even if NATO members unanimously support the construction of the missile defense system, major differences persist concerning the command and control structure of the system. Moscow seems ready to engage in a close (and transparent) cooperation with the U.S. and NATO provided that, first, the Atlantic Alliance is willing to yield on having full control of the system deployed to protect Eastern European countries and, second, explicit legal guarantees are incorporated into a binding accord stating the system would not be aimed at containing Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal.

NATO refuses to negotiate on Moscow's first demand because, it says, to include Russia in the management system would effectively legitimize the Kremlin's regional ambition, that is, the capacity to exert overt influence over Eastern Europe. The Atlantic Alliance, fifteen years after the demise of the USSR, is still haunted by the specter of a hegemonic Russia in its "near abroad." As to the second Russian demand, NATO gives strong assurances that the defense system is designed and will be operated only with the Iranian threat in mind (and that of North Korea); it categorically rules out any military options against Moscow.

The essence of this dispute is actually how spheres of influence are likely to shift as a result of the missile defense system. Under Vladimir Putin's first presidency (2000-2008), the Kremlin never fully accepted the integration of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states into the Euro-Atlantic collective security structure. Although discussions and negotiations have so far centered on the impact the project could have on U.S. (and consequently NATO, although Moscow still identifies NATO's interests with those of the U.S.) and Russian influence in Eastern Europe, and the world more broadly, a third major player has now been added to the lineup: Poland.

Thanks to twenty years of impressive economic growth which has resulted in a substantial military build-up, Poland is now convinced that it has the credentials to be regarded as a leader in Europe (and not just in Central and Eastern Europe). To act as a mediator between Russia and the United States on the missile defense initiative, and gain international prestige or notoriety on the international stage, is, in Warsaw's eyes, an opportunity not to be missed.

Poland has already initiated a process of relaxation in its relations with Russia, while ties with Washington have slightly deteriorated in recent times. Nevertheless, Warsaw reiterates that it is willing to host NATO missile interceptors on its territory. In parallel, it has strengthened its economic and military leadership within the Visegrad Group, an organization comprising Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, and potentially opened to the Baltic countries' accession.

This new Polish diplomatic assertiveness and gamesmanship have driven a wedge between some NATO allies. Poland's regional ambitions are, in fact, generating friction with neighboring countries, and this could alter the plans for the deployment of the missile defense system. Relations are particularly tense between Poland and Lithuania, two countries that would be greatly exposed to the threat of the Russian missiles deployed in Kaliningrad. For instance, Warsaw has warned Vilnius that if the rights of Lithuanians of Polish decent continue to be abused, it will, in retaliation, exclude Lithuanian territory from the protection the missile interceptors would provide. In response, Lithuanian president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, has deliberately ignored the April Visegrad Group Summit in Poland, which had been requested by the same Baltic countries.

It must be noted that the mutual distrust between Vilnius and Warsaw is historically rooted in Lithuania's fears of a hypothetical return to the strained relations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Kingdom of Poland's Crown experienced a period of great splendor, influencing the policy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The United States has not yet adopted a position on the Lithuanian-Polish dispute, as to do so at this point would certainly impair the realization of the missile defense system project. The widening of the gulf between Poland and the Baltic states, and U.S. meddling in the issue would only benefit Russia, which still has non-negligible levers at its disposal in that part of Europe. Moscow could play the energy card, especially with Lithuania, which already depends largely on its big neighbor for energy.

The NATO missile defense shield, a fierce point of contention between the U.S. and Russia, could change the strategic balance of the whole of Eurasia. In the last two years, Euro-Atlantic diplomacy has concentrated most of its efforts on confidence building with Moscow. The results have, however, proven insufficient. Russia still has no intention of renouncing its hegemonic ambitions which are bound up with its Tsarist and Soviet history.

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