Engaging Russia on Missile Defence

1. According to President Putin, the renewed post-Cold War competition began when the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002. “If we are to speak of an arms race, then an arms race started precisely at that point,” Putin said in an interview last year.1

2. The US decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, and its subsequent efforts to establish a missile defence architecture in the United States and Europe, was certainly a major turning point in US-Russian relations. The ABM Treaty was long-considered by Putin to be the cornerstone of the post-Cold War stability architecture, and so its demise has been met with an unexpectedly hostile response—including Russia’s violations of other critical arms control agreements and the modernization of its nuclear weapons arsenal. High-ranking Russian defence officials have stated that Russia’s research on technologies specifically designed to defeat US and European missile defences began shortly after 2002, when the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty.2 Today, we are seeing the fruits of these efforts, with Russia announcing its plans to deploy the first of its Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles by the end of 2019.3

3. Why is Putin so concerned about missile defence—particularly given US statements that its missile defence architecture is only oriented towards “rogue nations” (namely, North Korea and Iran) and that its interceptors are not technologically capable of shooting down Russian missiles?

4. Russia fears that even if these claims are true today, they may not hold indefinitely. As missile defence technologies mature, Russian officials suspect that US interceptors may eventually be able to defeat Russian ICBMs, thus seriously undermining Russia’s strategic deterrent. Although the majority of US officials and analysts would consider such assertions to be implausible, the United States continues to invest heavily in its missile defences, conduct research and development into new interception technologies, and dramatically expand its number of deployed interceptors.

5. Significantly, the Trump administration’s 2019 Missile Defense Review (MDR) includes an explicit reorientation of US missile defences to address Russian and

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Chinese hypersonic threats, constituting a conspicuous shift in longstanding missile defence policy. Until the release of the 2019 MDR, missile defence had been nominally limited to addressing threats from “rogue nations.” This all-important line has now been blurred, particularly by President Trump’s assertion that US missile defence systems are intended to “detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States anywhere, anytime, anyplace.”

6. Putin has made it crystal clear that Russia’s nuclear modernization will continue, in an attempt to counter US improvements to its missile defences. And given the Trump administration’s explicit pledge to “not accept any limitation or constraint on the development or deployment of missile defense capabilities,” it seems highly unlikely that Putin would agree to any further limitations on Russia’s strategic arsenal without corresponding limitations to US missile defence capabilities.

7. To that end, the United States should consider taking a series of unilateral confidence-building measures with the aim of assuring Russia that US missile defences do not threaten Russia’s strategic deterrent.

- As missile defence experts George Lewis and Frank von Hippel explain, the fundamental problem is that “the US ballistic missile defense system is not being built toward a well-defined goal, but rather as an evolving project.” Therefore, in the interest of strategic stability, the United States could unilaterally declare its intent to ensure the continued viability of the Russian strategic deterrent, even as missile defence technologies continue to evolve. To that end, the United States should establish firm limits on its missile defences, clearly communicate those limits to Russia, and eliminate any existing and proposed superfluous systems that could negatively affect strategic stability.

- The United States Congress could reverse its 2016 decision to ban the sharing of missile defence interceptor data with Russia.

- The United States could cancel its plans to conduct an SM-3 Block IIA test against an ICBM target in 2020, and declare that this type of interceptor will not be used for the homeland missile defence mission.

- NATO could pause construction of the Aegis Ashore site in Redzikowo, Poland, which is already significantly behind schedule.

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• As Bruce Blair, Jessica Sleight, and Emma Claire Foley have suggested in Global Zero’s Alternative Nuclear Posture Review, the United States and NATO could establish exclusion zones for their missile defence deployments near Russian territory, which would in turn reduce their potential effectiveness against Russian missiles. This option would become especially important as the United States seeks to convert a large number of its Aegis destroyers into BMD-capable warships over the coming years.

• Additionally, rather than continuous operation, NATO could ensure that its missile defences are deployed and on combat alert only if a legitimate third-party imminent threat presents itself. Russia could be briefed on such threats by NATO and could be notified in advance of subsequent deployments and alerts.

8. Additionally, the United States should explore options for engaging Russia in renewed arms control efforts that focus on missile defence.

• The United States and Russia could consider options for folding missile defence interceptors into existing or renegotiated arms control agreements. For example, two missile interceptors could be counted as equivalent to one nuclear-capable delivery system.

• If missile defense cannot feasibly be incorporated into existing arms control agreements, the United States and Russia could explore possibilities for asymmetric arms control agreements which would limit the specific adversarial capabilities which most concern the other party (for example, placing limits on American missile defences in exchange for limits on Russian hypersonic weapons, tactical nuclear weapons, or anti-satellite capabilities).

• NATO and Russia could explore the possibility of creating a joint system for assessing or sharing early warning data on third-party missile and space launches. This was actually agreed upon by Presidents Obama and Medvedev in 2009-2010, but the proposal was eventually abandoned.

• More ambitiously, NATO and Russia could explore possibilities for fielding joint NATO-Russian missile defence sites to counter third-party threats. This was proposed by the Russians in 2007, but was rejected by the United States in favour of Eastern European missile defence deployments. This is perhaps an aspirational goal given the current political climate, but should still be kept on the table.

9. After the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, Donald Rumsfeld characterized the initial Alaskan missile defense deployments as “better

than nothing.”⁸ In hindsight, his remarks could be considered generous, as these deployments dramatically contributed to the destabilization of the post-Cold War security environment and, according to Putin, immediately triggered an arms race. Although this certainly does not justify Russia’s aggressive actions in Georgia, Ukraine, or elsewhere, it is imperative that NATO takes action to address Putin’s perceived security concerns surrounding missile defense—otherwise, any remaining prospects for future arms control agreements will all but disappear.

Received 11 February 2019

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