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A Nuclear Nightmare in the Making: NATO, Missile Defense and Russian Insecurity

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In the aftermath of the Cold War, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has become increasingly powerful. It was created in 1949 as an alliance of Western military forces to protect against the perceived military threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, NATO has expanded by adding former Soviet bloc countries, moving to the borders of Russia. It has also engaged in military actions, notably in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Libya.

For the past several years, the US and NATO have been pursuing the deployment of an integrated missile defense system in Western, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, as well as in surrounding waters. The Russians have protested vigorously that the planned system will undermine its nuclear retaliatory potential and thereby its security. The United States, the driving force behind NATO missile defense plans, has repeatedly told the Russian leaders that there is no need to be worried about these deployments since they are designed to counter Iranian missiles rather than Russian ICBMs.

The US has refused, however, to provide Russia with written assurances that the missile defense system is not directed at Russia. Accordingly, Russia has rejected US verbal assurances and has threatened to deploy its own missiles aimed at the NATO missile defense installations. Russia

has also threatened to withdraw from New START, an agreement with the US to reduce the numbers of nuclear weapons and delivery systems in the arsenals of both countries.

The American Ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, with cold indifference to Russian concerns, recently stated, “Whether Russia likes it or not, we are about defending NATO-European territory against a growing ballistic missile threat. We will adapt the timing and the details to that threat, which is why the focus of our joint effort ought to be about how to figure out how to reduce that threat rather than trying to threaten and retaliate for a deployment that has nothing to do with Russia.”

Suppose for a moment that the situation were reversed, and that it was Russia who had formed another NATO, a North American Treaty Organization. Russia leads this military alliance with Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Mexico and various other Central American and Caribbean states. The Russian/NATO states all shared the same military communication and weapons systems, and had previously fought several wars in South America.

Imagine that, through this alliance, Russia begins deployment of an integrated missile defense system right up to the borders to the US, as well as on naval vessels positioned off the East and West coasts of the United States. Russia states the purpose of this system, which surrounds most of the continental US, is to protect against a possible missile launch from Canada. The US protests that the deployment of such a missile defense system would undermine its retaliatory potential and thereby its security. Concerned about the vulnerability of its nuclear forces, the US then threatens to target the Russian missile defenses and to withdraw from New START. Instead of taking US security concerns seriously, a Russian ambassador says, “Whether the US likes it or not, we are about defending NATO-American concerns.”

This is a dangerous scenario, no matter which NATO we are talking about, the real one or the hypothetical one. Continued US indifference to Russian security concerns could have dire consequences: a breakdown in US-Russian relations; regression to a new nuclear-armed standoff in Europe; Russian withdrawal from New START; a new nuclear arms race between the two countries; a breakdown of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty leading to new nuclear weapon states; and a higher probability of nuclear weapons use by accident or design. This is a scenario for nuclear disaster, and it is being provoked by US hubris in pursuing missile defenses, a technology that is unlikely ever to be effective, but which Russian leaders must view in terms of a worst-case scenario.

In the event of increased US-Russian tensions, the worst-case scenario from the Russian perspective would be a US first-strike nuclear attack on Russia, taking out most of the Russian nuclear retaliatory capability. The Russians believe the US would be emboldened to make a first-strike attack by having the US-NATO missile defense installations located near the Russian border, which the US could believe capable of shooting down any Russian missiles that survived its first-strike attack.

The path to a US-Russian nuclear war could also begin with a conventional military confrontation via NATO. The expansion of NATO to the borders of Russia has created the potential for a local military conflict with Russia to quickly escalate into a nuclear war. It is now

Russian policy to respond with tactical nuclear weapons if faced with overwhelmingly superior conventional forces, such as those of NATO. In the event of war, the “nuclear umbrella” of NATO guarantees that NATO members will be protected by US nuclear weapons that are already forward-based in Europe.

Shortly after President Obama came into office, he said in Prague, “The US seeks the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” If he has any intention of making that dream a reality, he had better instruct the US government to work with the Russians in a way that does not undermine their security, or perceived security, which, from the Russian perspective, is essentially the same.

The only security that can exist in the Nuclear Age is common security. An imbalance in security, or perceptions of security, threatens not only the weaker party, but all parties. NATO missile defense plans have created greater insecurity for Russia, which has set in motion Russian counteractions that are reducing security for the US, NATO and the world. Two solutions exist: either eliminate US-NATO European missile defense; or allow Russia to become a full-partner in the planning and operation the missile defense deployments.