
Missile Defence: Old Debate — New Challenge

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The ABM treaty of 1972 came to be seen, rightly, as the first contractual foundation of a bipolar order between the two superpowers. It codified, so to speak, the notion of mutual deterrence (MAD) which acquired, in the nuclear age, strategic precedence above defence in the classical sense of the term. Defence came paradoxically to be associated with war fighting (how to ride out a first strike so as to prevail in the second) in other words, how to dominate, whereas deterrence or the perspective of assured destruction was seen as stabilising because it was, intellectually at least, implied as a strategy of war denial. There are clearly remnants of this line of reasoning in the Russian argumentation of today against the US Missile Defence (MD) project.

The denunciation in 2002 of the ABM treaty, at the initiative of United States, although only mildly opposed at the time by Moscow, could not but symbolize the end of the era of bipolarity. It was furthermore perceived by Russia as the formal confirmation of what was already implicit to all since the early nineties, namely that it had lost its status of super power.

No surprise therefore that the revisiting of the broad problematic of missile defence in the wake of the projected US deployment of a limited missile defence (MD) capability in Europe, and this above all in former Warsaw Pact countries, should bring back, in the Russian psyche, the unhappy memory of the demise of the USSR, the greatest disaster in the Russian history according to President Putin. This the more so that Putin's Russia, now benefiting from the affluence generated by oil revenues, is eager to re-establish itself as a main player on the world scene, notably in relation to the US. It is therefore no so much that Russia feels threatened militarily; it is that it longs for the kind of recognition which it used to enjoy in days not so distant. Neither is it, contrary to what the Russians would have us believe, that the new Missile Defence controversy does simply amount to reopening the SDI debate.

Of course they are similarities between SDI and MD but differences are even greater. The problem with the Russians is precisely that they want to see the first and ignore the second; namely that the politico-strategic context has changed beyond recognition; consequently, the strategic framework of the cold war, by now obsolete in many aspects, is certainly no valid reference for assessing the pros and cons of a new system tailored to the strategic requirements of the multidimensional world tomorrow.

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This said, the fears and objections of Russia in regard to the projected deployment of an American strategic defence capability in Europe, unfounded or exaggerated as they may be, are to be reckoned with for what they are: the expression of a profound political dissatisfaction at what the Russians, not just President Putin, perceive as an unequal treatment.

The Russian strategic thinking was historically dominated by a quasi atavistic fear of encirclement. Furthermore, it is still profoundly rooted in the heritage of the USSR. Not unsurprisingly, the main line of reasoning of Russia against the US defence missile program is that it is primarily designed to downgrade its own security more than to shoot down hypothetical third party missiles directed at the American continent. But Russians also know, or at least should know that this proclaimed fear is largely unjustified from a military viewpoint, if only because the balance of existing strategic capabilities with the US remains what it was; true at a much reduced, and therefore much stable level. The truth, if essentially an untold one, is that Russia is probably more interested in downgrading the political influence of the US than it is to upgrade its own military power in relation to the latter. The MD controversy should, in the main, be seen as yet another sour point on a already long, and growing list which includes CFE, NATO enlargement, US creeping encroachment in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Ukraine and Kosovo, all domains where new Russia thinks that there is political ground to recoup.

If this assumption is correct, even in part, the solution to the MD question, any solution for that matter, needs to transcend the narrow confines of arms control or of balance of forces in the old sense of the cold war when the problem was truly of a military nature. The question, now, is more one of a balance of influence than of forces.

The result of all this is that we, the Russians, the Americans, and the allies in general are far from the kind of comprehensive compromise which could satisfy everyone, politically at least. An other factor to be reckoned with is that the weight of Europe in all this is secondary. The European allies do not hold the keys to whatever concessions the two main protagonists would be eventually willing to make to come to terms. In fact, the real challenge from a European-NATO point of view, is not whether to deploy or not, but how to uphold allied solidarity in the face of conflicting perceptions and priorities. In other words, the main issue is one of coupling, a perennial question in the life of the Alliance. Here, the motto should, once again, be “stay united”. Neutrality is therefore not a good option. It only would take us down the slippery slope of divisiveness which, if not the primary objective of Russia, is certainly a bonus worth pocketing from its point of view.

This said the question is not likely to go away; it has, on the contrary, the potential to poison further an already sour atmosphere. Under the circumstances, patience is of the essence. The core of the matter being political, the outcome will depend on the broad political context in the month ahead, and this in both Moscow and Washington.

It will be difficult to convince Russia, in its present mood at least, of the merits of the US approach simply by telling them that the world has changed and that deterrence, although still valid as a concept in the old East-West acceptance, loses much of its significance when third parties are involved — which Russians probably suspect but don't want to recognise. But whatever they may think, allies have no other useful course than to build up their own case on solid strategic ground if they want, as they should, remain united and show the

necessary resolve in the face of a probably growing Russian pressure to divide the Alliance. It is in all cases good tactics to oppose logic to phantasms. In so doing, we will also demonstrate that it makes not much intellectual sense, as Russia is doing, to refute new concepts, or today arguments on the basis of yesterday parameters.

It is not useful at this stage to indulge into an ideological or quasi philosophical debate on the relative merits of defence and deterrence. This would take us very far under the circumstances. What we should do is to reflect upon what has changed in the strategic environment, and what has not so as to draw useful operational conclusions.

First, the constants: The deployment, in Europe, of a limited US MD capability to counter a limited threat emanating from a third source cannot seriously degrade the operational capability of the Russian strategic arsenal, even at its present reduced level nor does it have a direct impact on the legitimate need for modernisation over the years, preferably within the framework of existing or even upgraded arms control agreements. Russia retains the capability to inflict, under whatever circumstances, a devastating second strike against whatever opponent, be it the United States. Russians know that past US investments in technologies and money, not to mention theirs, have demonstrated the inanity of a credible full protection against a massive offensive ballistic capability of the kind they still hold. A full shield is simply not in the realm of possibilities. The logic of MAD remains essentially intact although hardly plausible, rationally or politically, in the new East/West environment. Conceivably, US technological hedge could, at some point in time, make a difference but it will be years, if ever, before technology can significantly offset, at that kind of level at least, the quantitative factor; and this with, or without the MD project considering that a ban on research and development is unenforceable.

Second, the real question for tomorrow is not how to deter a “partner” to resort to force against the “other partner” but to counter a threat emanating from an “outsider”, possibly a rogue state, or even a non state entity. This situation excludes, almost by hypothesis, the kind of calculus which makes deterrence a rational process. This essentially to say that the notion of assured mutual destruction is in question against a terrorist threat or, a fortiori, in the case of a “collateral strike” or the blackmail thereof in the wake of a pre-emptive strike initiated by yet another party (what in case of an Israeli pre-emptive strike on a missile capable Iran, if it would come to that?). The reality is that, when a third party is involved, no country, how powerful be it, can realistically hope to control the developments on its own. The option of a massive retaliation, although by no means excluded, would probably prove, in such an instance, difficult to execute and to calibrate especially in the absence of well rehearsed contingency plans. In other words, defence is taking precedence on deterrence.

Third, and from a European point of view, NATO Europe is evidently more vulnerable to a “rogue” state missile attack than the US; something that even the Russian recognize. This means that a “US first deployment” will have in all cases to be made compatible with a “NATO-Europe and, why not tomorrow,, with a “NATO-Russia program tailored to European requirements.

Important as it is to convince ourselves, and ultimately the Russians, of the merits of our strategic thinking, allies are still ought, collectively, a number of concrete answers to a number of very concrete questions which so far have only been addressed superficially. The real question is not whether Missile Defence is inherently good or bad. More simply the question is: is it going to be effective against the designated threat?

Weapon system analysts as they are called still have to get their act together in order to convince their political masters including in the US. Any way, the final assessment will have to give due account to questions such as the exact nature and imminence of the threat, the adequacy of the response, its feasibility and reliability, as well as operational considerations, including command and control which are a key factor from the point of view of coupling and political control. Some of these questions will be difficult to answer short of a full testing under plausible operational conditions; a hard condition to fulfil, ex ante at least. Many doubts still exist which the US Congress will not fail to address. The jury is still out.

Russia, on its part, remains very vocal against the MD project. This does not, at least for now, augurs well of an agreed outcome. At least Russia has agreed to talk bilaterally and in the NATO-RUSSIA Council. In itself, that is good news, as well as an indication that they have not said their last word. In this respect, their offer made at Kennebunk Port at the last meeting between the two Presidents of a new strategic partnership is interesting if only because it goes at the hart of the problem.

Assuming that we are confident that we will have all the answers that one can reasonably expect, the real hard choice before we decide to forge ahead collectively, if we so chose, will not be made on technical nor essentially military ground. The choice will require a balancing act between the expected political damage to the relationship with Moscow on the one hand with, on the other, the US and the Alliance security gain, not vis-à-vis Russia, but in relation to third actors whose role and possible nuisance value is, at best, unpredictable, hence unquantifiable. The big question will be the “is it all worth the investment” militarily, politically, and financially at least for those who will be called upon to foot the bill!

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