

## **REMOVING THE MISSILE THREATS:**

### **OBAMA ACTION NEEDED NOW, EU MUST LEAD**

*By Greg Austin*

On November 5, 2008, barely one hour after Barack Obama's victory speech, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev announced plans to deploy missiles in Kaliningrad that could attack U.S. military targets in Poland. The targets are limited, small in number and do not yet really exist: they will exist if and when the United States completes its ballistic missile defense system that is planned for Poland along with a sophisticated radar component in the Czech Republic.

The reaction in Europe and the United States ranged from outrage in Poland, to "disappointed" in the White House, to "seriously concerned" in NATO headquarters. Russia claims it has been backed into a corner by U.S. erosion of key cornerstones of European and global security and by aggressive moves to expand NATO into areas that affect Russia's vital security interests.

How did we arrive at this point? Russia sees new threats from NATO and the United States and they see new threats from Russia. And even where they do agree on a threat to both sides—as in the case of potential and actual missile threats from Asia and the Middle East—they cannot find consistent common ground on how to deal with them. More importantly, how do we reverse this steady escalation of tension and confrontation? There is an EU-Russia summit on Friday, November 14. It will be an important opportunity to set a new tone.

#### ***We Should Be In a Different Place: We Are Not Enemies***

Twenty years ago, Moscow and Washington agreed on the radical measure of eliminating all intermediate range nuclear forces. This year, to mark the anniversary of the treaty that banned them, the two countries launched a bid to have other countries join that treaty and commit to a total ban on intermediate nuclear forces. The treaty was the direct result of Russia's adoption of the principle of common security, an idea captured in the phrase "our common European home." The missile ban was a direct response to the massive public outcry over deployment of missiles in Europe in the 1980s.

Both sides argue that they want peaceful relations. In 2008, despite the simmering tensions over U.S. plans to deploy the missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, the United States and Russia expressed interest in developing a joint ballistic missile defense system in response to shared perceptions of potential nuclear missile threats from Asia. The two countries also expanded their global initiative to prevent nuclear terrorism.

But neither side is prepared to de-escalate first. While Russia and the United States no longer actively prepare for or expect large-scale war with each other, both countries have massive nuclear arsenals that tacitly threaten each other, even if these forces have been de-targeted since the mid-1990s. Influential

figures in both countries do not yet trust each other as much as the transition from enemy status during the Cold War implies they should.

Thus, the not-so-distant history of strategic military confrontation between the two countries continues to hamper the transition to a relationship based on trust. The spirit of cooperation between the two countries on strategic military posture is now arguably worse than at any time since 1991. This was the message of the speech made by President Vladimir V. Putin in Munich in February 2007 and reiterated in numerous ways since, and things got decidedly worse with President Medvedev's speech on November 5, 2008.

The United States is not comfortable with Russian military spending, its military "space denial" policies, and what Washington sees as less than complete concurrence on WMD and other weapons proliferation issues. For its part, Russia is looking for change in U.S. forward-basing policies, especially missile defense, and some renegotiation of what Russia sees as unequal arms control treaties of the 1990s. Both want important changes in the geopolitical behavior of the other: Russia wants an end to what it sees as the U.S. impulse to use military force on a unilateral basis (without U.N. Security Council approval) and the United States wants an end to what it sees as Russian hegemonic policies toward its near neighbors, especially its direct military support for the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia. The two countries are at loggerheads in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in a way that may threaten the organization's very existence.

Russia has proposed a new security treaty for Europe and NATO has not revised its security concept since 1999. When it comes to discussing mutual military relationships, the mood in Brussels and Moscow is bristling and angry.

### ***Assessing Russian and U.S. Motives: Restoring Pragmatism and Finding the Match of Interests***

The growing hostility has many sources.<sup>1</sup> The atmospherics and style of bilateral diplomacy between Russia and the United States are hostage to an emotional climate quite incompatible with the needs of pragmatic diplomacy. And for a mix of domestic and international political reasons, neither side has as much of an eye on mutual security as they claim. There is an ideological clash between U.S. views of the expansion of NATO (as the zone of democracies) and Russian views of its relationship with its periphery countries (as a web of quasi-permanent personal and historical relationships from which Russia feels it cannot easily extricate itself nor are they emotionally predisposed to do so).

Both sides will find it difficult to back down from their current positions. The Obama campaign talked of an "increasingly autocratic and bellicose Russia."<sup>2</sup> But Obama has laid the groundwork for a new style of diplomacy on talking through the problems: "The United States is trapped by the Bush-Cheney approach to diplomacy that refuses to talk to leaders we don't like. Not talking doesn't make us look

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<sup>1</sup> These are analyzed in an EWI Policy Paper, *New Russia, New Ally: A Bilateral Security Agenda beyond 2008* by Greg Austin, Simon Saradzhyan, and Jeff Procak. See <http://www.ewi.info/pdf/NewRussiaNewAllyFINAL1.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See the Obama campaign website, [http://origin.barackobama.com/issues/foreign\\_policy/](http://origin.barackobama.com/issues/foreign_policy/).

tough – it makes us look arrogant, it denies us opportunities to make progress, and it makes it harder for America to rally international support for our leadership.”<sup>3</sup>

He promised a new comprehensive, vigorous, and integrated Russia strategy that encompasses the entire region: “Russia today is not the Soviet Union, and we are not returning to the Cold War. Retrofitting outdated 20th century thinking to address this new 21st century challenge will not advance American national interests.”

This is what President Medvedev has asked for. But by threatening Russian military responses in Europe in a speech that coincided almost to the hour with confirmation of the election results in the United States, he won few new friends in Washington. “Establishing a new global security regime is grossly overdue,” Medvedev said. “And it is especially important that we achieve results in the North Atlantic territory that comprises Russia, the European Union, and the United States.” He linked this to progress on bilateral arms reductions.

There may be quick common ground to be found on a pause to deployment of ballistic missile defense assets in Europe. On October 7, 2008, Michael McFaul, Obama’s key adviser on relations with Russia, asserted that Obama would pursue talks with Russia on this issue differently from how the Bush administration had pursued them.<sup>4</sup> McFaul criticized the unilateral approach that the current administration had pursued at the expense of Russia’s stated security interests.

The window of opportunity may be present in the way Obama has framed his position on the missile defense system. According to McFaul, Obama “will support the missile- defense plan if it works and if it can be financially feasible. Those are two big preconditions.”

### ***But By What Mechanism? With What ideas?***

This set of issues can be handled effectively at official level. The opening groundwork has been laid when Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, who may become one of Obama's principal Russian security policy advisers, took the unusual step—at the height of the Russia-Georgia controversy and in an election campaign—of meeting with his new Russian counterpart, General Nikolai Makarov, in Helsinki. Mullen almost certainly had the full support Secretary of Defense Robert Gates for this meeting. Senator Chuck Hagel is likely to be another key adviser. According to one source, he has regularly “opposed false trade-offs between embracing Eastern European nations (and even helping to create new ones) and Russia's serious national priorities.”<sup>5</sup> It is possible (indeed likely in my view) that the Gates/Mullen/Hagel view of how to deal with Russia will be in the ascendancy in an Obama administration, despite the events in Georgia.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Meyer, “Obama Adviser Says U.S. Should Engage Russia on WTO, Missiles,” Bloomberg, 7 October 2008, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=arYVjO6EqUag&refer=home>.

<sup>5</sup> See “Chuck Hagel Will Help Obama Find his “Inner Nixon,” The Washington Note, [http://www.thewashingtonnote.com/archives/2008/10/chuck\\_hagel\\_wil/](http://www.thewashingtonnote.com/archives/2008/10/chuck_hagel_wil/).

But there are at least four factors that could prove to be obstacles to a positive shift within six months or so:

- ❑ It will take time for the new Obama Russia team to get in place and to start working out new policies—policies that are likely to encounter opposition from officials with entrenched views linked to current policies;
- ❑ It will be hard for them to lift U.S.-Russia relations and European security into the priority position they need to be in—ahead of Obama’s consideration of security relations with Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Few in the Pentagon or State Department see European and Russian security as a high priority relative to the other security issues;
- ❑ Public opinion in both states will play against early concessions;
- ❑ The overall security relationship is characterized by mistrust among security elites.

So the path to easing tensions must be a route that gives primary attention to counteracting these four factors within the coming six months. There must be creative and practical ideas that provide new directions and lay out the incentives for change.

### ***One Breakthrough Signal Needed, Backed Up by EU Leadership and New Track II***

***The Obama camp and the European Union (EU) must give a clear signal that the current drift in relations with Russia is unacceptable and agree to an early meeting between key high-level security advisers on all sides.*** NATO is not the right mechanism here. It lacks credibility with the Russian government and is unable to take a comprehensive view of the over-arching political trends, not least the need to subsume any narrow institutional interest in continued tension with Russia to the demands of higher priority security issues like overcoming the current financial crisis or rising pressures on global energy security. The EU (spurred on by smaller concerned EU members with a track record of promoting effective arms control or nuclear disarmament measures, such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland among others) must serve as the bridge here. We need a temporary coalition of small EU states to push for a new EU consensus on Russia. This will be very difficult. EU newcomers who feel they are on the frontline of the new Russia are particularly sensitive. A unified EU agenda cannot be simply a western European one.

***All parties should intensify their participation in available Track II mechanisms or create new ones to foster the mood for change.*** This has to be both bilateral (Russia and the United States) and trilateral (to include Europe). The Track II work needs to be problem-oriented. Joint working groups on several high value issues should be set up now with a four to six month reporting schedule. Political leaders need to go outside and beyond official channels for new perspectives on breakthrough measures that might yield early results. Five promising areas for such collaborative solutions-driven work by standing working groups at Track II or Track I.5 level could be:

- ❑ Small military to military task forces on security threats in Asia (such as missiles, Afghanistan, and Persian Gulf security)
- ❑ Natural gas, Europe, and global energy security

- ❑ New European security arrangements
- ❑ Political reform and open economies
- ❑ International humanitarian law

This short article is not the place to explain the rationale for these proposals in full. All of them are connected to serious misperceptions on one or both sides, and in each area there is a current set of pressing problems begging not just for more common understanding but also for new and early changes in policy. All of them also can be seen as part of the comprehensive security reform that both Medvedev and Obama say they favor.

As Obama and Medvedev both make plain, we have important global challenges to meet before we can allow ourselves the indulgence of a new ideological cold war—because it would be a phony war. We are not enemies.

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Greg Austin is a Vice President of the East West Institute and co-author with Aleksei Muraviev of *The Armed Forces of Russia* (I.B. Tauris, New York, NY, 2000).