

Experts Say Missile Defense Cooperation a Possibility

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WASHINGTON — Missile defense, an issue that has poisoned U.S.-Russia relations, could be a "game-changer" that transforms ties if the two sides cooperate on a shared system, says a report by former top officials from both sides of the Atlantic.

Recent headlines in both countries have been reminiscent of the Cold War, with the Russians threatening to deploy missiles aimed at countering a proposed U.S. missile shield, and the Americans responding that they will build the system, come what may.

The planned U.S. shield, endorsed by NATO, would deploy U.S. interceptor missiles in and around Europe in what Washington says is layered protection against missiles that could be fired by countries like Iran.

Moscow says this could undermine its security if it becomes capable of neutralizing Russia's nuclear deterrent.

Now an international commission that has been working on the matter for two years has

designed a basic concept for cooperation with the help of military professionals from both sides.

The new proposal by the Euro-Atlantic Security Commission says the United States, NATO and Russia could share data from radars and satellites about missile attacks and so provide one another with a more complete picture of any attack than countries would have on their own.

But the parties would remain responsible for shooting down any missiles that threaten them. They would keep sovereign command-and-control over their own missile interceptors.

"While the Russians are somewhat skeptical about whether Iran is a threat, ... the Russians are very strident about their worries about Pakistan, which has ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons," said Stephen Hadley, a co-chairman of the working group that produced the proposal. He served as national security adviser to former President George W. Bush, a Republican.

Hadley said a working group of experts from the United States, Europe and Russia concluded that there was enough of a threat from the proliferation of nuclear weapons capabilities and ballistic missiles with a range of up to 4,500 kilometers to conclude that defenses were needed.

"Constructing defenses takes a long time, and the last thing you want to be — if you are doing defenses — is late to the party," he said.

Hadley co-chaired the missile defense group together with Volker Ruehe, a former defense minister of Germany, and Vyacheslav Trubnikov, a former Russian deputy foreign minister and retired general.

The design of the shared system was created by Henry "Trey" Obering, a former chief of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, and Viktor Esin, a former chief of staff of the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces.

The missile defense proposal was part of a larger report by the Euro-Atlantic Security Commission that said the United States, NATO countries and Russia should cooperate on the Arctic, energy issues and regional conflicts as well as missile defense.

It was unveiled this past weekend at an annual international security conference in Germany.

"Successful cooperation on ballistic missile defense would be a game-changer," the proposal said. "It would go a long way toward overcoming the legacy of historical suspicion and achieving the strategic transformation that is needed."

"Cooperation on missile defense would establish a pattern for working together, build trust and encourage further cooperation in other areas," it said.

Discussions about missile defense have been a source of tension since Ronald Reagan's idea of protecting the United States from ballistic missile attack was dubbed "Star Wars" a quarter-century ago. Lately, the incoming Russian rhetoric has been intense.

"I think it's well known that the Russians are paranoid about missile defense and the implications that it has," U.S. intelligence chief James Clapper told Congress last week.

"They overanalyze that and deduce that's a profound threat to their status as a national power."

Recently, the Russians have complained bitterly about plans to station elements of the U.S. missile defense system close to them, in NATO member states Poland, Romania and Turkey, from where radars could presumably see into Russian territory.

On the American side, there is some anxiety about cooperating with the Russians, even though cooperation on European missile defense was favored by Robert Gates, former Pentagon chief under both Bush and President Barack Obama, and has been sought in talks during the Obama administration.

In Congress, some lawmakers have been so worried that the Obama administration might provide sensitive information to Moscow that they recently wrote a ban on sharing classified data into law, unless the administration notifies Congress first.

"House Republicans will not allow any delay to efforts to deploy missile defenses that protect the United States. Nor will we permit sharing with Russia classified information about our missile defense," said Representative Michael Turner, chairman of the House Armed Services strategic forces subcommittee.

Hadley said the commission's proposal would protect sensitive technologies by letting each side set up screens to filter radar and satellite data before it is shared.

"We would talk about what is being screened out, so people would know what they are not getting," he said. "We do that all the time, in cooperation with countries all over the world."

But other analysts say that because the proposed approach focuses on the threat from intermediate-range missiles, it sidesteps the critical issue of long-range nuclear forces.

The main reason that efforts to cooperate on missile defense have so far failed is Moscow's concern that some of Washington's yet-to-be-deployed or developed interceptors could be aimed at Russia's strategic missiles, said Tom Collina, research director for the Arms Control Association in Washington.

"Until these concerns are addressed, Moscow is unlikely to begin the trust-building process that (the report) suggests," Collina said.

Sam Nunn, a former U.S. senator who co-chairs the Euro-Atlantic Security Commission, agrees that the proposal doesn't address all the issues that could arise, but he said: "I think you could solve other problems as you go down the line."

"If people work together on the first stages of this, the light bulbs will go off, (and) people will say 'Hey, we need to work together on the other stages too,'" Nunn said.

Otherwise, he said, the Russians may make good on threats to resort to a larger offensive missile buildup: "That was what they said they'd do, and I happen to believe them."

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