Conference report

Missile defence and the transatlantic alliance
Friday 25 – Sunday 27 March 2011

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1. At its Lisbon Summit in November 2010 the Alliance decided to develop the capability to defend NATO’s populations and territories against ballistic missile attack, putting missile defence as a core element of its defence strategy. The Summit also committed allies to the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR), which will seek to look afresh at NATO’s overall posture in deterring and defending against the full range of threats whilst also seeking to create the conditions for further reductions in nuclear weapons stationed in Europe. Moreover, NATO announced that it would actively seek cooperation on missile defence with Russia and other Euro-Atlantic partners, and that it would work towards greater transparency with Russia on nuclear issues taking account of Russian stockpiles of short-range nuclear weapons. The invitation to Russia to explore ways of cooperating on missile defence (MD) was accepted by President Medvejev at the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) summit held on the same occasion.

2. The decision taken on MD is likely to present the Alliance with a number of opportunities as well as significant challenges. Opportunities include the possibility of enhanced protection of European populations and territories, thereby increasing NATO’s security vis-à-vis the threat of ballistic missile attack. Furthermore the Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA) also allows the Alliance to deploy MD in phases as the threat evolves; this has the added practical advantage of allowing time for the Alliance to work through the difficult issues of command and control and rules of engagement. In addition, there are potential political benefits: the deployment by the United States of new, advanced missile defence systems in Europe may provide the demonstration of continued US commitment to the defence of Europe that allies there require, and the sharing of MD as widely as possible among European Allies may also provide NATO with a new avenue for demonstrating Alliance cohesion and solidarity. Additionally, the invitation to cooperate with Russia presents a unique opportunity for significantly improving NATO’s relationship with Russia and may be a ‘game-changer’ in Euro-Atlantic security.

3. The challenges of MD system lie in a whole bundle of related issue areas such as nuclear posture, deterrence posture, threat assessment, technical issues and architecture as well as arms control and, again, relations with Russia. These issue areas are deeply intertwined and are highly complex in themselves. They include: the effect on the intra-alliance dimension of NATO and how consensus can be constructed and maintained; the potential of MD to either create a ‘Fortress NATO’ or a more expeditionary NATO, with all the implications of both; the collective threat assessments that MD is to be based upon; the effect on the extra-alliance dimension, particularly the relationship with Russia; the strategic and political implications of BMD operations; the MD architecture and its command and control; the assets required from Allies; what are the wider ramifications of MD for NATO’s deterrence and defence posture and how can they be managed? Indeed the implications of the adoption of a MD system are so far reaching that NATO is currently undertaking an unprecedented and comprehensive review exercise in the ongoing Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) to set out the political-military framework for common NATO defence planning under the new post-Lisbon conditions. Furthermore although MD in many ways is the ultimate Article 5 asset as it is designed to provide territorial defence, missile defence is itself a manifestation of a shift in emphasis in the Article 5 concept towards nuclear proliferation and other emerging threats and is as such a manifestation of the determination of the Alliance to meet new challenges.

4. Because the changes envisaged in the Alliance as a result of the decision to adopt a missile defence are far-reaching, they also tend to be extremely difficult to generate intra
alliance consensus on. Although, NATO has discussed missile defence before, and indeed was working towards a fixed approach to missile defence before 2009, the issue has always been one that was seen as challenging for Alliance consensus. Following the establishment of agreement on the initial decision to adopt the Phased Adaptive Approach, the challenge for intra-alliance relations after the Summit will be to build consensus on the detail of the system, clarify conceptual issues and answer some of the challenging questions raised on coverage, threat assessment, cooperation with Russia and wider implications of the adoption of MD. In consequence, NATO is in a difficult position of needing to build consensus with Russia on architecture, whilst also building consensus on architecture and threat perception without Russia. This is a major challenge, which shows that ‘the devil is in the architectural detail’.

5. NATO has agreed that discussions about architecture should be concluded this year. However, at the moment Russia and NATO disagree on the basic question of whether the system should consist of one integrated system or two parallel systems, with NATO favoring the latter. Further disagreement exists on whether the third and fourth phase of the system will affect the Russian strategic capability, which would be unacceptable to Russia. As a result the issue of architecture cannot at the moment be said to be fully settled, although it is widely agreed that NATO security cannot be outsourced and that Russia cannot be granted a de facto veto on intra-Alliance issues such as preferred architecture.

6. Related to the architecture and the precise role to be played by Russia is also the important question about command, control and consultations. NATO has different systems of authorization, and different assets under the MD system are likely to be under national command. The question therefore is what will happen in times of war, or – even more problematic – in the event of a sudden and unexpected missile attack? Missile defence cannot be run through the usual NATO consensus machinery, as decisions will have to be taken in an instant. The decision-making powers to launch interceptors therefore have to be delegated to SACEUR. If the architecture ends up as two parallel systems, what will NATO be responsible for and where will Russia’s responsibility lie, and what kind of pre-delegation of decision-making authority will be acceptable? The whole nature of the system and the situation in which it would be deployed, places a premium on establishing precise rules of engagement and for launch procedures to have been worked out in advance, which in itself is a highly demanding task for a consensus based organization such as NATO.

7. Another issue in relation to the intra-alliance dimension is coverage. It is widely agreed that due to some European Allies’ geographic location and the nature of the PAA, full coverage will not be possible without supplementary systems, such as sensors located in the south eastern part of Turkey. At least one Ally will not enjoy the benefits of the proposed system in its current form, which clearly is an issue that goes straight to the heart of the principle of equal protection to all NATO Allies, and the principle of indivisibility of Allied security and solidarity, as well as fair risk and burden sharing.

8. The question of who the MD system is supposed to protect against is also an issue on which it has proved difficult to harmonize national views. The Strategic Concept did not mention any specific threat, although Iran was mentioned in the Lisbon Declaration and it is widely assumed that MD is envisaged as a protection against an Iranian missile threat. However, Turkey views the whole matter differently, arguing that Iran has never voiced any intention to attack NATO. Clearly Turkey, as a neighbor to Iran has an interest in maintaining good neighborly relations with Iran, which may explain why Turkey is willing to emphasize Iranian expressed (or non-expressed) intentions, whereas most other NATO Allies (and Russia) impute intentions from behavior and focus on the capabilities under development in Iran. Nevertheless, the issue of threat assessment and consensus about from whom the new missile defence system is supposed to afford protection is not a settled issue internally in the Alliance.

9. The initiative to invite Russia to cooperate with NATO on MD was undoubtedly one of the more surprising outcomes of the Lisbon Summit. If successful, the initiative could fundamentally alter the relationship between NATO and Russia, opening up the ultimate possibility of a partnership – perhaps even that the two may become allies. However, it is still early days as the project at hand faces the challenge of building trust in a relationship that has seen little fundamental change since the end of the Cold War. Russia may now be more open to change as it is geographically closer than most NATO members to both Iran and North Korea, and also – should adverse changes occur – to Afghanistan and Pakistan.
Change is already evident in Russia’s military reforms that seem to be taking place with a view to becoming more like Western armed forces. However, it must be recognized that confidence building is a long and complicated process, where the ‘ghost of the past’ constantly affects the present and where a process of small steps may be more likely to provide long-run results. There is a window of opportunity open now, but it will not be open forever.

10. The issues that are currently under discussion are, to summarise, focused on whether the system should consist of two independent systems or one joint system; threat assessment; the practical basis for cooperation; and the implications of phase 3 & 4 on Russian strategic forces. Although these are major hurdles to be overcome, the starting point must be a shared belief that cooperation will enhance the functioning of the system rather than compromising on effectiveness, and that both sides stand to gain (at least from phase 1 & 2) from the cooperation. Russia has until recently pushed for a joint system, but some notion of change is detectable indicating that the possibility of two parallel systems, where NATO protects its countries and Russia protects itself as well as other countries (for example Ukraine) by agreement may be agreeable. There also seems to be a largely shared threat perception. Russia has reviewed its relationship with Iran and there is no going back, although no joint threat assessment explicitly mentions Iran. Nevertheless Russia does share the perception that medium-range (500 km) missiles exist and could threaten Russia. Furthermore, China is a key issue for Russia, which to some extent may be seen as an important factor for driving the reformulation of the relationship with Europe. It is likely that the practical aspects of the new cooperative relationship will start out with pooling data exchange in the first instance to create a common threat assessment and transparency through the whole process including architecture. The biggest issue is the issue of phase 3 & 4 on whether they undermine Russian strategic forces. As phase 3 & 4 are still on the drawing board, there is as yet no clarity on whether Russian strategic forces would be undermined, and if so, which ones and how many. Russia is currently not willing to compromise, as they argue that they do not know what the future holds in terms of for example future American administrations. The possible threat to US strategic forces has not been brought to the table as an issue of concern.

11. Although the PAA is based on largely existing technology that is likely to develop as the system itself develops, substantial major issues on the strategic and political dimensions of missile defence operations need to be addressed. In particular, issues of coverage and impenetrability remain, as does the issue of debris shortfall. Testing is ongoing and is currently looking at the details of the consequences of MD use – such as where do interceptors that fail to intercept go and what happens with the debris from intercepted incoming missiles, which may contain highly damaging material even after interception. In its initial phases it seems that MD will be a fairly ‘small umbrella’ and twill never be impermeable. In addition it seems likely that some allies will gain more protection than others, with particularly the protection of Turkey being an issue because of the short flight times.

12. An experimental process designed to examine a range of political and military issues that will influence future multi-national MD operations is currently being undertaken in the Political-Military Wargame called Nimble Titan 12 (NT12). Although NT12 does not represent actual US bi-lateral or Alliance arrangements, and does not represent actual missile defence policies or operational concepts, it aims to support the development and implementation of US missile defence plans and approaches in concert with Allies. It currently has 12 participants, including NATO as well as a large number of US agencies and commands. The objectives of NT12 include to cover issues of: Consequences of Engagement (COE), including coalition procedures with engagement, non-engagement, intercept and debris management; Legal Issues and Rules of Engagement (ROE), including weapons release authority criteria, collaborative planning; Command, Control and Communication (C3) including C3 structures, consultations processes, C3 concepts of operation, 3rd party engagement and interoperability; and finally BMD Strategy/Strategic Communications including coalition political consultation, strategic communication, deterrence and information sharing. The project is expected to run for 2 years and to have an impact on national and coalition experimentation, education and information leading towards development and implementation of BMD policy.
13. Despite being based on existing and plausible technology, such as THAAD interceptors, SM-3 interceptors or GBI interceptors as well as tracking sensors such as forward based x-band radars and airborne IRST, there are still a number of technical and architectural challenges to MD. The emphasis is on near term threats such as Iranian medium and inter-mediate range missile threats of which the Sejji 2 with a range of 2500 km is regarded as a substantial threat. Threats from ICBMs are thought to be more distant. The phased deployment of the Phased Adaptive Architecture is envisaged to take place with Phase 1 in 2011, Phase 2 in 2015, Phase 3 in 2018, and Phase 4 in 2020, where NATO member sensors and shooters will be connected via the Active Layered Theatre Missile Defence (ALTBMD) system. However, coverage and penetration will depend on a large number of factors, including the trajectory and speed of the missile, the size of the object being tracked, the amount of time the missile can be tracked through the coverage of the sensor and the speed of the interceptor. It is likely that the technology, with regards to coverage of sensors and speed of interceptors may develop as the system itself develops. Nevertheless, as all sensors have to be netted together, substantial demands on C2 are to be expected and the ‘rules of acquisition’ that the system will cost more, be late and have less capability than predicted is to be expected. NATO is currently working on C2 arrangements for national shooters, which should be finalized within the next year – until such time national C2 arrangements will need to prevail. However, initial NATO C2 arrangements is likely to fall short of the kind of comprehensive crisis and conflict management capability required for large-scale threats and engagements. Furthermore, given the substantial political issues related to Phase 4 and the likelihood that some interception of Russian ICBMs may be possible, the possibility exists that Phase 4 will be deemed politically unacceptable despite its technical feasibility.

14. Although phase 1 & 2 are both feasible and based on existing, and to some extent in situ assets, there are still a number of unanswered questions in relation to coverage, C2 and costs within an environment of financial restraint. Coverage can be improved through the deployment of faster interceptors, through fitting the planned European F35s with sensors and by placing a radar facility in the southern part of Turkey. However, such ‘additions’ to the plans would significantly increase the cost of the system as outlined by NATO, would add further costs to already expensive F35s and would increase the vulnerability of Turkey. Furthermore current planning is based on the assumption of a fairly simple threat. Yet US Secretary of Defence Gates has predicted an Iranian capability to attack Europe with ‘scores or even hundreds of missiles’ by the end of the decade. Although there is certainly not agreement on this threat assessment, should the threat change towards large raid sizes, increasing demands will be placed on the interoperability between different systems and between different actors. In anticipation of further demands for collaboration, the system needs to be of an open, modular plug-and-play design with the ability to work across associated domains and missions – possibly including non-NATO systems. In order to achieve the desired flexibility and in order to be able to achieve maximum leverage of collective lessons learned collaboration is needed in basic engineering. What is needed is a forum to allow for European industry collaboration and European technologies to contribute to the system of BMD and to ensure maximum leverages from industry’s collective experience and expertise.

15. The adoption of MD in NATO’s new Strategic Concept has important ramifications in a number of adjacent areas, in particular in relation to the future of NATO’s defence and deterrence posture and nuclear weapons. One of the tasks set by the heads of states and governments at the Lisbon summit was therefore for a re-evaluation of NATO’s current nuclear deterrence posture. In addition to the necessity for such a re-evaluation brought about by the decision to adopt a missile defence, the role and fate of NATO’s existing sub-strategic nuclear weapons (nuclear B61 gravity bombs to be delivered on dual-capable F-16 and Tornado aircraft) had also been under scrutiny prior to the Lisbon Summit as some NATO members had questioned the continued utility of these weapons. The issue is a delicate one internally in NATO as some NATO members still regard the presence of American nuclear weapons in Europe as a linchpin of Alliance solidarity. As a result NATO initiated a Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR), which started officially on 25 January 2011.

16. The DDPR is an unprecedented review exercise providing the opportunity to forge greater NATO consensus on capabilities to implement the new Strategic Concept and to set out a politico-military framework for common NATO defence planning. As such the review is supposed to find a bridge between the different existing positions in NATO on how
to deal with the fundamental statement by Foreign Secretary Hilary Clinton that NATO is a nuclear alliance and will remain so as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world. Although all NATO members agree on the need for a credible deterrence against nuclear and non-nuclear threats, the question is what constitutes a credible deterrence. The issue is highly contested and presents the Alliance with a risk of intra-Alliance divisiveness if the outcome of the DDPR is not well defined. Key questions to be answered include; how to stabilize NATO’s core principle of extended deterrence, where the nuclear members make a commitment to their non-nuclear allies; whether the credibility of extended deterrence requires a physical presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe; whether non-nuclear elements such as MD can be a substitute for nuclear weapons and how an effective missile defence capability affect deterrence and vice versa? As a result NATO will have to decide what declaratory policy should underpin NATO’s posture and what combination of American and European military capabilities would best sustain the transatlantic link and ensure the indivisibility of Alliance security in all circumstances. These are highly political questions that have no right or wrong answers and which holds a significant potential for intra-Alliance disagreement.

17. The adoption of a missile defence clearly has significant ramifications for arms control and the nuclear posture of others, which is an area that cannot be considered in isolation from a much wider political and historical context. For example the possibility for cooperation on missile defence between Russia and NATO is only possible because of the INF Treaty, which eliminated all ground based intermediate-range missiles (500-5500 km.) in both countries. Therefore as neither country has this class of missiles, a political window of opportunity has opened up for cooperation to protect against intermediate range missiles held by third parties such as Iran. However, although history on this occasion seems to have provided an opportunity, history also shows that missile defence has been one of the trickiest issues in the strategic relationship between Russia and the United States, and that it raises as many problems as its proponents claim that it solves. It is therefore doubtful that a breakthrough in the relationship between NATO and Russia also will extend to remaining sub-strategic weapons and in particular to the strategic arsenals under the shadow of phase 4 of PAA.

18. Another major trend that is likely to influence the available possibilities for arms control is the changing world order as a result of the rise of major states in the developing world – especially the rise of China. No one really knows how established powers will react to the prospects of intensified arms races in emerging powers that might take steps to overcome the missile defence systems of established powers. However, in such circumstances one of the more likely scenarios is that incipient offence/defence arms races between newly prosperous states will intensify, that in the process US/Russia reductions will grind to a halt and both those powers will pour increased amounts into modernization. The question therefore is how to avoid such an unwelcome scenario. One possibility could be a move from a position in which relative nuclear capability is still important to one in which nuclear stability at lower numbers is achieved at levels of assured destruction comparable to those currently underpinning the doctrines of those smaller nuclear weapons states (UK, France and China) who now possess global range weapons. Such a possibility might exist as a result of the general trend that war between high income states is becoming rarer, which may induce a willingness amongst high income states to reduce their nuclear arsenals to a minimum level. Of course in such a world of nuclear restraint, many other factors would determine whether Great Power peace would endure, in particular the absence of major revolutionary ideologies and expansionist drives and whether there remained a common commitment to an international order, built round the principles established, albeit not always observed, in 1945. In such an order, which in many ways resembles the 19th century Concert System, nuclear weapons would remain above global zero as an element of deterrence, but the system would build on restraint and cooperation.

19. Five years ago there was no European discussion on missile defence, whereas today missile defence has clearly been placed firmly on the international agenda and, for better or for worse, is likely to remain there, and to raise many uncomfortable and difficult questions both within the Alliance and with and between others outside. Essentially it seems that the issue of missile defence is about seeking to deal with profound change and dealing with increasing levels of uncertainty, whilst at the same time trying to pin down some stable markers in the relationship with Russia and in the purpose of the Alliance. Yet missile defence itself opens up new questions and new areas of uncertainty that are unlikely to be settled in the near future. Uncomfortably therefore the adoption by NATO of a missile
defence may well have given rise to more questions than it has answered and may well also have given rise to as many problems as solutions. What is more is that within the current conditions of profound change in the world order – and in the Middle East – we may have difficulty in imagining the political context of the future within which missile defence will be operational. The one thing therefore that is certain, is that missile defence will be a topic of discussion for some time to come.

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