



Geopolitical Implications of Missile Defense System in Europe

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Introduction

In a significant strategic move, the United States (US) has activated the missile defence system in Deveselu, Romania on 12 May 2016.¹ The land-based Aegis ballistic missile defence system is equipped with long-range radar, Aegis BMD weapon system and Standard Missile (SM)-3, which is capable of intercepting incoming missiles and destroying them in the air. The missile defense shield was planned by the then US President George Bush. Later, the European missile defense system was reviewed and implemented by President Barack Obama in 2009.² As part of European Phased Adaptive Alternative (EPAA) phase II, work on the Deveselu site in Romania was started in 2013. Construction of phase III site has also started in Poland on day after operationalization of the Romanian site. The Polish site is scheduled to be completed in 2018.³

The activation of missile defense system in Southeast Europe has further complicated Russia's relations with Europe and US as well as strategic milieu of European continent. The missile defence system has been perceived by Russia as a threat to its national security. In this context, the Russian Military Doctrine 2014 explicitly notes '*creation and deployment strategic systems*' of missile defence is major external threat to Russian Federation. The missile defence would undermine not only global stability, but also violates '*the balance of forces in nuclear-missile sphere*.'⁴ Russia views it as a broader strategic programme of the US and it would alter the strategic balance of the region. It has repeatedly objected to military escalation in its

neighbourhood. More recently, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said at the Munich Security Conference 2016 that NATO's policy towards Russia is "unfriendly and generally obdurate." He observed that Russia and the West are moving towards a "new cold war", and Russia being considered as the biggest threat to NATO and its allies. Mechanisms of addressing the mutual concerns have also been discontinued and partnership initiatives are ending one by one.⁵

The US/NATO claims

The US and NATO claimed that missile defense system is necessary to protect its allies from ballistic missile threats from 'outside the Euro-Atlantic space.'⁶ Robert Work, U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary, said, "As long as Iran continues to develop and deploy ballistic missiles, the United States will work with its allies to defend NATO."⁷ Jens Stoltenberg, General Secretary of NATO, argued that missile defence system is a 'defensive' measure. In an opinion piece, he noted that many countries are developing ballistic missiles and NATO cannot ignore that threat.⁸ Officials from the US and NATO maintained that the defense system is not aimed at Russia. They alluded to the Iranian missile programme. Jens Stoltenberg stated that the objective of NATO is to achieve complete coverage and protection for European Allies against ballistic missile attacks from outside the Euro-Atlantic area.⁹ Both NATO and the US argue that SM-3 could not undermine strategic balance of the region because these missiles are not capable of intercepting Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) do not carry any explosives. Technically, as NATO and US argue, these missiles are designed to eliminate high-velocity targets by hitting them directly. NATO and US also attempted to assure Russia that nuclear-armed attack missiles would not be deployed in Romania.¹⁰

Russian Reactions

The inauguration of missile defense site in Romania did not surprise Russia. Russia's Presidential Spokesman, Dmitry Peskov stated that the new development is certainly a threat to its national security.¹¹ Russia argues that it would fuel arm race in the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin said that it is 'not a defense system.' He observed that the missile defence is 'part of U.S. nuclear strategic potential brought onto a periphery. In this case, Eastern Europe is such periphery.'¹² Therefore, Russia would continue re-arming its army and navy and spend the approved funds in a way that would "uphold the current strategic balance of forces."¹³ Russia

criticized US/NATO for using the Iranian missile programme as a pretext to deploy missile defense system in Europe. Iranian missiles do not have the capability to reach any European territory. In addition, Iran has already signed the nuclear agreement with the P5+1 - the US, UK, France, China and Russia plus Germany in July 2015. Therefore, Russia blames the US for escalating the military build-up on its periphery in order to encircle it. It voiced concern over installation of SPY-1 long-range radar in Romania, which can be used for spying on missile tests and aircraft in its airspace. Reportedly, Romanian system could also be re-equipped with offensive cruise missiles.¹⁴

Geopolitical Implications

The activation of missile defense system would have multiple geopolitical implications, particularly, for security dynamics in Eastern Europe, Russia-US relations - arms control treaties between them and Syria crisis & fight against Islamic State. Broadly speaking, Russia's relationship with the US and Europe has been deteriorating in the recent times, embittered by unresolved arms control issues, NATO enlargement, the policies of some Eastern European countries towards Russia, and adverse political trends in the common neighbourhood.¹⁵ Strategic dynamics in the Eastern European region has further become tense after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and Ukraine crisis. Romania, Poland and Baltic countries have openly voiced their concerns over alleged growing Russian assertion in the region. Poland stresses on enhanced military presence of NATO in the region. It perceives that strengthening of transatlantic security is the only rational response to Russian aggression.¹⁶ NATO has gradually been stepping up its security presence in the region. The US has announced plans for a fourfold increase in European Reassurance Initiative funding in 2017.¹⁷ It may deploy more troops and armaments in Eastern Europe.¹⁸ The additional military presence will increase US's ability to conduct military exercises.¹⁹ In the latest meeting of foreign ministers of NATO countries held on 19 May 2016, it was agreed that the NATO's role should be increased to ensure stability beyond the alliance's borders. NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg said that NATO must also train the local forces. NATO is supporting training of Iraqi security officers, developing Special Forces training and national intelligence center in Tunisia, capacity building in Georgia and Moldova. At the foreign ministers meeting, it was also decided to do preparatory work for helping Libyan security institutions.²⁰ European countries are supporting the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya and offered support for strengthening Libyan security forces.

NATO conducted a military exercise - Anakonda 16 - in Poland from 6 to 17 June, 2016. More than 30000 troops from 24 countries are involved in this exercise. The US provided 14000 troops, the largest military contingent, in the exercise. Poland has mobilized around 12000 troops. It is one of largest military exercises in the post-Cold War era in the Eastern Europe.²¹ On the other hand, Russia has repetitively accused NATO for pursuing aggressive policy and altering security balance of the post Cold War era. NATO has broken promises by expanding towards Central and Eastern Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin questioned relevance of NATO eastward expansion after the end of the Cold War. Consequently, Russia has also been enhancing military presence in the region. In the month of April, 2016, the Russian Sukhoi Su-24 Fencers executed close passes near the USS Donald Cook in the Baltic Sea. Russia has developed its military capability in Kaliningrad. Reportedly, it has deployed the S-400 air defense system and Iskander ballistic missiles. Defense experts point out that Russia could also swiftly move its land - based anti-ship missile system into Kaliningrad.²² The Iskander missiles have a range of up to 500 kilometers. Poland would be in range of these missiles. Due to conflict and persisting tension, mechanism of consultation and cooperation between the two sides have waned. Cooperation between Russia and NATO was halted after the crisis in Ukraine. Although Russia and NATO held a meeting in April 2016 almost after two years, they could not iron out their differences. The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) meeting ended without any agreement on reducing the risk of close military encounters between the two sides.²³

Increasing military measures have the potential to affect arms control treaties between Russia and the US. Russia has alleged that missile defense system violates the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. On the other hand, the US has also expressed concerns over Russian violation of the same treaty. Russia is in the process of major strategic modernization programme, which involves production of new ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and ballistic missile submarines.²⁴ To counter the threats from missile defense, Russia is developing new ICBMs with particular attention to their ability to penetrate the US missile shield. Sergey Karakayev, Russia's Strategic Missile Force Commander, said that capabilities of Russian ballistic missiles would be increased by reducing ICBM's acceleration section and introducing new types of warheads with the flight path, which would be not be easy to predict. He also said, 'Russian missiles are also capable of delivering warheads via energy optimal trajectory and of striking from multiple directions.'²⁵

Security dynamics of Nordic region seems to be shifting as well. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden have signed a joint declaration to enhance their military cooperation in terms of more joint military exercises, intelligence exchanges and stronger defence industry linkages. The determining factor of their move is an altered security environment in the region. These countries believe that the Ukraine crisis and Russian military activity in the Baltic region have altered security environment.²⁶ The US supports regional defense cooperation of Nordic countries. The joint statement of US-Nordic Leaders' Summit held in May 2016 states that the US supports deepening of regional cooperation and would help to promote security in the region.²⁷ The US is working to further enhance defense cooperation with the Nordic countries. Finland and Sweden are not members of NATO, but they joined the military exercise in Poland, June 2016. Finland and Sweden pursue a policy of strategic neutrality. They are now inclined to expand cooperation with NATO. Russia shares a 1300 kilometer long border with Finland. Increasing cooperation of Finland and Sweden with NATO may irk Russia.

Currently, the political situation in the south eastern part of European neighbourhood - Middle East and North Africa - is fragile. Peace process in Syria appears to be in the nascent stage. Russia and the US are seeking mutual cooperation to resolve the crisis in the Middle East and effectively fight against international terrorism. Although their political initiatives have increased, they are yet to yield effective result on the ground. Tension between NATO and Russia would affect the political situation in the Middle East. Though Russia and US are engaged in consultation, fundamental differences and diverse strategic goals may not easily lead towards a viable political solution.

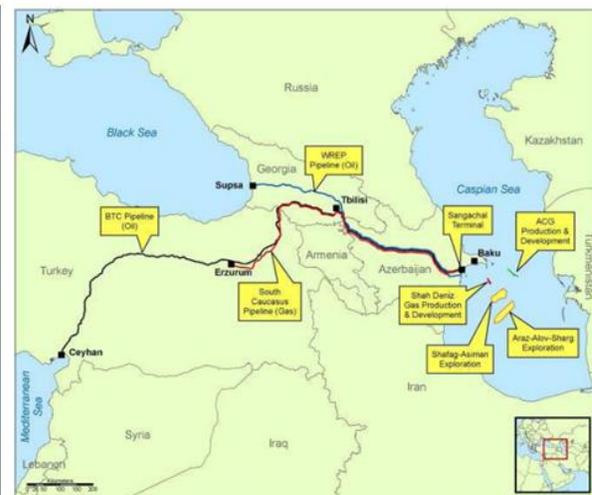
Any violence in the Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed oblast (province) between Armenia and Azerbaijan, would threaten energy security of NATO allies. Violence suddenly erupted in month of April, 2016. Russia played an active role in calling truce in four days. Historically, mostly Armenian populated region became an autonomous region within Azerbaijan during Soviet Era. Conflict started in end of 1980s. Peace agreement was signed in 1994; however, it remains a 'frozen conflict', which has potential to flare up. Crucial pipelines- the Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipelines, the South Caucasus Natural Gas Pipeline - cross the South Caucasus region. Disturbance and conflict in the region could affect energy security of some of NATO allies.²⁸

Map 1: Location of Nagorno-Karabakh



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, Nagorno-Karabakh,
<http://www.britannica.com/place/Nagorno-Karabakh>

Map 2: Gas and Oil Pipelines in South Caucasus



Source: Azerbaijan and the Southern Gas Corridor to Europe, Implications for U.S. and European Energy Security, Conference Report September 13, 2013, The Jamestown Foundation,
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Economic consequences create differences in the EU over policy towards Russia. Some of the EU member states do not favour the extension of economic sanctions against Russia. They share comprehensive economic linkages and heavily rely on Russian energy supply. Hungary and Greece openly criticized economic sanctions and Italy wanted discussion over extension of sanctions in January 2016. Recently, France's lower house of parliament has voted in favour of not extending EU sanctions against Russia.²⁹

Conclusion

Political and security structures evolving in European region are not inclusive. Russia remains out of the regional security architecture in Europe. Political mistrust between Russia and the West has further increased. Both are taking measures and counter measures to balance each other in Eastern Europe and adjacent regions. Several twists and turns have emerged in their relations in the post Cold War era. Once keen to join the Western alliance and other European organizations, Russia seems to be disillusioned after NATO enlargement and escalation of military presence in its neighbourhood. Consequently, Russia has also begun to take counter measures to deal with emerging challenges in its neighbourhood. Some of the Eastern European countries are

demanding greater military presence of NATO. The next NATO Summit is scheduled to take place in Warsaw in July 2016. The Summit seems to be important as NATO countries will discuss changed regional security environment and are expected to decide future course of action in Eastern Europe. Military escalation of NATO in Eastern Europe could fuel more competition and political rivalry with Russia.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

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