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After Lisbon, NATO Must Get Missile Defense Right

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The new Strategic Concept adopted by NATO at the Lisbon summit this weekend stated: “The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.”¹ Accordingly, NATO has declared missile defense a core competency of the alliance. The 2010 Strategic Concept states that the Alliance will “develop the capability to defend our populations and territories against ballistic missile attack as a core element of our collective defence, which contributes to the indivisible security of the Alliance.”²

The development of a transatlantic-wide missile defense architecture will produce an effective defensive strategic posture for the alliance and marks a welcome step forward in terms of addressing the security challenges presented by the post-Cold War world. History will view it as a major milestone in moving the West away from the Cold War policy of maintaining deterrence primarily by the threat of nuclear retaliation for any strategic attack on members of the alliance and toward a policy putting in place defenses to protect its population and territory against such attack.

Taking Programmatic Steps. The proliferation of ballistic missiles is growing among state and non-state actors, and the operation of missiles is getting easier. The alliance therefore declared that it will expand its fledgling theater-based developmental capability to protect populations and territory as well as troops. However, the Strategic Concept is ultimately just a policy document, and NATO should now develop, test, and deploy the military

capabilities necessary to operationalize this policy. NATO should stand behind its deadline of drafting an action plan to implement its missile defense capability by June 2011.

Fortunately, the alliance does not have to start from scratch in this effort. It already has a number of prominent existing programs from which to draw to field effective missile defense capabilities, including NATO’s Active Layered Theater Ballistic Missile Defense system, the Medium Extended Air Defense System (a U.S., German, and Italian joint program), and the U.S. Phased Adaptive Approach for missile defense in Europe.

Nevertheless, NATO will need to expand on these existing programs. Europe’s contribution to a transatlantic-wide missile defense architecture is about more than hosting U.S. sensors and interceptors. As important as the hosting arrangements in locations such as Poland and Romania are to the Administration’s Phased Adaptive Approach to missile defense, cooperation should extend to other activities, such as the joint development of missile defense systems, establishing command-and-control systems, and preparing operational plans. NATO needs to field a variety of land-, air-, sea-, and ultimately space-based systems. Further, the broader missile defense capability will have to be

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capable of intercepting ballistic missiles in all three stages of flight: the boost phase, the midcourse phase, and the terminal phase.

The NATO Council has been tasked with designating command-and-control arrangements by March 2011 as well as an action plan to implement alliance-wide missile defense capabilities by June. It must stand behind these deadlines and outline how it will implement the plan pushed by Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to expanding transatlantic missile defense to U.S. allies in Europe at a cost of €200 million (\$279 million) over 10 years.

Missile Defense and Nuclear Weapons. NATO could have easily fallen into the trap of asserting that the defensive strategic posture that it is now seeking obviates the need for a capable nuclear arsenal. Fortunately, the Strategic Concept avoids this trap. Article 5 is best reinforced with a protect-and-defend strategy that includes the continued presence of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe as well as the erection of a transatlantic missile defense architecture.³

The 2010 Strategic Concept makes a clear commitment to sustaining the nuclear force and asserts that NATO will remain a nuclear alliance for as long as is necessary. The Strategic Concept states that “as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance.”⁴

Nuclear weapons will remain an essential element of a defensive strategic posture for as long as nuclear weapons exist in the world. NATO, however, has serious work to do regarding the future of the nuclear force. While the Strategic Concept correctly asserts that NATO will field a mix of conventional and nuclear forces, it does not describe how these forces will be integrated to provide the most robust defensive capability possible. NATO planning, therefore, will have to undertake this matter in the future.

NATO Missile Defense and Russia. The Lisbon summit also played host to the alliance’s first meeting of the NATO–Russia Council since Moscow’s invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and was attended by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The 2010 Strategic Concept outlined several areas for NATO–Russia cooperation, and stated, “We will actively seek cooperation on missile defence with Russia and other Euro-Atlantic partners.”⁵

It is appropriate for NATO to seek Russian cooperation in this field as part of a broader policy for transitioning the U.S.–Russian strategic relationship away from one based on retaliation toward one that is fundamentally defensive in nature. NATO and Russia agreed to conduct a joint ballistic missile threat assessment and develop a joint analysis of the future framework for missile defense cooperation—which will be discussed at the June defense ministers meeting. Beginning with shared assessments of the missile threats is a good starting point, but any future missile defense cooperation plan should contain a number of guidelines, including:

- Shared assessments of the threat should recognize that the two nations will also have independent assessments and that cooperation will focus on addressing the threats shared by both sides;
- Missile defense cooperation should not depend on an all-or-nothing approach but on a step-by-step approach; and
- The best initial step in missile defense cooperation between the U.S. and Russia is one of coordinated deployments.

Missile Defense and New START. Russia’s vague pledge to cooperate on missile defense contradicts Moscow’s insistence that the signed treaty on strategic nuclear arms reductions with the U.S. (New START) should limit U.S. and, by extension, NATO

1. NATO, “Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” November 19, 2010, at <http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf> (November 20, 2010).

2. *Ibid.*

3. For an explanation of the protect-and-defend strategy, see Andrei Shoumikhin and Baker Spring, “Strategic Nuclear Arms Control for the Protect and Defend Strategy,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2266, May 4, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/05/strategic-nuclear-arms-control-for-the-protect-and-defend-strategy>.

4. NATO, “Strategic Concept.”

5. *Ibid.*

missile defense options. Moscow has threatened that unspecified improvements in missile defense capabilities by the U.S. are grounds for Russian withdrawal from New START. If the Russian pledge to cooperate with the West in the area of missile defense is to have real meaning, the Russians will have to issue three policy statements in addition to accepting the programmatic guidelines listed above:

1. That Russia no longer sees the development and deployment of robust missile defense capabilities as undermining the strategic balance and believes that moving toward defensive strategic postures will enhance stability in the post-Cold War world;
2. That Russia accepts the fact that fielding missile defenses capable of countering missiles that are in the hands of third states both now and in the future will necessarily have some capability to counter Russian missiles; and
3. That Russia understands that the new NATO missile defense policy is a legitimate part of the alliance's inherent right to collective self-defense and not a threat to Russia.

A Smart Move. As a military alliance, NATO must confront both current and future strategic threats, including the proliferation of ballistic missile technology. The Lisbon Strategic Concept means that NATO's Article 5 mutual defense clause will now be reinforced with a protect-and-defend strategy that includes the continued presence of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and the erection of a transatlantic missile defense architecture. The alliance should now put resources behind its vision and invest in robust land, sea, air and space missile defense capabilities.

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