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What Will the Iran Deal Mean for NATO Missile Defense?

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Immediately following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the world powers and Iran, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested that Moscow expected the United States to review its missile defense plans. Lavrov referred to the celebrated Prague speech of US President Barack Obama, who in April 2009 stated that once the Iranian threat was “eliminated,” there would no longer be a need for missile defense in Europe.

Although President Obama abandoned the controversial missile defense plans of the Bush administration, in 2009 he unveiled a new anti-missile system, known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA). Russia has never accepted the US and NATO claims that the system is designed to deal with the dual threat of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction emanating from the Middle East, and maintains that it is actually directed at its own strategic nuclear forces. A NATO anti-missile facility is now being deployed in Romania, with a further deployment planned for Poland in 2018. The Putin government perceives the missile defense shield as a means to strengthen US political control over Russia’s backyard.

Iran has the largest and most sophisticated missile arsenal in the region, and its ballistic missile program is a major threat to the Middle East and beyond. Iran is believed to be working on intercontinental ballistic missiles, and already has operational missiles with ranges of 1500 to 2500 km that can reach targets in the Middle East, Turkey (a NATO member), and southeast Europe. It has been working on an extended-range version of the Shahab-3 and a 2000 km medium-range ballistic missile, the Sejil-2 (also known as the Ashura). NATO members Romania and Bulgaria are within range of such missiles. According to US intelligence assessments, Iran would be most likely to deliver a nuclear weapon by means of a ballistic missile.

On the face of it, the Russian argument on NATO missile defense is not unreasonable. The system is intended mainly to deal with nuclear-armed missiles, rather than conventional threats. It would appear to make little sense to invest vast amounts of money and political capital to defend Europe from conventionally-armed missiles, since

the potential damage from conventional missiles would be relatively insignificant compared to the effects of nuclear missiles. The NATO Lisbon Summit of 2010 stated that missile defense would be developed in accordance with the “level of threat.” Were this threat to diminish as a result of Iran’s adherence to the JCPOA, the justification for the anti-missile shield would arguably be reduced significantly.

On the other hand, US Secretary of State John Kerry stated already in 2013 that even if Iran’s nuclear program were to be dismantled, there was the risk that Tehran could equip its ballistic missiles with other forms of WMD. NATO officials have stated on numerous occasions that missile defense in Europe is not directed at one particular country and is intended to give protection from ballistic systems that could carry nuclear, chemical, biological, or conventional warheads.

Moreover, US officials have stated in the past that the missile defense deployments would go ahead, irrespective of any comprehensive deal with Iran. Indeed, the logic of the planned deployments in Romania and Poland appear to be consistent with the JCPOA, as the temporary restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program will be removed within fifteen years. President Obama has acknowledged that once restrictions are lifted, the breakout time for Iran to obtain a weapon could shrink to zero. Since the JCPOA mandates the suspension of the UN Security Council sanctions on ballistic missiles in the coming years, this threat could become more acute within the next ten years, with perhaps a greater risk of Iranian missiles being transferred to organizations such as Hizbollah. Thus, the missile defense system is essentially a long term hedge against an Iran that could eventually possess nuclear-tipped missiles.

The escalating tensions between Russia and the West have only added to the confusion on missile defense. President Obama appeared to contradict previous US policy statements on this issue in his address to the Estonian people in Tallinn in September 2014. In expressing the need for NATO to deter Russia, he spoke of “investing in capabilities like intelligence and surveillance and reconnaissance and missile defense.” This statement implied that the NATO anti-missile shield could in time address a Russian missile threat. While the capabilities of the interceptors are too limited and their numbers too few to address the threat of Moscow’s missiles, it is not inconceivable that the NATO system could be adapted and improved in such a way that it could eventually acquire a limited capability against Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles. However, this would do little to address the concerns of countries such as Poland and the Baltic States, which are anxious about their neighbor’s intentions in the wake of its actions in Ukraine.

The recent difficulties between NATO and Russia are not limited to the conflict over Ukraine, and there has been a significant increase in close military encounters between Russian and Western military forces in the course of 2014 and 2015. Furthermore, since

the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, both NATO and Russia have expanded the magnitude and range of their war games, heightening the risk of military confrontation. US claims regarding the Russian violation of the INF Treaty and Moscow's modernization of its strategic nuclear arsenal have resulted in a growing climate of mistrust. This situation has been exacerbated by Russia's nuclear rhetoric, amid NATO concerns that Moscow has lowered the threshold for its use of nuclear weapons. In March this year, the Russian ambassador to Denmark warned Copenhagen that Danish warships would become targets for Russian nuclear missiles if it participated in the NATO missile defense system.

Thus, even in the unlikely event of a diminished Iranian threat, the United States would still have an obligation to reassure its allies in Central and Eastern Europe of its commitment to their security. For countries such as Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, the attraction of NATO missile defense lies in the establishment of a US presence (however limited) on their soil to maintain and operate radars and interceptors rather than the protection against Iranian missiles. In the event that the United States were to signal readiness to withdraw its missile defense commitments at a time when Russia is active on NATO's borders, ensuing divisions likely within NATO would join the problematic message transmitted to vulnerable US allies.

Now that the deal with Iran has been signed, the Obama administration will need to engage closely with its NATO allies in Europe and ensure clarity over the future of its missile defense plans. At the same time, the United States can help to provide a measure of reassurance to Israel and its allies in the Gulf region through strengthening cooperation in the field of missile defense. In Israel, this is exemplified by the ongoing development and funding of the Arrow-3 system, which is intended to deal with a potential non-conventional threat from Iran.

