

## **Strategic Challenge? –Russia, the EU and NMD**

by Otfried Nassauer

### **Introduction**

There is an open secret about summit meetings among Western politicians. The most important and controversial topics do not appear on the official agenda. They are discussed over lunch or dinner. No official notes are taken during these occasions.

One of the most controversial and important topics likely to be discussed during the EU Summit luncheons at Feira on June 19 and 20 is the EU member nation's position on U.S. plans to decide on the deployment of a U.S. National Missile Defense system (NMD) by autumn. The topic's importance to European security and the future of arms control and disarmament is obvious. But is the EU to take a joint position on this subject? Is the Union trying to jointly influence the outcome of what is obviously an American decision? This is most likely as controversial as European concerns are serious.

This Policy Note argues: The European leaders should meet the challenge, building on their history of giving arms control and non-proliferation policies priority and agree on a Common Position under the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy, which

- Stresses the importance of the ABM treaty and its integrity;
- Clearly expresses their concerns resulting from a possible U.S. decision on NMD for the future of nuclear arms control and non-proliferation;
- Suggests a delay of the U.S. decision;
- Proposes tripartite U.S.-EU-Russian as well as bilateral consultations on the arms-control and nonproliferation consequences of deploying a U.S. NMD-system;
- Envisages bilateral and trilateral consultations with the U.S. and Russia on cooperative initiatives to strengthen non-proliferation regimes and
- Supports ongoing consultations with NATO about the consequences of an NMD-deployment and proposes NATO-EU consultations on the issue.

Most interestingly, the challenge to discuss and consider such policies has been triggered by an outside player, Vladimir Putin, the newly elected Russian President. During his initial months in office, he has launched a major offensive on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation issues, which has pushed the United States on the defen-

sive and brought Europe onto the testing-ground. His policy is likely to become a challenge for Russia's Asian neighbors as well. However, his initiatives have already had one major effect: the Russian Federation has reentered the world stage as a major diplomatic actor.

### **Putin's Strategic Offensive**

The challenge for European leaders to decide whether to act jointly on U.S. plans for an NMD system is one result of Putin's major diplomatic campaign to rally support for Russia's opposition to changes to the 1972 ABM Treaty and the consequences U.S. policies might have on the future of arms control and world security. One element of Putin's campaign has been to strongly engage Europe over these issues and build bridges for European-Russian cooperation on security, arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation issues as envisaged in the EU's "Common Strategy on Russia". During his visit to Berlin in June he argued: "Europe must be an example for an integration, free of barriers" and asked the European nations to seek broad cooperation with Russia on important issues of economic and security policies.

Vladimir Putin has proven to be an energetic politician. Elected only in late March, he has brought the Russian Federation back to the world stage as a major player within a few months. Putin simply seized the initiative on arms-control and disarmament. Prior to the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, he accomplished what the West had expected of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin for nearly seven years. He succeeded in pushing the START-II Treaty towards ratification in the Russian Duma. His second initiative came only one week after this first move: He convinced the Russian parliament to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). He indicated, that Russia was prepared to take independent and unilateral steps on arms-

control; in the U.S. the Republican dominated Senate has refused to ratify this agreement.

During the NPT-Review Conference both steps gave Putin the results he wanted. While the international community strongly criticized the lack of progress made on nuclear disarmament since the last Review conference, the heat of the criticism turned onto the U.S.. Washington had readily come to Putin's assistance. Just in time for the NPT conference, politicians in the U.S. including the presidential candidates had become engaged in a heated domestic debate on U.S. plans for the deployment of a ballistic missile defense system. All positions presented implied that the U.S. would violate the 1972 ABM-Treaty which many in the world perceive to be one of the most important cornerstones of nuclear arms-control. Washington had even indicated that it was willing to unilaterally withdraw from this treaty, if Russia did not agree to change the wording of the Treaty to according to U.S. national missile defense plans.

Putin did not reject U.S. calls to consult on the future of the treaty. He entered discussions with the U.S. and simply warned of the severe consequences which a unilateral U.S. decision to cancel the treaty would trigger. That it would indeed cause Russia to react very harshly and – thus Putin's repeated threat – make Russia to consider a withdrawal from all major existing arms control arrangements.

However, he also signaled political will to compromise. Russia initiated a debate about seeking deeper cuts into U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals under the future START-III treaty than envisaged earlier, informed the U.S. that there might be options to strengthen the non-proliferation regimes for weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. Finally – just one day before U.S. President Bill Clinton was to visit him in Moscow – Putin addressed the U.S. public during a television interview and introduced his suggestion to jointly build a

Russian-American-European missile defense system against the most likely missile threats. Soon after Clinton left Moscow, Putin himself began traveling through EU member states, Italy, Spain and Germany, to promote his ideas in time before the EU Summit meeting in Feira.

His offensive has not yet come to an end. The Russian President has already announced that he will visit China and North Korea, the two countries most likely affected by the U.S. plans to deploy an NMD system before the Okinawa G-8 Summit in July. During his Pyongyang visit, Putin is likely to play on the non-proliferation theme and thus point out the influence Russia may have on this isolated country whose programs on developing missiles and weapons of mass destruction are the most often named as justifications for U.S. plans to build a national missile defense system. On the other hand, China, a long-time nuclear power perceives NMD as a risk to the credibility of this countries' deterrent, which consists of only a very limited number of intercontinental ballistic missiles. Putin is likely to signal that there are ways to deal with the spread of these weapons in diplomatic not military ways. By the time of the G-8 Summit, Putin is likely to have elaborated on all elements of his initiative: more rapid nuclear disarmament, improved non-proliferation regimes and the offer to cooperate on missile defenses as long as they are legal under the ABM-treaty. He even might be ready to integrate them into a Russian initiative on arms control and nonproliferation. The G-8 Summit is anyhow likely to discuss issues of nuclear safety and security, e.g. U.S.-Russian initiatives to render surplus nuclear weapons fissile materials useless for weapons purposes.

The Russian President is unlikely to face any significant domestic opposition to his strategy. Those likely to oppose, both in the Duma and in the military, can not easily attack him on reasons of giving up core Russian national interests or even significant

ground. Following Putin's strategy Russia will not have to make any unilateral concessions. The strategic balance with the U.S. remains unchanged.

The START-II treaty will only enter into force, if the U.S. Senate ratifies the Treaty along with the 1997 protocols to the ABM-Treaty which is nearly impossible in the Republican dominated U.S. Senate. Similarly, the CTBT treaty will not enter into force in the foreseeable future. This treaty must be ratified by 44 countries including India, Pakistan, Israel, the Peoples Republic of China and the United States, who all did not yet ratify it.

Putin's initiative for deeper cuts into U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals is much in the Russian interest. The Russian Federation has other priorities spending its scarce resources than trying to maintain an oversized nuclear posture. Russia will probably already face problems in maintaining a nuclear force of 1.000 – 1.500 nuclear weapons as suggested by the Kremlin during discussions on the future START-III limits unless the country recovers economically.

Finally: Putin's suggestions to strengthen non-proliferation regimes might cause some limited concern within Russia's export community, which often targets countries such as Iran. However, these opponents are unlikely to be able to form a critical mass. In addition, they might hope for some technological and financial gains if the President's initiative to build a joint missile defense system bears some fruit. Thus Putin seems to be in an excellent position to continue on his path of action.

He knows that throughout the whole process the U.S. will be on the defensive. Russia will not loose the initiative and can indicate readiness for a number of regional as well as global initiatives to strengthen nuclear arms control and safeguard the non-proliferation regime. In addition Putin can signal Russia's political will to realistically deal with proliferation risks and – if necessary - to counter

them in a cooperative manner. Thus he will be able to continue to link Russian acceptance of existing proliferation risks to his firm conviction that they can be dealt with while respecting the limits set by the ABM Treaty. From his perspective there is also very little incentive to urgently negotiate a deal with the current U.S. administration. For most of his presidency, Vladimir Putin will have to deal with the successor to President Clinton.

However, the combination of his initiatives and his capability to carry them through will put the European Union countries to a test. European perception of future proliferation risks is more similar to the Russian than to the U.S. position. The EU's preferred strategy to deal with these risks is arms control, non-proliferation and diplomacy, not military responses. This again is closer to the Russian than to the U.S. approach. However, the Europeans will not be comfortable with that choice. Are they ready to challenge their longtime ally, the U.S., or are they going to disappoint Moscow, one of their most important partners in cooperation for stability in Europe?

### **Putin's Challenge to Europe**

Although President Putin may hope that the EU will develop a common position or will at least coordinate its opposition to exploit its leverage towards the U.S., he is quite obviously not expecting to win this fight in Europe. He is fully aware that European ties with the U.S. are much stronger than European-Russian relations. He knows, that his European counterparts are likely to be somewhat uneasy about how strongly they should oppose the U.S. and also whether they should discuss with the U.S. jointly or individually.

However, it might be Putin's intention to test how serious European Union members are about assuming a greater role and responsibility in European Security, as indicated during the Cologne and Helsinki Summits in 1999. He might also wants to

find out how seriously the EU is interested in developing practical examples for what was proposed in the Union's "Common Strategy on Russia", namely to "identify common responses to the security challenges in Europe and beyond ... by promoting arms control and disarmament and the implementation of existing agreements."

Putin has a clear point there. He builds on common European-Russian security interests and shared concerns over U.S. plans while testing Europe. Is the European Union ready to cope with its self-imposed commitment to strengthen its Common Foreign and Security Policy and gain greater autonomy, especially from the U.S.?

The testing ground is well chosen. It is not as delicate as challenging Europe over near-term cooperation in military crisis-management in areas of interest to Russia such as Central Asia or the Transcaucasus. It is over cooperation on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation issues where there is much common ground. This is an area where the European Union since Maastricht has developed a tradition of jointly developing "Common Positions" as well as "Common Actions" on a variety of issues, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel mines, the latter being a clear example where there are significant differences between the EU and U.S. positions.

He also knows that he has an excellent point of departure. A carefully worded reminder that European concerns about NMD might call for the European nations to develop a joint stand had already been made by German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, during a recent visit in Washington. It was accompanied by the admittance that "interests are not homogenous in Europe, so we will need some time for discussion". However, Fischer's remarks indeed indicate the need to act jointly.

Finally, the challenge is indirectly over a much larger issue. Putin's initiative will re-

sult in an indication to Russia whether the European Union's approach to its major Eastern neighbor seriously opens up a second door to West for the Kremlin. Is Europe ready to opt for strategic partnership with Russia? Is the European Union envisaging an inclusive European Security Architecture, one that encompasses Russia as an equal partner? Is Europe to give Russia a greater say on European Security matters than NATO does under U.S. leadership? Or is the European Union developing into just a European version of NATO, which also might turn confrontational towards Russia one day? The answer given by Europe will be of significance and importance to the Russian Federation, especially when considering the position Russia will take towards EU enlargement.

For years it had been the Europeans who had been talking about urgent need for constructive engagement with Russia; now it seems Russia takes the initiative and is engaging Europe. Putin suggests to his European counterparts: Don't be overcautious. Don't feel like having no leverage. If Washington is willing to make concessions to anybody, why not to its closest Allies? Thus, the European Union might be an appropriate forum for Europeans to coordinate their response.

### **A European Option**

Conventional wisdom suggests that the EU will be reluctant to take a Common Position on a controversial topic that could be dubbed a "defense" issue. However, conventional wisdom sometimes is limited wisdom. For years the EU has been taking Common Positions as well as even Common Actions on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation issues under the authority granted to Brussels by the Maastricht Treaty and significantly widened since the Amsterdam Treaty entered into force on May 1, 1999. This ground has been tested and members would act in accordance with

established practices if they decided to do so.

The concerns aired by European governments over negative effects of the U.S. NMD proposal are widely on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Worries based on long-term effects on collective defense and transatlantic relations add to European reservations, but are not the primary objection put forward. Indeed, if collective defense issues were the main aspect of the European concerns, it would be extremely difficult to join forces in developing a common position. Collective defense is the one main area of a future Common European Security and Defense Policy, which until now and for excellent reasons has been deliberately excluded from the EU-members' scheme of action and political integration.

However, taking a joint stand on arms control and non-proliferation concerns resulting from a unilateral U.S. move on further developing national missile defense technologies securely falls under the authority the European Union has assumed under its Common Foreign Security and Defense Policy. If European leaders were to follow their own priorities, i.e. giving the strengthening of arms control and the safeguarding of nonproliferation primacy over fighting the consequences of proliferation militarily, they would have to come up with a Common Position on U.S. NMD plans. These plans are very likely to reverse these priorities.

Europe will have to face this challenge. Indecisiveness is not an option. To Moscow, it would either signal disinterest in expanded relations or a European reluctance to take the development of a Common European Security and Defense Policy seriously. In either case Europe would not be ready for a true partnership with Russia.

At Feira, EU leaders should use discussions over lunch or dinner to deliberate on the long-term consequences of taking a common position or the failure to do so.. They

might come to the conclusion that Russia, the EU and the U.S. would be best off if they got more time before a U.S. decision seriously affects the current arms control and non-proliferation acquis. They might also conclude that they best serve this interest if they express a Common Position within the limits of their traditional turf. Elements of such a position might be

- Stressing the importance of the ABM treaty and its integrity;
- Expressing their concerns resulting from a possible U.S. decision on NMD for the future of nuclear arms control and non-proliferation;
- Suggesting a delay of the U.S. decision;
- Proposing tripartite U.S.-EU-Russian as well as bilateral consultations on the arms-control and nonproliferation consequences of deploying a U.S. NMD-system;
- Envisaging bilateral and trilateral consultations with the U.S. and Russia on cooperative initiatives to strengthen non-proliferation regimes and
- Supporting ongoing consultations in NATO about the consequences of an NMD-deployment and proposes NATO-EU consultations on the issue.

**This policy note was written by Otfried Nassauer, the Director of BITS with input from Clara Portela Sais and Denise Groves, who both work as researchers at the center. BITS is working on European aspects of NMD in a joint effort with the British American Security Information Council.**

**BITS acknowledges the generous support received from the Ford Foundation and the W.Alton Jones Foundation for its work on NATO-Russia, EU-Russia relations and European Security.**