The offensive posture of NATO's missile defence system

Glenn Diesen a, b, *, Conor Keane c

a School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Australia
b Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia
c Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

A C T I V E I N F O

Article history:
Available online 25 April 2018

Keywords:
Missile defense
NATO
Russia
Offensive

A B S T R A C T

A compelling case can be made to develop a NATO’s missile defence system in response to the advancement of missile technology and the danger of nuclear weapons. However, this development also undermines Russia’s retaliatory capacity, and consequently heightens the offensive potential of nuclear weapons. This article explores the offence/defence posture of NATO’s missile defence plans in terms of both capabilities and strategy. It is argued that NATO is incrementally increasing the strength and reach of its missile defence components, while rejecting any international treaty to regulate and limit their future expansion. This corresponds with a strategy of achieving invulnerability through counterforce and utilising NATO as an ‘insurance policy’ against Russia, to be activated when conflicts arise. We conclude that NATO has the capacity to distinguish between an offensive and defensive posture by discriminating between potential targets, but it has displayed no intention to do so.

© 2018 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Missile defence has emerged as a highly contentious issue between NATO and Russia. Many disagreements between both country’s foreign policy makers and military officials revolve around concerns over the offensive capacity of NATO’s missile defence system. Missile defence can enhance international security by diminishing incentives for states to embrace nuclear proliferation. But by undermining Russia’s security, NATO’s stance may, in fact, precipitate another nuclear arms race. Instead of exploring Russian perceptions or misperceptions, this article provides objective and observable indicators to determine whether NATO is capable of distinguishing between an offensive and defensive posture. The issue of missile defence is primarily the degree to which NATO has the intentions and capabilities to threaten Russia’s nuclear retaliatory forces.

First, this article will assess the nature of NATO’s military alliance, and the purpose of its missile defence system. NATO’s strategy demonstrates the refutation of the non-offensive defence concept in an effort to cement the unipolar moment. It will be argued that missile defence corresponds with a broader strategy of achieving invulnerability by supplanting deterrence with counterforce. We concentrate on the pre-emptive/preventive aspects of NATO’s post-Cold War containment policy, which functions as an ‘insurance policy’ against future Russian threats.

Second, the article surveys the capabilities of NATO’s missile defence system. It examines the extent to which NATO discriminates between so-called ‘rogue states’ and Russia as potential targets by limiting the capabilities. We highlight the
problems associated with deploying a missile defence without committing to international treaties that limit or regulate the scope of that system. This has the potential to upset the strategic balance of security in Europe. NATO's format for missile defence involves a continuous enhancement of its capabilities, limited by funding and technology rather than ambitions. There are opportunities to discriminate between Russia and 'rogue states' as possible targets by adjusting the quality, quantity and location of its interceptive missiles and radars. However, we assert that NATO does not endeavour to tailor its missile defence architecture to suit specific targets since any constraints on flexibility are equated to 'outsourcing' its security to Russia and granting Russia a ‘veto’ over the security of its members.

2. NATO: an ‘insurance policy’ against future threats from Russia

The creation of a NATO-centric European security system after the Cold War positioned Russia as a peripheral object of security. With this in mind, Williams and Neumann (2000: 361) suggest that Russia was given the ultimatum to 'either be an apprentice striving to join Western civilisation, thus entailing an acceptance of NATO enlargement as inevitable and positive; or, alternatively, Russia could be a countercivilizational force, entailing opposition to NATO enlargement'. NATO therefore pursues two incompatible objectives: first, to reassure Russia that it is not considered a threat, and second, to deter Russia from seeking a more prominent and independent role in Europe. This incompatibility is referred to as the ‘deterrence-cooperation dichotomy’ in Russia-NATO relations (Danilov, 2005: 84).

NATO can thus be conceptualised as an ‘insurance policy’ for its member states against future conflicts with Russia. This notion is encapsulated in the words of former US Secretary of State, James Baker (2002), who argued that many in the West still consider Russia a geopolitical rival and hence, ‘NATO is an insurance policy against resurgent and possibly virulent Russian nationalism’. Baker (2002) warned against such a policy as preparing for a future conflict with Russia would precipitate confrontation and thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Moscow would inevitably reject that NATO could expand and prepare for a possible future conflict with Russia, while concurrently claiming to be benevolent as skirmishes have not yet occurred. George Kennan, the architect of the anti-Soviet containment policy, predicted that the expansion of NATO under the auspices of promoting democracy would spark another Cold War (Friedman, 1998). Kennan castigated the debates in the US Senate leading up to NATO expansion for being based on the flawed assumption that Russia was 'a country dying to attack Western Europe'. Kennan also argued that eventually 'there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are – but this is just wrong' (Friedman, 1998).

The expert group that drafted the recommendations for NATO's Strategic Concept of 2010 attempted to differentiate between existing and future threats. While posting that NATO does not consider Russia a military threat to the alliance, they advocated that NATO should nonetheless prepare for potential future conflicts ‘because Russia’s future policies toward NATO remain difficult to predict, the Allies must pursue the goal of cooperation while also guarding against the possibility that Russia could decide to move in a more adversarial direction’ (NATO, 2010).

The US has also communicated the need to enhance its capabilities against Russia to hedge against potential future conflicts. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a 1992 leaked Pentagon paper, Defence Planning Guidance, proposed that in the post-Cold War world Russia is 'the only power in the world with the capability of destroying the United States', and therefore called for an early introduction of a global anti-missile system (Tyler, 1992). A leaked paragraph from the draft of the US Nuclear Posture Review of 2001 likewise considered nuclear weapons to mitigate possible Russian threats:

> Russia’s nuclear forces and programs, nevertheless, remain a concern. Russia faces many strategic problems around its periphery and its future course cannot be charted with certainty. US planning must take this into account. In the event that US relations with Russia significantly worsen in the future, the US may need to revise its nuclear force levels and posture (Weitz, 2005).

The ‘insurance policy’ concept bridges the division between member states in terms of threat perceptions from Russia by responding with a policy of both reassurance and containment. There is friction, however, between Western Europe envisioning a less threatening Russia, and Eastern Europe still harbouring the memory of Russian domination during the Soviet era. These dichotomous perspectives have fostered strategic ambiguity. Ambiguity is necessary since an assertive debate vis-à-vis both positions has the potential to threaten NATO’s uniformity (Thränert, 2009). Some Western European states would distance themselves from NATO if Russia was identified as a threat, while other Eastern European states would lose confidence in the US/NATO’s commitment to defend if Russia was unequivocally dismissed as a threat (Thränert, 2009).

When conflicts do emerge, the insurance policy is activated. Russia’s intervention in Georgia is demonstrative of this phenomenon. The US announced that missiles would be deployed in Poland while the conflict in Georgia remained active. Poland requested that missile defence be accompanied by a ‘large US military footprint’ on the ground to deter Russia (Wikileaks, 2009a). Poland presented ‘a series of hypothetical questions on the adaptive nature of the system vis-à-vis the changing threat’ and requested the ability to reconfigure the missile defence system to defend against ‘missiles coming from elsewhere’ (Wikileaks, 2009b). The US responded by reassuring Poland that ‘sea-borne platforms could provide surge capability against threats from an unforeseen direction, land-based sites could be upgraded with more interceptors if the scale of the threat were increased, and radars could be reoriented’ (Wikileaks, 2009b). A similar insurance guarantee was evident when the conflict enveloped Ukraine in 2013/2014, which resulted in NATO declaring Russia a threat and massing troops on its border. With the support of the US, Poland, and the Baltic states, NATO has also begun to debate whether the missile defence system should be primarily directed towards suppressing Russian power (Spiegel, 2014).
The contradictory nature of a position that includes both reassurance and deterrence was articulated in leaked US documents referring to the ‘Eagle Guardian’ plan, drafted in 2010. The plan outlines US defensive war plans against Russia, recognising that this contingency had to be kept secret since ‘it would require specifying Russia as a potential threat’, which controverts the public position whereby ‘NATO has consistently said that it no longer views Russia as a threat’ (Wikileaks, 2009c). Furthermore, ‘many Allies will take great pains to avoid even the suggestion that the Alliance and Russia are on course toward a new Cold War’ (Wikileaks, 2009c). Ambiguity is deemed to be necessary so as not to disrupt cooperation with Russia: ‘A public discussion of contingency planning would also likely lead to an unnecessary increase in NATO-Russia tensions, something we should try to avoid as we work to improve practical cooperation in areas of common NATO-Russia interest’ (Wikileaks, 2010). However, Matthew Kroenig (2017), a former strategist in the US Office of the Secretary of Defence, is critical of such strategic ambiguity as missile defence would be more effective if the real target is clearly identified by explicitly ‘recognizing Russia as the primary missile threat to Europe’. Kroenig (2017) posits that the sale of Patriot missiles and the Integrated Air and Missile Defence Battle Command System (IBCS) to Poland is an important step towards this goal by gradually and openly directing the missile defence system against Russia.

As NATO continues to enhance its capabilities, and Russia fears encirclement, the ‘insurance policy’ becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that may result in missile defence explicitly targeting Russia. Former US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, acknowledged in his biography that NATO instigates conflicts with Russia by placing bases in Romania and Bulgaria, and that ‘trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching and a ‘monumental provocation’ (2014: 162). The eastward expansion of NATO has a combined military budget that is more than 10 times that of Russia. Yet, the mantra within NATO, that such asymmetrical power does not fuel conflict, is conversely argued to sustain the liberal-democratic international order under the patronage of NATO. Successive NATO’s Secretary Generals therefore periodically requests member states to respond to the Russian threat by increasing their military budgets.

Realist theory recognises that the demise of the Soviet Union created systemic incentives for NATO to adopt an ‘insurance policy’ strategy. The paradox of the post-Cold War era is the absence of a great power threat as the raison d’etat. Yet the severely skewed balance of power removes constraints and incentivises expansionism. NATO’s security strategies from the 1990s embraced various concepts of sovereign inequality, ranging from humanitarian interventionism, democracy promotion, regime change, countering rogue states, and the global war on terror. However, the relative decline of the West and end of the unipolar era compels NATO to take a more ‘honest’ stance in terms of its ambitions to build global peace on the collective hegemony of the West. Indeed, after more than two decades of lambasting Moscow for portraying NATO as an anti-Russian military alliance, NATO is openly ‘returning’ to its Cold War mission of containing Russia. The new US Security Strategy of December 2017 repeatedly lists Russia and China when referencing the return of Great Power competition as the main challenge to America’s global leadership (White House, 2017). The Nuclear Posture Review of February 2018, similarly devotes an entire chapter to ‘Great Power competition’ as an incentive to modernise its nuclear arsenal (US Department of Defence, 2018).

3. Conceptualising an offensive missile defence system

NATO’s missile defence program illustrates the ambiguous relationship between offensive and defensive weaponry. It can be used defensively against an attack or, conversely, it can support a nuclear first-strike by eliminating the second-strike capabilities of an opponent. During most of the Cold War, a first-strike was unfeasible as it would result in mutual destruction. With this in mind, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was signed in 1972 to preserve the strategic balance vis-à-vis the United States/NATO and the USSR. In 2001, however, President George W. Bush announced that the US was withdrawing from the treaty to construct a missile defence system.

Offence/defence theory posits that posture reflects the opportunities and constraints embedded within the international system. MIT Professor of political science, Stephen Van Evera (1998), argues that offensive advantage or defensive deficiency makes wars more likely. With offensive advantage, there is less incentive to negotiate as it becomes more feasible to pursue preventative warfare and opportunistic expansion. Meanwhile, defensive deficiency encourages first-strike for survival. If missile defence enhances the offensive proficiency of nuclear missiles, the implications of a defensive ‘first-strike’ is limited to neutralising an opponent’s missile defence architecture. A rational state developing a ‘defensive’ missile defence program, therefore, can be expected to mitigate the security dilemma by distinguishing between offensive and defensive postures.

An offensive missile defence system is conceptualised as bolstering NATO’s capacity to intercept Russia’s nuclear retaliatory capabilities, thus nullifying the nuclear assets that survive a hypothetical US/NATO first-strike. Insecurity is heightened since a first-strike becomes a more feasible option during conflict. Military confrontation, meanwhile, is more likely because nuclear weapons can become a tool for political pressure. ‘Escalation control’ or ‘escalation dominance’ is continuously increasing military pressure that includes the use of force until the other side stands down (Snyder, 1961; Oelrich, 2005). Russia would be required to capitulate under pressure given the knowledge that the US/NATO could launch a successful first-strike. If Russia does not yield, a first-strike by NATO may be the most desirable option during heightened tensions, which could push Russia to launch their own defensive first-strike on NATO’s missile defence components.

A defensive and non-provocative missile defence system is conceptualised as being designed to defend against missile attacks from ‘rogue states’ that may acquire nuclear weapons and advanced missile technology. A missile defence system aimed against Russia is almost exclusively offensive in design since even an advanced system could not effectively defend against a first-strike from Russia’s large nuclear arsenal. But putatively, a ‘defensive’ missile defence system, which is
positioned against Russian attacks, would reduce and eventually replace NATO’s reliance on nuclear weapons to maintain the strategic balance. Missile defence, therefore, plausibly guarantees US security commitments to Europe and provides an alternative to stationing nuclear weapons on the continent.

Posture is not only a reference to whether missile defence is offensive or defensive; it also denotes the ability and intent to draw a clear distinction between the two. Most military assets have dual purposes and whether a weapon is offensive or defensive depends upon the situation and their utilisation. For example, even defensive weapons like air-defence were an important component of Egypt’s attack on Israel in 1973 (Tang, 2010). Whether the two postures are notably distinct has been the subject of debate (Jervis, 1978; Levy, 1984; Van Evera, 1999), and at present ambiguity thus shrouds effort to distinguish between offensive or defensive posture.

The posture of missile defence can be extrapolated by observing the extent to which NATO is willing to demarcate offensive and defensive capabilities and strategy. The effectiveness of this capability derives from NATO’s ability to detect, monitor, intercept and destroy incoming ballistic missiles. The radars must be placed in a location that can identify the launch and the flight trajectory of projectiles. Interceptor missiles must then be able to reach, intercept, and destroy them. The efficacy of a missile defence grid is enhanced if it can target a missile early in its flight path when it is still flying low and before it has accumulated too much speed.

A missile defence system can be divided into three categories: ‘Tactical Missile Defence’ which intercepts short-range missiles; ‘Theatre Missile Defence’ which intercepts medium-range missiles; and ‘Strategic Missile Defence’ which intercepts long-range missiles. Tactical and Theatre Missile Defence are directed towards specific regions and target missiles in the early boost-phase when they fly slow and low over enemy territory. Strategic Missile Defence, meanwhile, is not necessarily directed towards a specific region as it aims to defend one’s own territory, which requires faster and longer range interceptive missiles to intercept enemy missiles later in their flight path (Wallander, 2000). Interceptor missiles and radar systems are therefore observed by their quality, quantity, and location.

Crucially, missile defence strategy is not only a point of definitional reference to how ones security is defined, but also involves determining how current and future policies are applied to its advancement. A defensive strategy denotes that the objective is only to be prepared for the possibility that ‘rogue states’ may acquire nuclear. An offensive strategy, however, infers that missile defence aims to achieve invulnerability by undermining the strategic balance with Russia through counterforce and first-strike capabilities.

4. Military capabilities: incremental and continuous expansion

NATO’s missile defence system features modest capabilities that can be deployed immediately, yet they are set to gradually improve their offensive capacity without limitations on future developments. This plan resembles the so-called ‘spiral development’ policy masterminded by former US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld (2003):

Instead of taking a decade or more to develop someone’s vision of a ‘perfect’ shield, we have instead decided to develop and put in place a rudimentary system by 2004 - one which should make us somewhat safer than we are now—and then build on that foundation with increasingly effective capabilities as the technologies mature. We intend to apply this ‘spiral development’ approach to a number of systems.

Missile defence is developed and deployed by NATO through the so-called ‘Phased Adaptive Approach’ (PAA), which gradually deploys radars and interceptive missiles at multiple land-sites and on mobile Aegis ships. It is more specifically referred to as the ‘European Phased Adaptive Approach’ (EPAA) as it can supplement a broader global system, with components in the US and other parts of the world. These capabilities will gradually mature to correlate with both the increase in threats (allegedly from Iran and other ‘rogue states’) and the availability of technology and funding. The EPAA initially consisted of four planned phases, though the last was cancelled in March 2013. Phase 1, which began in 2011 developed and deployed existing missile defence system components for defence against short and medium-range ballistic missiles in southern Europe. This first phase included radar and SM-3 Block IA interceptive missiles deployed on Aegis ships. Phase 2, from 2015 upgraded capabilities to the more advanced SM-3 Block IB interceptor missiles with additional sensors. Though more effective, these interceptive missiles can only target short and medium range missiles. Interceptors will also be added to land sites in Romania. Phase 3, with the timeframe of 2018, significantly upgrades interceptive missiles with SM-3 Block IIA, which increases coverage due to its capacity to target intermediate-range missiles. New interceptive missiles will be placed on Aegis ships and on a second land-based site in Poland. Phase 4 was cancelled on the 15th of March 2013, which would have included a further upgrade to interceptive missiles with SM-3 Block IIB that could intercept long-range ICBMs (White House, 2011).

The cancellation of Phase 4 of the missile defence system indicates that the current system has less offensive potential than the previously proposed format. Phase 4 of the EPAA constituted the greatest threat to Russia since it would provide NATO with the capability to intercept ICBMs. Taking this into account, some commentators suggest that the cancellation of Phase 4 should reassure Russia since it invalidates most of their security concerns (Pifer, 2013). Yet, it was only a cancellation of announced deployments and it has not been claimed by either the US or NATO to be permanent. Although potential future developments after Phase 3 are yet to be announced, NATO and the US unequivocally reject that they would be limited by these three phases and refuse to set any limits on future capabilities. NATO has not ruled out the reintroduction of Phase 4, nor has the possibility of Phase 5, Phase 6, or Phase 7 been excluded.
Since the spiral development model indicates that the absence of Phase 4 is temporary, it is imperative to consider why it was cancelled. The annulment was not rooted in any official recognition for the need to constrain missile defence development in a fashion that would avoid undermining Russia’s retaliatory capabilities. Washington implied that the cancellation of Phase 4 in Europe would be impermanent, and explained that it was due to investments being directed towards the reinforcement of missile defence in Alaska. Additionally, the technology is still to be developed, as the interceptor missiles are not yet available.

A temporary cancellation could also merely serve to reduce internal and external opposition to the initial three phases. A key benefit of the ‘spiral development’ is that the gradual enhancement of capabilities is less vulnerable to political opposition than a large once-off deployment, which would instantly alter the strategic balance. Although Washington has adamantly rejected the contention that respect for Russian security was the reason for cancellation, this dismissal may be directed towards the domestic audience since there is a tendency in the US to portray concessions to Russia as ‘appeasement’ (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2009). In a political blunder, when Obama was unaware that his microphone was still on, he attempted to reassure President Medvedev regarding missile defence by stating: ‘This is my last election. After my election I have more flexibility’ (Goodman, 2012). However, the permanence of Phase 4’s cancellation remains dubious given the lack of confirmation that it is enduring, and NATO rejects any international treaties that would offer legal guarantees against future deployments. Irrespective of Obama’s intentions, the missile defence system could become a basic platform for a much more sophisticated and antagonistic stance toward Russia from current and future US administrations: ‘After all, the Obama administration had just overhauled its predecessor’s plans; any future US administration could do the same’ (Mankoff, 2012: 340).

5. EPAA as an upgrade of the Bush-era system

Obama’s cancellation of the Bush-era missile defence plans was part of the effort to ‘reset’ relations between the US and Russia, which was intended to alleviate the fears of the latter party. However, Obama soon thereafter announced another missile defence program with radically higher capabilities. The European missile defence components of the second Bush administration consisted of 10 Ground Based Interceptors (GBI) in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic. The planned interceptive missiles could target long and intermediate range missiles. However, the planned GBIs in Poland were to be silo-based and therefore immobile. Meanwhile, the new and more ambitious missile defence system upgraded the scheduled quantity of interceptive missiles. Following phase 3 in 2018, NATO have 32 Aegis-equipped sea-based vessels and 48 SM-3 IB land-based interceptors. In terms of quality, these smaller interceptive missiles have a lower capacity to intercept Russian ICBMs, though future upgrades in technology can bridge this gap. The benefit of smaller interceptive missiles is their increased flexibility, which enables NATO to rapidly develop more land-based locations across Europe and introduce a mobile ship-based system. While the development of new silos would be a time-consuming process, this arrangement enables NATO to acquire ‘new targets’ with few adjustments.

Former US Defence Secretary Robert Gates explained that the new EPAA system will organise faster deployment of a more reliable missile defence system, compared to the former Bush-era missile defence plans (Gates, 2009). The Director of the US Missile Defence Agency, Patrick O’Reilly (2009), also confirmed that the new EPAA system will ‘provide a more powerful missile defence capability for NATO’ as ‘we are strengthening it and delivering more capability sooner’. Interceptive missiles are progressively increasing in numbers and capabilities (speed and range), which do not reflect current or projected Iranian capabilities. Irrespective of Iran’s compliance with the nuclear agreement reached in late November 2013, the missile defence system will nonetheless still be deployed according to the original schedule (US Department of State, 2013).

The offence/defence posture of capabilities becomes less distinguishable as the quantity and quality of interceptive missiles gradually increase, and while their location is amorphous, being primarily sea-based. A port for Aegis ships in Spain and an early warning radar station in Turkey are under construction, which will enable surveillance ability all the way to the Urals. This weakens Russia’s capacity to conceal its mobile vehicles and defend its second-strike capabilities in European Russia. O’Reilly (2009) confirms that the NATO missile defence system is an improvement due to the flexibility provided by the ‘ability to rapidly increase the number of interceptors at any launch site’. Another missile defence site in Redzikowo, Poland, scheduled to become operative in 2018, is likely to further stir concerns in Russia.

The quality of these capabilities will also increase when interceptive missiles are exchanged with more capable models, once the technology becomes available. Phase 1 and 2 deployed only Block I SM-3 interceptor missiles, which do not constitute a significant challenge to Russia, an important nuclear power with a vast territory. Phase 3 (and the former Phase 4), however, introduces interceptive missiles with higher burnout velocity, which determines that the Block II SM-3 can engage strategic missiles and ICBMs (Trubnikov et al., 2011; Butt and Postol, 2011). The 2010 US BMDR Report suggests that the burn-out velocity introduced with Phase 3 is aimed to enable the missile defence system to ‘detect and track large raid sizes of ballistic missiles over their entire trajectories from space’ (US Department of Defense, 2010a). The reference to ‘large raid sizes’ represents a clear departure from a contingency to intercept or eradicate the smaller missile arsenals of Iran or North Korea. Consequently, the radar systems deployed in Europe enables the US to track Russian ICBMs very early in the ‘boost-phase’ after launch when they fly lower and slower (Butt and Postol, 2011).

The mobility introduced with the sea-based components further reduces the ability to distinguish between an offensive and defensive posture. New targets can be acquired within a very short timeframe, by manoeuvring into positions in the northern seas and the Arctic where Russia’s retaliatory missiles could be readily intercepted. The Director of the US Missile
Defence Agency, explained the benefit of sea-based components, which allows the US to rapidly change targets ‘if the direction of the threat changes’ (O’Reilly, 2009). Moreover, the Aegis ships have multiple purposes. They may be positioned in areas that are highly sensitive for Russia, but unimportant for Iran, such as the Black Sea, Norwegian Sea, Barents Sea, or Arctic. The refusal to accept any limitation of geographic location already caused tensions when Aegis ships with missile defence components entered the Black Sea during a counter-piracy exercise. In the future, Aegis ships may also enter the Arctic for rescue exercises or other purposes. A technical study by the think tank Federation of American Scientists confirms that the flexibility of the missile defence system allows it to easily reconfigure to target Russian retaliatory capabilities (Butt and Postol, 2011). Butt and Postol (2011) therefore conclude that NATO’s missile defence heightens the offensive capabilities of nuclear weapons, which gives Russia legitimate concerns as its deterrence capacity is gradually weakened.

Russia’s vast territory ensures that NATO’s current European missile defence components would primarily, if not exclusively, affect the ability to intercept Russian missiles launched from its European terrain. O’Reilly (2009) proposes that the enormous geographical size of the country would be the greatest obstacle to target Russia’s nuclear forces. Arbatov (2012) concurs that deeper within Russian territory, beyond the Ural Mountains, Russia would not be exposed to the European components of the missile defence system. While the current system would not be able to successfully eliminate all of Russia’s retaliatory capabilities, it would still be able to reduce them and make a first-strike a more desirable option. However, while the threat can be confined by limiting missile defence to Europe, the unpredictable geographical spread of missile defence bases strengthens Russia’s military and political concerns (Arbatov, 2012). The key threats derive from the EPAA being linked to a global missile defence system and the Aegis ships ability to rapidly position themselves in Russia’s north (Gerasimov, 2012; Ilyin, 2012).

### 6. The uncertainties from no constraints: rejecting international treaties

While the US withdrew from the ABM-Treaty, no new treaty has replaced it to regulate missile defence. Any international treaty to limit and regulate missile defence deployment is categorically rejected by NATO, which is justified on the basis that it would give Russia a ‘veto’ over the security of NATO members. Obama’s first Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton (2011), stated that ‘no ally within NATO is going to give any other country outside the alliance, a veto over whether NATO protects itself by building a missile defence system, against the threats that we perceive are the most salient’.

This has precipitated a refusal to even discuss possible limitations on quantity, technical capabilities and the location of radars and interceptive missiles (Tauscher, 2011). Michael McFaul, the US Ambassador to Russia from 2012–2014, emphasized that ‘we are going to accept no limitations on that whatsoever because the security of our people, of our allies, is the number-one top priority’, thus ‘we are going to build whatever missile defence system we need’ (Markitan, 2012). Previously McFaul categorically rejected any treaty that incorporated Russian security interests:

> We’re not going to reassure or give or trade anything with the Russians regarding NATO expansion or missile defense. Rather, our approach is different than that. We’re going to define our national interests … And then we’re going to see if there are ways that we can have Russia cooperate on those things that we define as our national interests (White House, 2009).

NATO spokesperson, James Appathurai, argued that ‘instead of focusing on treaties or conferences’, Russia should be reassured by the offering to develop ‘a real European security architecture - one roof that includes the Russians, that is built with the Russians, that is maintained with the Russians’ (Gardham, 2010). All references to a common ‘roof’ was later removed in favour of alluding to two separated systems that could cooperate, without becoming dependent on Russia, accepting a Russian ‘veto’, or accepting any constraints. Yet, the NATO Secretary-General refuted that the missile defence system could possibly be a threat and ‘our invitation to cooperate on missile defence is proof of that’ (Rasmussen, 2011). Former US Secretary of Defence, Gates (2014: 162), wrote candidly in his memoirs that the US was ‘just kicking the can down the road on missile defence, playing for time. The Russians recognised that they were being presented with a fait accompli, and that our offer of cooperation were more like take it or leave it’.

The main purpose of offering Russia ‘cooperation’ was to overcome internal political opposition within NATO that feared antagonising Russia. Stephen Hadley, the former US Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Policy, asserted later that ‘if we could get the Russians to agree on BMD then even Sam Nunn and Carl Levin couldn’t oppose it’ (Futter, 2013: 40). A US Congressional Research Service report similarly argued that ‘many observers believe that Russia’s pledge to participate removes a major stumbling block to the development of a European territorial missile defence program’ (Hildreth and Ek, 2011). NATO had similarly signed the ‘Founding Act’ with Russia in 1997 to overcome opposition to NATO expansion. The Founding Act gave the impression to NATO members that Russia approved of NATO expansion, and it mitigated the negative Russia’s reaction. Yet, the Founding Act’s promise of no ‘permanent stationing of substantial combat forces’ in new member states was later betrayed with missile defence deployments and other military infrastructure. Much like NATO vaguely offered ‘cooperation’ on missile defence, the Founding Act used ambiguous words such as ‘permanent’ and ‘substantial’.

A key argument against an international treaty to replace the ABM Treaty was that it would be too time consuming to move beyond ambiguous promises. Rasmussen declared that legal guarantees would require a complicated legal formula, which would be difficult, if not impossible for all member states to ratify (NATO, 2011). A senior NATO official also argues that it would be too challenging to gain a consensus on the text amongst all member states (Author interview, 2011). As
THRASYVOULOS STAMATOPOULOS, NATO’s Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy, stated, ‘should we start negotiations on an agreement with all its legal parameters, can you imagine how long it will take?’ (Panjiev, 2013).

The key weakness of any missile defence system is the ability to overwhelm the system with decoys, which is also cited as a reason why Russia’s nuclear forces are not vulnerable. Decoys are cheap and easy to produce, but the flaw in this argument is that the ease of producing decoys also applies to Iran and North Korea. Several US specialists, military officials, and politicians have warned that those with capabilities to build missiles can easily build decoys (Walpole, 2000).

The possibility of countering missile defence with decoys can result in increasing political support for responding with upgrading interceptive missiles by arming them with nuclear-tipped warheads. Nuclear-tipped interceptive missiles significantly improve the ability to neutralise large clusters of missiles and decoys, and may also be used in a direct attack or against satellites (Butt and Postol, 2011). Former Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld proposed the possible use of nuclear-tipped interceptors, which had been rejected by Washington in the 1980s when it was technically problematic and faced intense political opposition (Crandall, 2003). However, the will to introduce them could gain impetus among the political class if cheap decoys render the expensive missile defence system impotent.

Presenting a different perspective, Lieber and Press (2006: 52) argue that the value of decoys in relations with Russia is usually overstated as it is based on calculations of a Russian attack that could overwhelm any missile defence system. However, in terms of the missile defence as an offensive system, an effective US first-strike would leave only ‘a tiny surviving arsenal’ of nuclear weapons and decoys, thus ‘even a relatively modest or inefficient missile defence system might well be enough to protect against any retaliatory strikes’ (Lieber and Press, 2006: 52).

Future deployments of missile defence components outside NATO territory can also serve political purposes as a de-facto enlargement of NATO by creating ‘tripwires’, which translates into extended security guarantees. The then NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen proposed to start talks on establishing a missile defence site in Ukraine (Atlantic Council, 2011), while some US senators have similarly advocated placing missile defence components in Georgia (NTI, 2011). Stephen Cambalda (2012), a nuclear weapons and arms control expert from Penn State University, considers ‘a NATO missile defence installation deployed to protect Tbilisi or Kiev, supported by short- and medium-range ballistic missiles as a trip wire’. The prospect of missile defence components in Ukraine and Georgia would cause tension and alienate these states further from Russia if Moscow’s defensive measures entail targeting missile defence components in a potential future conflict. In an open letter to NATO, various experts on nuclear security warned that extending ‘missile defence system to the very borders of Russia increase the odds that any conventional military confrontation would quickly escalate into nuclear war’ (NAPF, 2012).

7. Supplementing rather than replacing offensive capabilities

Conceiving missile defence as an offensive weapon assumes that the system would absorb the second-strike capabilities that survived a first strike. Missile defence as a ‘shield’ must therefore be placed alongside offensive nuclear and conventional weapons as a ‘spear’. Missile defence develops in addition to, rather than as replacement for, nuclear weapons or other potential offensive capabilities. A hypothetical missile defence system that replaces the reliance on nuclear weapons can be considered to enhance non-offensive defence, while missile defence that simply adds value to nuclear weapons constitutes an enhancement of overall capabilities. The US Quadrennial Defence Review Report of 2010 describes the development of a ‘new, tailored, regional deterrence architecture that combine our forward presence, relevant conventional capabilities (including missile defences), and continued commitment to extend our nuclear deterrent’, which will ‘make possible a reduced role for nuclear weapons in our national security strategy’ (US Department of Defense, 2010b). Within NATO there are some who believe that missile defence could reduce reliance on nuclear deterrence (NATO, 2011). US nuclear weapons in Europe could be reduced and eventually removed, as US security commitments to Europe would instead be exemplified by missile defence (Thränert, 2009; Young, 2010; Flockhart, 2010).

However, this notion has been challenged and indeed contradicted by the US, which stipulates that ‘missile defences are not a replacement for an offensive response capability, they are an added and critical dimension of contemporary deterrence’ (White House, 2003). This was reiterated by a NATO document suggesting that missile defence would add to existent conventional and nuclear capabilities (NATO, 2011). Both NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture Review and the official declaration at the NATO Chicago Summit in 2012 confirmed, with the same sentence, that ‘missile defence can complement the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence, it cannot substitute for them’ (NATO, 2012a; NATO, 2012b). The Nuclear Posture Review of 2018 similarly reiterated that ‘missile defence cannot substitute for our nuclear deterrent, track, and target mobile systems of regional adversaries, and other non-nuclear capabilities, which we are now strengthening, can complement but not replace U.S. nuclear forces for this purpose’ (NPR, 2018: 23).

Missile defence is developed in parallel with conventional and nuclear weapons to obtain first-strike advantage. An account by RAND Corporation argues that the number and operating procedures of US nuclear weapons indicate a departure from mere deterrence and a move towards first-strike capability (Buchan, 2003). Scholars such as Lieber and Press even proposed in a controversial technical study that the US ‘stands on the verge of attaining nuclear primacy’, and ‘could conceivably disarm the long-range nuclear arsenals of Russia or China with a nuclear first strike’ (Lieber and Press, 2006: 52). In December 2001, the US Nuclear Posture Review presented plans for a nuclear ‘triad’: first, an ‘offensive strike system (both nuclear and non-nuclear)’ consisting of new and more ‘usable’ offensive nuclear weapons such as small nuclear weapons for earth penetration/bunker busters; second, a ‘defensive’ system which includes missile defence; and third, a modernised production infrastructure that will provide continuing heightened capabilities (US Department of Defense, 2001).
The US also enhances its conventional offensive capabilities with the development of a ‘Prompt Global Strike’ (PGS) program, which aims to strike anywhere in the world within an hour. The Nuclear Posture Review of 2001 emphasised the necessity for precision strikes, combined with increased intelligence on mobile targets. US nuclear disarmament in concert with Russia is being pursued correspondingly with efforts to transfer first-strike capabilities to conventional weapons (Miasnikov, 2009). The large arsenals of conventional ‘precision-guided weapons’ are acquiring the capability to destroy silo-based ICBMs (Miasnikov, 2009). Additionally, the US has been making advancements toward the development of ‘hypersonic missiles’, which travel more than 5-times faster than the speed of sound, and would be indispensable in a first strike.

Nuclear weapons research continues with the aim of making them more ‘usable’. Such efforts include so-called ‘bunker busters’, which are designed to hit deep targets such as nuclear command centres. The question of what would be done with the aging nuclear weapons in Europe has also been answered with announcements that they will not be scrapped, but rather updated and modernised. The director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists, Hans Kristensen, explains that upgrades to US nuclear weapons in Europe include adding controllable tail fins, which enables them to be delivered by F35s with stealth technology (Borger, 2013). Furthermore, Obama’s announced upgrades includes the development of ‘a guided nuclear bomb’ makes nuclear weapons more ‘usable’ because they can strike closer to the target, which implies that a lower explosive yield can be used and thereby reduce nuclear fallout. The Nuclear Posture Review of 2018 further outlines the plan to modernise the nuclear arsenal with low-yield nuclear explosions to make nuclear weapons more usable for limited strikes, so-called bloody nose strikes (US Department of Defense, 2018). Kristensen further posits that the modernisation constitutes a ‘significant upgrade of the US nuclear capability in Europe’, which contradicts Obama’s landmark speech in Prague 2009 and the US Nuclear Posture Review of 2010 (Borger, 2013) that pledged the US would not ‘provide for new military capabilities’ (US Department of Defense, 2010a,b,c). The upgrade of nuclear weapons in Europe also contradicts NATO’s own Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (NATO, 2011). Upgrading hundreds of US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe indicates that Russia is the only significant target.

The design of the US nuclear arsenal still looks as if it is aimed to disarm Russia in a first strike (Oelrich, 2005: 41). Threats from Iran and North Korea, or even China, do not explain why hundreds of US nuclear weapons must be based at sea at all times to ensure their survival in a first strike.1 Arbatov (2011: 10) suggests that the evolving conventional weapons of the US also demonstrate enhanced first-strike capabilities against Russia. The modification of US Ohio-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines and strategic bombers makes it possible to launch about 2900 high-precision, conventional long-range missiles:

Ohio-class submarines are designed to stay on patrol for long periods of time and remain undetectable even to advanced anti-submarine warfare systems, and heavy bombers are capable of penetrating advanced air defences. Rogue states and terrorists possess neither anti-submarine warfare nor serious air-defence systems (Arbatov, 2011: 20–21).

8. Strategy: counterforce as a means for invulnerability as an end

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both the US and NATO have steadily shifted from accepting an international system based on mutual vulnerability and relying on deterrence, to seeking invulnerability through offensive-defence and pre-emption. Effective missile defence constitutes a denial threat, which is a strategy distinctive from the punishment threat of mutually assured destruction (Morgan, 2003). NATO has two stated missions: collective defence from attack, as outlined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, and ‘non-Article 5’ functions, developed after the Cold War, such as interventions to resolve conflicts beyond its own borders. Missile defence fulfils both these missions: it functions as a territorial defence and reduces the risks for NATO to pursue interventions. Interventions can also pre-empt or prevent situations where there are threats to NATO’s territory. As proclaimed by the former NATO Secretary-General, Anders Rasmussen (2012): ‘the defence of our borders often has to start beyond our borders’. This increases reliance on long-range mobility and offensive power given that ‘such forward defence often requires a global reach’ (Daaldor and Goldgeier, 2006: 105).

In 2013, the Pentagon released the Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States, which argued that ‘the new guidance requires the United States to maintain significant counterforce capabilities against potential adversaries. The new guidance does not rely on a ‘counter-value’ or ‘minimum deterrence’ strategy (US Department of Defense, 2013). The recognition of a counterforce strategy rather than a counter-value strategy for nuclear weapons is of great significance as it implies that pre-emption and first-strike is a serious option. A counterforce strategy targets the military of an adversary with the aim of destroying its weapons before they can be launched, thus minimising or eliminating their ability to retaliate. This is very different from a counter-value strategy, which deters attacks by threatening to respond with the destruction of enemy’s targets of equal or greater value.

The US has shifted towards a strategy of security through military superiority rather than accepting a balance. The 2002 US National Security Strategy stipulates that ‘our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States’ (White House, 2002). The US Nuclear Posture Review does not specify that nuclear weapons would only be used for retaliation, and could possibly be used preemptively. Hegemony as the foundation for security is evident when the US seeks dominance through enhanced space-

1 Approximately 60% of submarine forces are at sea at any given time [Arbatov, 2011: 8].
based missile defence components, while denying its potential adversaries similar opportunities. The US National Space Policy specifies that the US will ‘preserve its rights, capabilities, and freedom of action in space’, and ‘deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to US national interests’ (White House, 2006).

Missile defence is argued to prevent nuclear proliferation, but it has also been developed to enable interventionist policies. The potential for interventionist policy is severely restricted if opponents are equipped with nuclear weapons (Riecke, 1999: 267). The demand for missile defence has developed along with the emerging interventionist policies of both NATO and the US. The post-Cold War missile defence program was used to support the deployment of ground forces during the 1990/91 Gulf War. In this offensive operation, the US stationed Patriot missiles in defence of Iraqi Scud missiles. NATO began its discussion for Theatre Missile Defence for similar conflicts in 1999, at the time of NATO’s intervention in Kosovo. However, NATO did not begin its missile defence development until 2005 (NATO, 2011). Similarly, in 2012 missile defence components were placed in Turkey arguably to reduce the ability of Syria to retaliate if it were attacked by the West.

9. Conclusion

It has been argued in this article that NATO’s missile defence system adopts an offensive posture. By exploring its capabilities and strategy we advise that Russia has valid reasons for its security concerns. A dangerous precedent is set by NATO’s missile defence system, which is bereft of any international treaty or political assurances to regulate and constrain its advancement. This absence remains despite the ambiguity between offensive and defensive weapons and the potentially destabilising effects of the missile system’s evolution on Europe’s strategic balance. NATO endeavours to incrementally improve the quality, quantity, and location/flexibility of its missile defence components, which gradually undermines Russia’s retaliatory capabilities. Despite opportunities to tailor the missile defence infrastructure to discriminate between Russia and potential targets, there are no indications that NATO intends to pursue them. NATO insists on maintaining flexibility to calibrate for future developments, and the accommodation of any international treaty limiting missile defence is denounced as giving Russia a ‘veto’ over the security of NATO members. The progression of missile defence capabilities does not replace offensive weapons, but rather occurs in parallel to the development of nuclear and conventional weapons with heightened counterforce capabilities.

The strategies of the US and NATO indicate that security is sought through increasing invulnerability and military superiority, pursued through counterforce capabilities. Thus, NATO is envisioned as an insurance policy against Russia to mitigate future rather than existing threats. This posture is consistent with and harmonises NATO’s internal divisions in respect to threat perceptions, by neither clearly identifying nor dismissing Russia as a threat. NATO responds to Russia with both reassurance and deterrence, promoting friendly relations while hedging against future threats by augmenting its offensive capabilities. As demonstrated in both Georgia and Ukraine, this ‘insurance policy’ is activated when conflicts occur, which means that increased hostilities between the US/NATO and Russia become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

References
