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## **RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF ARMS CONTROL**

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*In collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)*

**Dmitri Trenin**

*Spring 2001*



**Security Studies  
Department**

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## *Proliferation Papers*

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Though it has long been a concern for security experts, proliferation has truly become an important political issue over the last decade, marked simultaneously by the nuclearization of South Asia, the strengthening of international regimes (TNP, CW, MTCR) and the discovery of fraud and trafficking, the number and gravity of which have surprised observers and analysts alike (Iraq in 1991, North Korea, Libyan and Iranian programs or the A. Q. Khan networks today).

To further the debate on complex issues that involve technical, regional, and strategic aspects, Ifri's Security Studies Department organizes each year, in collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (*Commissariat à l'énergie atomique, CEA*), a series of closed seminars dealing with WMD proliferation, disarmament, and non-proliferation. Generally held in English these seminars take the form of a presentation by an international expert. The *Proliferation Papers* is a collection, in the original version, of selected texts from these presentations.

The following text is based on a presentation given by Dmitri Trenin at Ifri on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 2001.

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# Introduction

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In the 1990s, arms control, heretofore the central element of U.S.-Soviet managed rivalry, became almost marginalized within the new framework of Russian-American relations. These relations were initially all about «assisting post-Communist transition» and «helping Russian reform», and later, increasingly and disturbingly, they centered on geopolitics, from NATO enlargement to Kosovo. When the START-II treaty was signed, in January 1993, this was not the product of lengthy negotiations. In the loudly proclaimed new era of strategic partnership Moscow and Washington were supposed to get beyond the nuclear calculus. Alas, the deterrence relationship based on mutual assured destruction was not substantially altered. Political declarations not supported by political acts and concomitant military measures were soon exposed as hollow. Mutual trust remained in short supply. No wonder the START treaty's ratification process in the Russian State Duma became a political football between the Kremlin and the opposition in parliament. Moreover, it allowed both to publicly vent their growing anti-American feelings. As the promised strategic partnership failed to materialize, and Russia's steep and rapid decline in all aspects of national might produced a major and growing asymmetry in the bilateral relationship. Since the old U.S.-Soviet concept of arms control was based on military parity, leading Russian analysts started to sound the alarm over the crisis of arms control. To some of them, it appeared terminal.

Ironically, this was happening even as Russia and the United States retained their Cold War strategic postures and continued to practice nuclear policies which had obviously outlived their original purpose. Only very timid steps were taken to adjust to a post-confrontational environment. Insignificant measures such as de-targeting took the place of real bold steps to reform mutual assured destruction, which had lost any political sense. De-alerting proposals met with skepticism and stiff resistance. While America put emphasis on advanced non-nuclear weapons such as precision guided munitions, Russia, in order to compensate for its unprecedented conventional weakness, lowered the nuclear threshold in its military doctrine. Inertia prevailed and even grew stronger, continuously reproducing relations of a bygone epoch.



# The Drift Is Coming To an End

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It was not before the revival of the missile defense project in the United States in the late 1990s that the drift and the general complacency had stopped. Several factors contributed to this renewed nuclear awareness.

One was the coming of what had come to be called the *second nuclear age*, symbolized as it was by the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, and the North Korean missile launch, which all happened in 1998. Nuclear and missile proliferation had established itself as a distinct and powerful trend, which provided the rationale for U.S. national missile defense plans, strongly advocated by the Rumsfeld Commission report.

Another one was the return – virtually by default - of nuclear issues to the center stage of U.S.-Russian relations. This was a sad recognition of the former adversaries' failure to structure a more positive bilateral agenda. During the Balkans crises, President Yeltsin made vague references to the dangers of a "Third World War". Yeltsin's final pronouncements, made in Beijing in November 1999 five weeks before his resignation, and amid the criticism of the Russian military conduct in Chechnya, was a warning to President Clinton «not to forget for a second that Russia was a nuclear power». To many observers in Russia and the West alike, a new Cold War was looming again.

Yet another major factor was the steady growth of China throughout the decade, and Beijing's increasing international weight and new assertiveness, impacting on its relations with the United States and reversing the triangular balance between America, China and Russia. The salience of the Taiwan issue visibly rose, provoking concerns about a potential Sino-American military confrontation with nuclear overtones.

Assessing the combination of these and other factors, Russian officials and analysts grimly concluded that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century nuclear weapons were more likely to be used than in the Cold War confrontation period.<sup>1</sup> However, they were at a loss to define an effective strategy to deal with the new realities. Instead, most remained fixated on the deteriorating U.S.-Russian balance.

Against this background, the arrival of U.S. missile defense plan took the nuclear debate to the point of bifurcation. On the one hand, there was a danger of slipping back to a nuclear arms race. On the other hand, it highlighted the need for Washington, Moscow and other interested parties

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<sup>1</sup> For a candid official view, see, e.g. an interview with Oleg Chernov (deputy secretary of the Russian National Security Council) with "Yadernyy Kontrol", v.7, Issue 1, January-February 2001, p.26-31. A military analysis of a multipolar *nuclear* world is contained in an article by Colonel L.A. Kononov, "O probleme yadernoy opasnosti v sovremennom mire", in: "Voennaya mysl", 2001, Issue 1 (January-February), p.4-11

to deal with a whole number of new issues under the rubric of strategic stability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Russian analysis of the U.S. missile defense plan concluded that the Americans were unnecessarily playing up the risks of ballistic missile proliferation, prematurely classifying them as real threats; that U.S. missile defense advocates were disingenuous by claiming that the defenses would be built to protect the U.S. primarily from the «states of concern», and that Russia and especially China were at least as much a source of threat in the eyes of the Americans as were North Korea and Iran; and that the driving forces behind the entire project were the US politicians' quest for national invulnerability, and the political and business elites' strategy of using huge federal expenditures to dramatically increase America's technological edge over the rest of the world in the new century.

# Implications of U.S. Missile Defense Plans for Russia

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The implications of U.S. plans for the Russian Federation, analysts concluded, depended on a number of variables, each leading to a very different scenario.

The first one was the U.S. administration's real willingness to go ahead with deploying strategic missile defenses, which meant a violation of, or, more likely, a withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty. While there were some doubts in Moscow in this regard during the Clinton administration, and certain hopes for the eventuality of a Gore victory in the 2000 presidential elections, the arrival of George W. Bush in the White House, flanked by Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary, sent a clear message to the outside world that the Americans would not be bound by the ABM Treaty. Moscow had to take that seriously. On the first count, the major uncertainty was over. The United States administration was bent on dismantling Cold War-era constraints which unnecessarily, in its view, limited its options in the new strategic environment.

The second variable was *what exactly* the U.S. would proceed to build and deploy. Bill Clinton had a three-phase plan for ground-based defenses. George W. Bush, although strict in principle, was not immediately comfortable with the details. Different options were open, including some, like boost-phase intercept, which were less problematic for Russian ICBMs. In general, the Russian experts concluded that for a long time yet - decades rather than years- the United States would lack a capability to absorb even a weakened Russian second strike. That provided a measure of self-confidence to the Kremlin leadership.

The third element was the conclusion about the impact of U.S. missile defenses, which would be feasible in the next 10-25 years, on Russia's deterrence posture vis-a-vis the United States. Having studied various options for what was called, since the days of Reagan's SDI, «asymmetrical response», the Kremlin came to a simple, apparently inexpensive and effective solution. A combination of MIRVing the *Topol* ICBMs and extending the life span of the SS-19 would, in President Putin's words, preserve deterrence «for 50 to 100 years».<sup>2</sup> Although subsequently Putin added that this “might not be necessary”, the option remains available to the Russian government.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> President Putin's comments to the press at the Kremlin, July 23, 2001

<sup>3</sup> However, part of the Russian security community is concerned that U.S. airborne and space-based lasers would be able to help the U.S. absorb Russia's hypothetical second strike. Cf. Igor Korotchenko. “Zvyozdnye voyny” prevraschayutsya v realnost. “Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie”, 2001, # 28, Aug.3-9, 2001, p.1,5

The fourth element in the equation, however, was less reassuring. Even in the wake of the 1999 NATO intervention in Yugoslavia over Kosovo, Moscow warned that the West was in fact inviting the «rogue states» to procure nuclear arms and missiles, in order to protect themselves from a Kosovo-like attack from the air. NMD, it argued, was only reinforcing that very point. A probable Chinese response to U.S. missile defenses would be the expansion of Beijing's presently small strategic nuclear force. In principle, China would thus hit the road toward eventual strategic parity with Russia, ending the latter's only remaining serious power advantage over its partner. But the unfortunate consequences would not stop there. China's actions would spur India's, which, although totally unproblematic from Russia's perspective, would provoke Pakistan. Now, Pakistan would relay shock tremors both westward to Iran and northward to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The worst case scenario is the disintegration of Pakistan itself, followed by its radicalization and "Talibanization". And so on, not to forget other countries in the area, including Saudi Arabia with its potential for Islamic radicalism. All these countries, Russian experts couldn't fail to note, lay on the southern periphery of the Russian Federation.

## The Bush Framework

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At this point it is not clear, of course, how the U.S. intends to proceed. An early American withdrawal from the ABM Treaty would have put the Russians in a most uncomfortable position. Moscow would have either had to respond with “asymmetrical measures”, highly damaging to Russia’s economy and its foreign relations, or allowed Washington to call its bluff, with a huge loss to Russia’s prestige abroad, and Putin’s at home. Against some gloomy expectations, the May 1, 2001 statement by President Bush produced a temporary sigh of relief on the Russian side. Washington signaled its willingness to proceed toward deep cuts in offensive nuclear arsenals. The Americans also did not withdraw from the ABM immediately; what is more, they were willing to discuss matters with the Russians as they were sorting out the modalities of their defense plans.

The underside of the Bush statement, of course, was the confirmed determination of the U.S. administration to go ahead with the missile defense program, which leaves no chance to the ABM treaty as it currently stands. The change of leadership in the U.S. Senate in May 2001 aroused only short-lived illusions in Russia about the possibility of blocking the missile defense program in Congress. And despite allied doubts and skepticism, no world-wide coalition against U.S. missile defense plans was emerging. The Russians have finally come to the conclusion that pressure from the outside would not be able to decide the fate of missile defenses in the U.S. The most the European allies were able to accomplish was to successfully plead with the Americans for an early summit meeting with Putin, which took place in Ljubiana, Slovenia, in June 2001.



# Russia's Strategy and Tactics

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In this situation, Russia's strategic goal appears to be constraining the U.S. missile defense program in such a way as to preserve Russia's deterrence capability, and to proceed with drastic nuclear arms reductions. Initially, the Russian government refused to consider altering the 1972 pact, arguing that such a step would engineer the collapse of the entire arms control *acquis*. Alternatively, should this approach fail, some sections of the Russian military establishment argued in favor of withdrawing from START constraints altogether to be able to structure the Russian strategic forces unilaterally as Moscow would see fit.<sup>4</sup>

At the first meeting with President Bush at Ljubiana, Vladimir Putin signaled to Bush that Moscow was ready to engage in discussions on "changes" to the ABM Treaty. Soon thereafter, however, he added that a U.S. refusal to work toward a compromise with Russia would leave it no other option but to MIRV its ICBMs and end on-site inspections provided for in the START treaties. During the second Putin-Bush meeting at Genoa in July 2001, the two sides agreed to address the issues of offensive arms and missile defenses in their interrelationship.<sup>5</sup> Intensive political and military consultations followed in the run-up to the summit in Texas scheduled for November 2001. Moscow evidently hopes that a combination of technological problems and pressure in US domestic politics, along with international criticism, will eventually lead to a result with which it can live. What is not clear, including to the Russians themselves, is the extent of possible Russian concessions. America's formula for compromise is another unknowable at this point.

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the Russian government's position, see Pavel Podvig. Est li buduschee u Dogovora po PRP? In: "Yadernyy Kontrol", v.6, Issue 5, September-October 2000, p.4-9

<sup>5</sup> "Adding the shield to the sword", in the words of Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov, "changes the entire configuration" of the international security system. Cf. <http://starna.ru/state/foreign/2001/08/13/997703284.html>



## **Nuclear Arms Reductions to Continue**

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The debate about strategic defenses is proceeding against the background of continuing Russian nuclear arms reductions. The strategic nuclear force has lost its status of a separate service and is being downsized. For economic, financial and other reasons, Russia is unable to support strategic forces to the maximum limits allowed by the START treaties. In this situation, the mainstream view is to continue strategic weapons reductions together with the United States down to 1,500 or even lower. The preference is for treaty-based arrangements, since Russia's capability to quickly reconstitute a bigger force, unlike America's, is weak to non-existent. From this point of view, unilateral reductions are not reassuring enough. An alternative view, bolstered by the attitudes within the Republican administration, is just the opposite, i.e. to go unilateralist. This would allow Russia to shape and structure its force out of any treaty constraints, as it sees fit. As a weaker party, it would be able to fashion the proper weapons and platforms mix, based on its meager resources. Actually, the Russian Law on START-II ratification requires the government to withdraw from START-II if the U.S. withdraws from the ABM treaty or violates it. The mainstream view is still the prevailing one, but the new factor, which resulted from the missile defense debate, is the emergence of a vocal unilateralist wing within the Russian security community.



## Russian TMD Proposal: Worth a Second Look

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Missile defense, however, can be more than a bone of contention between Russia and the United States, and could lead to a new confrontation. In principle, missile defense can become a crucible for a new partnership and even an alliance relationship. Moscow's proposal on European theater missile defense (TMD)<sup>6</sup>, quickly brushed off by the West as unworkable and apparently aimed at undermining alliance cohesion, and winning a share of NATO's air defense market, deserves a closer look by the West and further elaboration by Russia. It would be fair to add that a number of Russian scholars are very skeptical of the Euro-TMD proposal, and even see it as undermining strategic stability.<sup>7</sup>

If one were to examine the idea's deeper implications, one would find that in fact it proposes close interaction between NATO and Russian intelligence and security services (via joint threat assessment); policy coordination (by means of intimate political consultations and joint decision-making) and, ultimately, a military alliance (through co-production and deployment of missile defense systems, joint command and joint manning of the relevant forces). In other words, it *de facto* proposes Russia in NATO – under another name. It would be wrong for the West to ignore the philosophy behind the proposal, even if its specifics were deemed unworkable.

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<sup>6</sup> Presented to NATO Secretary General George Robertson during his trip to Moscow in February 2001, the idea had been in gestation for at least two years. See, e.g., A.A.Piontkovsky, V.N.Tsygichko. Dogovor po PRO: nastoyaschee i budushee. In: "Voennaya mysl", 2000, Issue 1 (January-February), p.6-13

<sup>7</sup> Cf., e.g., Alexander Menshikov. Proverim ideyu na prochnost. "NVO", # 16, May 11-17, 2001, p.5



# Agenda for the Future

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Cold War-style arms control is slowly passing into history with the end of the Cold War confrontation and the emergence of dramatic asymmetries between the United States and Russia, which used to be its two pillars. The fate of the ABM Treaty is illustrative in that respect. However, America, Russia and Europe needs to work hard to find a new formula for ensuring strategic stability in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Arms control emerged out of confrontation, as is exemplified by the extremely elaborate and expensive “adversarial” treaties of START type. New relations between Russia and the West are no longer based on confrontation, but they are not (at least not yet) based on the principles of a security community either. To manage the residual confrontational elements in the relationship and to help construct the security community, innovative instruments of cooperation are in order.

In principle, unilateral reductions of nuclear stockpiles have much merit to them. Neither Russia nor the U.S. needs to keep thousands of warheads targeted – despite all declarations - on each other. The notion of nuclear parity, or strategic balance between the former adversaries is outdated. Deterrence can be expected to work even if there is a likelihood of only a handful of nuclear weapons being able to hit the territory of the other party. Scenarios of a U.S. missile defense system being able to absorb some time in the future a Russian second strike following America’s devastating surprise attack are wholly divorced from the current realities or the political and technological trends for the future.

Still, it is preferable that unilaterally decided nuclear arms reductions be coordinated. Otherwise, because a Cold War mentality still lingers on both sides, and the political leaders are unwilling to risk a major policy clash with their own militaries, there is a danger of a virtual confrontation for which there would be no political rationale other than remaining suspicions. The Russian military chiefs point out that the U.S. is prepared not so much to reduce the nuclear stockpiles as to de-alert them, retaining a formidable uploading capability for an eventual crisis situation, which can not be matched by Russia.

Thus, acting from a position of weakness, the Russians want real assurances in a legally binding form. The U.S., however, proceeding from a position of strength, prefers to keep its hands free to meet any eventuality. America, however, should be no less interested than Russia, albeit for a different reason, to ensure transparency with respect to the Russian nuclear arsenal. The insights it gets in the framework of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program may not be enough, or even sustainable if Russia were driven to adopt “countermeasures”. It would be ironic and absurd if Moscow were forced to use the opacity of its arsenal to enhance

the uncertainty of U.S. strategic planning, thus driving America back to Cold War-era type arrangements.

Unlike in the period of the superpower military balance, Russia and the United States are vastly unequal in terms of military power capabilities. Credible future assurances in this new situation demand a new level of transparency which can be best reached initially through intensive two-way information sharing (including exchanges of detailed military plans) and confidence-building joint defense-related projects. The latter is especially important because it has the dual potential of easing the deep-seated suspicions of America's intentions in the Russian security community (and vice versa), and providing a solid material foundation for U.S.-Russian security cooperation.

The new relationship will also demand revising nuclear deterrence strategies to take account of the non-adversarial political interests. This cannot be accomplished very quickly, but it is vital to produce a real turnaround. The need has been perceived for some time. The Russian defense minister, e.g., has been talking about "controlled dissuasion" as a possible replacement for deterrence,<sup>8</sup> but it was not immediately clear what he had in mind, and it is the substance, not terminology, that matters. Mutual assured destruction, which may have kept peace between the two hostile superpowers, has finally become absurd to sustain in the new environment. To wit: the continuation of SIOP-type planning reflects the prevalence of Cold War thinking in both Russian and U.S. military leaderships. It is incumbent on their political masters to exercise leadership and translate reciprocal pronouncements saying that former hostility is a thing of the past into specific instructions, to, respectively, the Joint Chiefs and the General Staff. The residual nuclear confrontation has to be gradually, but steadily, dismantled for real trust to emerge between the U.S. and Russia.

Obviously, there is a need for new rules of the game. A new security treaty between Washington and Moscow, suggested by some experts<sup>9</sup>, is probably unrealistic at this stage. Better use could be made, however, of the existing arrangements such as the Permanent Joint Council based on the 1997 Founding Act on NATO-Russia Relations. Instead of a prime forum for practical policy coordination and military collaboration, the PJC has been languishing as a *pro forma* clearing house for complaints and a place for posturing. This must be changed if Russian and Western leaders are serious about their mutual desire for building a security partnership. Ironically, it appears that the NMD issue, for many in Washington and Moscow, has overshadowed other potential areas where cooperation is possible. This situation logically calls for vision and courage on behalf of Europe's leaders.

Increasingly, new nuclear arms arrangements will need to be multilateral in nature, to include all responsible international players. There is a Russian idea being floated about which would have all five major nuclear states agreeing to a global limit of nuclear weapons in their possession. The U.S. and Russia would limit their forces to 1,500 weapons each, and China, France and the U.K. combined would be allowed to keep

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<sup>8</sup> Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov speaking to the media in Moscow on August 13, 2001

<sup>9</sup> Such as Sergei Rogov, director of the USA-Canada Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences

another 1,000.<sup>10</sup> Such a scheme may not be fully realistic, especially as far as China's position is concerned, but it points to the objective need to move beyond the outdated bipolarity in arms control.

Missile risks, which highlight the *globalization of security*, should encourage leaders to advance precisely in that direction. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, strategic stability no longer rests on the nuclear balance between Washington and Moscow. The Cold War is over. The scenario of Russia evolving into the biggest "rogue state" is wholly unrealistic. Rather, the principal challenge to world stability and security is nuclear and missile proliferation<sup>11</sup>. After the false "sundown" in the early 1990s, nuclear weapons are back at the forefront of international politics. Nuclear multipolarity is real, and growing. The new nuclear weapons states, unlike the USSR and the USA in the 1960s-1980s, are not status quo powers; with the help of nuclear weapons, they aspire to enhance, rather than consolidate, their standing. Having emerged as the weapons of the rich and powerful, nuclear weapons and missiles are becoming "poor man's equalizers". It follows that instead of having a paralyzing effect on military activities, the "new nukes" may have a catalytical result. The new nuclear owners are also relatively inexperienced, and lack the luxury of physical separation from the would-be adversaries which the U.S. and Russia enjoyed. On the contrary, some of the new arrivals are locked in bitter conflicts with their close neighbors. It is in the context of these disputes that Asian and Middle Eastern nations are acquiring nuclear weapons and missiles. Thus, nuclear weaponry has been given a new lease on life, and the threat of actual use of these weapons, whether delivered by missiles or other means, has been growing. However, these new developments affect the security of the Russian Federation and the European Union directly, and that of the United States indirectly.

To deal with the challenge of proliferation, the U.S., the E.U. and Russia would need to collaborate diplomatically and politically. One potential area of cooperation is the regime of export controls. Here, Iran is the salient issue. Moscow and Washington need to work together to reduce and eliminate the existing suspicions.<sup>12</sup> If this proves possible, a modicum of trust will be created to support wider cooperation.

Another goal is to help bring North Korea out of its deep isolation. In principle, all major powers – including China's – have common interests here. What one should guard against is the temptation to exclude any outside player from this process – as was done to Russia when the KEDO project was proposed – and the temptation to use the North Korea connection as a "card" against U.S. missile defense plans – which some suspect Moscow has been engaged in before, and during Kim Jong Il's 2001 visit to Russia.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Vadim Solovyov. Washington tselestremlyonno dvizhetsya k ravvyortyvaniyu NPRO. "NVO", July 20-26, 2001, # 26, p.1, 2

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent overview of the issues involved, see Therese Delpech. Nuclear Weapons – less central, more dangerous? In: Nuclear weapons: A New Great Debate. Paris, Institute for Security Studies: Chaillot Papers, #48, July 2001, p. 5-32

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of Russo-American differences on Iraq, Iran and North Korea, see Roland Timerbaev. Sostoyanie i perspektivy yadernogo neresprostraneniya. In: "Yaderny Kontrol", v.7, Issue 2, March-April 2001, p. 27-31

<sup>13</sup> Cf., e.g., interview with Duma deputy and leading analyst Alexei Arbatov in "Nezavisimaya Gazeta", August 14, 2001, p.4

A major product of this cooperation and a useful vehicle for expanding it could be a joint information center monitoring missile- and nuclear-related activities worldwide. It would be highly useful to make it at least trilateral (America, Europe, Russia) from the start. Thinking 15-20 years ahead, the military component of U.S.-EU-Russian cooperation could be a joint missile defense system capable of protecting their territories and troops from missile attacks, primarily, but not exclusively, at theater level, and from global nuclear blackmail. Its wider political mission would be unmistakably ambitious: to help create a security community from the Atlantic to the Pacific and to enhance stability globally.

The tables should be reversed. The missile defense controversy could and should be used constructively and imaginatively to sort out the Cold War legacy in the field of arms control and wider strategic issues. Indeed, it should help focus attention on the need to work out a new set of security arrangements suited for the new environment. The ambitious but thoroughly realistic goal would be to expand the zone of peace beyond what is currently imaginable as NATO's limit of expansion. To put it bluntly, the task is to include Russia in an organic and mutually acceptable fashion.