



Russian reactions to NATO missile defence

NATO's decision to develop a ballistic missile defence (BMD) system prompted harsh reactions from Russian leaders. Diverging views on the purpose and capability of NATO's BMD make cooperation with Russia difficult, but dialogue continues.

Missile defence in Europe: background

At the 2010 Lisbon Summit, NATO [decided](#) to develop a BMD capability - meant to intercept and destroy BMs - to defend European NATO members' populations and territory. Three [assumptions](#) led to the decision: firstly, proliferation of ballistic missiles is a real threat to Europe; secondly, NATO was already developing a missile defence capacity to protect its deployed troops from short- and medium-range ballistic missiles; thirdly, the US would integrate its regional BMD in Europe into a NATO framework. In May 2012, [NATO's Chicago summit](#) declared an interim BMD capability, while the [Deterrence and Defence Posture Review](#) specified the role of BMD in NATO's defence: a deterrent complementary to nuclear weapons, designed to counter threats from outside the Euro-Atlantic area.

Proliferation of ballistic missiles

[Ballistic missiles](#) are classified according to their range into short-range (SRBMs), medium-range (MRBMs), intermediate-range (IRBM) and intercontinental (ICBMs). Iran's SRBMs and MRBMs (<3000 km), in particular, are viewed as a threat to Europe and deployed US troops.

NATO's theatre BMD

In 2005, NATO member states agreed to gradually develop an [active layered theatre ballistic missile defence \(ALTBMD\) system capability](#) to protect deployed NATO forces against SRBMs and MRBMs. NATO would have its own command and control capacity, while NATO member states would contribute sensors and weapon systems.

Proposal for a US BMD for Europe

In 2009, US President Obama announced [the phased adaptive approach for missile defence in Europe](#) (EPAA), replacing the [contested 'third site' plan](#) of the Bush administration from

2007. The EPAA will be part of NATO's multi-lateral framework, relying on the Aegis sea-based BMD system and the Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptor, as well as other re-locatable assets. They will be deployed in four phases, up to 2020, each phase introducing a more advanced SM-3 interceptor for longer missile ranges, and gradually covering more territory.

Thus, the NATO BMD extends the scope of ALTBMD from protecting deployed forces to NATO European people and territory, integrating the US EPAA and [national contributions from European Allies](#). NATO's BMD should eventually protect the entire European NATO territory against ICBMs.

Russian objections: rhetoric vs. reality

NATO leaders constantly stated the BMD was not targeted against Russia, and invited Russia to cooperate. Russian leaders maintain they will oppose NATO's BMD deployment, including through retaliatory measures, if their concerns are ignored. Then-[President Medvedev](#) threatened, in 2011, to deploy offensive weapons in Russia's south and west, including short-range Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad (Russia's Baltic exclave); he also pledged to disrupt BMD assets and improve Russian ICBM capacity to penetrate BMD. Moreover, Russia would abandon the new 2010 START treaty and stop all disarmament and arms control measures. Recently, a [Russian general](#) even warned of a possible pre-emptive strike on NATO BMD. Russia is also developing new ICBMs to counter NATO's BMD, due to be [in service by 2018](#), and carried out a [successful test](#) in May 2012.

Russian concerns

For Russia, the [link between strategic offensive and defensive forces](#) is clear. Therefore, it sees NATO's BMD as an attempt to undermine Russia's strategic deterrent and **alter the strategic balance**, fostering a new arms race. The US is accused of aiming at global defence to acquire a [dominant position](#) and [impunity](#) in world affairs. Russia is particularly worried about the final EPAA phases, when advanced SM-3 interceptors could seemingly annihilate

Russian ICBMs and destroy ballistic missiles at all stages of flight.

Russia also fears the **offensive capacity** of BMD interceptors, as well as the **open-ended nature** of NATO's BMD plan. Finally, Russia deplores the [geopolitical positioning](#), near its borders, of NATO BMD assets: they [threaten Russia's strategic arsenal](#), while offering limited protection against missiles from the south.

Russian approach

Russia has made clear its [view](#) on NATO's BMD. Euro-Atlantic security is "indivisible and equal", so Russia and NATO should develop jointly any BMD in Europe, with Russia's full integration into the system's data-sharing, decision-making and operation. If the parties disagree on a [joint BMD](#), then Russia prefers a **sectoral approach**: two separate, but jointly managed BMD systems, each responsible for a distinct area. In this scenario, Russia's BMD defends part of European territory, as NATO's BMD coverage should not interfere with Russian BMs. In any event, NATO should commit to a **legally binding agreement** defining military-technical criteria of its BMD use (locations and coverage of BMD assets, interceptors' numbers and speed limit).

Real threat or rhetoric?

Russia's concerns lack technical merit, according to some [analysts](#). Unlike US-based interceptors, EPAA's final phase interceptors could not destroy Russian ICBMs, unless certain speed conditions are met. [NATO representatives](#) say Russia bases its threat assessment on unrealistic scenarios. The real capabilities of NATO's BMD do not and will not threaten Russia's ICBMs, regardless of speed conditions. The [US](#) also insists the BMD would defend against limited missile launches and could not counter a full-scale attack from Russia.

Although [other experts](#) deem Russian concerns about the EPAA's last phases justified, [different motivations](#) seem to be hidden behind official Russian declarations: bargaining for greater involvement in any European BMD; justifying increased domestic military spending; attempting to raise the popularity of the ruling party through nationalist discourse; trying to keep a sphere of influence in Europe, by opposing further NATO

"expansion". [Costs](#) may be another reason, as Russia would rather share the burden in a pan-European network than invest alone in BMD. Underlying everything is [Russia's fear of being excluded from the Euro-Atlantic security architecture](#), with NATO still focused on Russia's containment.

NATO-Russia cooperation on BMD

In Lisbon, the Allies stated their readiness to cooperate with Russia on jointly assessing possibilities to link their respective BMDs, mainly through data-sharing. The [NATO-Russia Council](#) (NRC) agreed on the same occasion to pursue cooperation on BMD (joint threat assessment and theatre MD exercises).

However, Russia and US/NATO views on BMD cooperation **diverge** significantly. NATO opposes both Russian approaches (joint and sectoral BMD), since Russia could effectively veto NATO operations and collective-security obligations of NATO members would be outsourced to a non-member. Furthermore, a binding agreement on BMD is unacceptable to the US, which is unwilling to limit its BMD capabilities. Different standards and procedures or Western reluctance to share sensitive military technologies may be further [barriers to cooperation](#). Alternatively, [NATO has proposed](#) long-term cooperation on information exchange and even planning to Russia, to increase predictability and understanding of the system's capacity.

Despite their differences, both parties have agreed to continue dialogue. Genuine cooperation may be possible, with some suggesting a political, [non-binding agreement](#). Others relate to [practical measures](#), such as setting up a NATO-Russia centre to assess data from early warning radars, and joint Russia-NATO missile defence training exercises. The [US may also foresee](#) allowing Russia to monitor SM-3 tests or slowing down the deployment of advanced interceptors, conditional on the state of Iran's development of ICBMs.

European Parliament

In its resolutions, on [NATO's role in European security](#) or on [EU-Russia summits](#), the European Parliament called for an US/NATO frank and comprehensive dialogue with Russia, including missile defence.