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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

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ABSTRACT

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.

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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

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: gdiesen@gmail.com (G. Diesen).

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 counter-civilizational 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 positing 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 defence 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](#)).

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