

# The US/NATO ABM Defense Shield in the Black Sea Region

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**The anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system under construction by the US and NATO in the Black Sea Region poses no threat to US-Russian nuclear strategic parity. On the contrary, it holds cooperative potential for the two leading nuclear powers. It could also stabilize the broader Eurasian security situation in the light of Iran's policy of nuclear blackmail.**

The installation of NATO radar systems in Turkey and Romania paves the way for the creation of an effective regional anti-ballistic missile defense system: Bucharest also confirmed its readiness to host ABM platforms for ground-based interceptors of medium-range missiles; Georgia has displayed similar readiness to allow NATO to use its territory for further ABM systems; Bulgaria politically supports the construction of such a system, but the technical appropriateness of building it on Turkish and Romanian territory has so far prevented Sofia from physically hosting ABM system elements. The Black Sea regional anti-ballistic missile system will be a significant component of a larger regional infrastructure that would include Poland and Spain, as well as US ships equipped with Aegis combat systems, capable of intercepting ballistic missiles.

## **Tactics and Strategy**

The purpose, design, implementation and consequences of having regional ABM defense around the Black Sea are of a tactical character as they cannot be used against Russian strategic forces and in no way threaten Moscow's nuclear potential and deterrence capabilities – at least for the next decade. In the future, technological improvements could lead to the upgrading of the Black Sea ABM defense from tactical to one of strategic importance. Radar systems in operation in Turkey and Romania already have the potential to detect and track some ballistic missile launches from Russian territory, but with no significant military effect as Moscow's strategic objectives are in a northerly, not southerly, direction. A decade could also provide enough time for negotiations and agreements between Russia and the United States which diminish both countries' threat perceptions and promote broader deterrence interests.

The construction of the ABM system in the Black Sea area bears a huge potential for cooperation between NATO, the US and Russia. There are expectations and hopes in the countries of the Black Sea Region and within the Alliance that this system could become a joint cooperative project between the US and Russia: Neither the NATO countries, nor Russia and its immediate neighbors need an uncontrolled and increasingly provocative nuclear Iran.

## **The Uncertainties of Iran**

At this point in time, Russia considers cooperating with Tehran a simple continuation of an old partnership. Both countries share a strong interest in the supply of, and markets for, natural gas: They have the potential to dictate most world developments in this area. They are also regional powers with a variety of geopolitical challenges surrounding them. Furthermore, Iran is a key component of Russia's north-south strategic corridor, which links the chilly European north with the warm waters of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, a corridor along which trade and economic exchange has successfully flourished. Considering its strategic importance, Russia is undoubtedly interested in having a friendly Iran on its borders.

What Russia must also take into consideration, however, is Iran's ambition to polarize sectarian differences within the Muslim religion, which has assumed very secular geopolitical parameters. Russia would not be excepted from experiencing the negative consequences of such a policy: The Russian Federation's huge Muslim population – and perhaps more critically, its northern Caucasian territories - are not immune to Iran's social, cultural and religious influence.

Tehran's policy of running and pushing the social and political processes in the Middle East has acquired some very dangerous features. The support for anti-Israeli military organizations, the plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to Washington, DC and a similar plan against the Israeli Ambassador to the US show the regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad needs to be prevented from undertaking further aggressive acts. Such activities, when combined with Iran's efforts to build a regional power balance favorable to Tehran, could dramatically destabilize the Middle East. A NATO member country (Turkey), as well as NATO Partnership for Peace members from the Southern Caucasus, and the seven NATO Mediterranean Dialogue participants would inevitably be affected.

### **ABMs: Consequences for the Region**

When faced with such prospects, the NATO ABM system in the Black Sea Region therefore plays the role of security guarantor for Alliance members, their neighbors, and strategic partners such as Russia and Ukraine. The mechanism is simple and old: deterrence. There are a couple future scenarios which could play out, each with its own potential for stabilization and regional security:

The first possibility is that this could develop into a regional arms race between Iran and NATO. In this situation Moscow will need to decide what to do with this new power balance on its periphery.

Second is the possibility that the ABM placement will deter Iran from any further aggressive ambitions. This consequence does not seem likely due to the regime's ideological pledges.

A third scenario is Russia's cooperation with NATO, strengthening a powerful political and ABM barrier against a nuclear Iran. This is the most desirable outcome, but in order for it to occur, Moscow must become more confident.

### **Logic and Stability**

Building an effective ABM defense, with its significant potential for deterrence, could prove to be a significant obstacle to Iran's realization of its aggressive and dangerous plans. A timely joint US/NATO-Russian project would also send a significant deterrence signal to geopolitical planners in the broader Middle East, namely that their 'adventurous' attitudes will not be tolerated by these leading military powers.

Of course, there is always the chance of what could be considered the best option – a regime change in Iran – occurring, with Tehran joining the democracy-building mainstream. Neighboring Arab states have shown this is possible over the past year. And in Iran itself, domestic democratic dissent has never stopped.

For the time being, all options are open and constructing an effective tactical ABM system in the broader Black Sea Region seems necessary, rational and logical - and nothing to do with the "mutually assured destruction" logic of the Cold War.

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