THE SIMONS FOUNDATION

DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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Visiting Reykjavik's Hofdi House 27 years later

Twenty-seven years to the day after the historic Reagan/Gorbachev Summit in Reykjavik, a visit to the scene, the modest Hofdi House near Reykjavik harbour, is a reminder of what almost happened on October 12, 1986.

The Hofdi House visit became a brief personal excursion during the course of the inaugural Arctic Circle forum in Reykjavik, at which more than 1,000 participants from 40 countries gathered to consider a broad range of contemporary Arctic issues – sea ice melt, polar law, shipping and transportation, the prospects and risks of oil and gas drilling, the role and rights of indigenous peoples, security, clean energy and more.

There were no security discussions that focused on arms control directly, but inasmuch as participants in the security breakout sessions obviously understood the Arctic to be a place of strategic and geopolitical significance well beyond its own geography, as it was for the decades of the Cold War, it seemed more than appropriate to recall the day that American President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev came to Iceland and within a hair's breadth of agreeing on a radical plan – that is, to eliminate all their nuclear-armed missiles and to jointly set a course toward a world without nuclear weapons.

In the end they couldn't close the deal. The chief stumbling block turned out to be ballistic missile defence. They tried to get past the missile defence problem and both agreed to a 10-year commitment not to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. Gorbachev insisted that the missile defence research and testing permitted by the Treaty should be confined to laboratories, while Reagan insisted on field and flight testing (research and development that went well beyond the labs[1]).

Now, almost three decades later, missile defence continues to be divisive, including in the Arctic. At a meeting of the Russia-NATO Council in Brussels in October 2013, US and NATO missile defence developments were once again under discussion, but the impasse remains. Only days after the discussions, US Defense Department officials were in Romania to launch construction of a US interceptor base. "Missile defense programs develop and our concerns are ignored," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.[2]

Just a month earlier, in September 2013, Russia's military prominently proclaimed the permanent return of the Northern Fleet to regular and expanded patrols in the Arctic. The plans for the enhanced military presence include the upgrading of a permanent airfield in the New Siberian Islands archipelago. And here's the missile defence connection – the head of a key Moscow military think tank made a point of explaining to the Russian press that these new military developments and deployments were in part an effort to counter the Americans' mobile Aegis ballistic missile defence (BMD) system.[3]

Cooperative security has become a widely declared objective, but as one speaker at the Arctic Circle forum noted, major power cooperation is turning out to be both cautious and devoid of substantive disarmament in offensive strategic forces. The Cold War strategic military structure essentially remains in place, and while Washington obviously calls on Russia to regard the Pentagon's 28 Aegis missile defence ships as fully benign, just as Reagan urged Gorbachev in 1986 to discard any notion that the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) might be a threat to Russian interests, the Russians aren't convinced now, as they weren't then.

In 1986 the Russians worried that, if they agreed to major mutual reductions in offensive nuclear-tipped missile forces while the Americans continued to develop and test missile defence systems, once the arsenals were down to a few hundred missiles on each side, the US could potentially be in command of a missile defence system that could neutralize the Russian deterrent and render Moscow vulnerable to American intimidation.

It is certainly true that Russian worries were overblown inasmuch as SDI essentially came to nothing – its one clear achievement being to scuttle the radical Reagan/Gorbachev vision of a world without nuclear weapons. And today's US missile defence system may also come to very little militarily, but it is also proving to be, as was its SDI forebear, successful in one very damaging sense – it is once again undermining efforts towards further reductions in US and Russian nuclear deployments, and, it also seems, undermining efforts towards substantially demilitarized cooperative security in the Arctic.

While SDI was in 1986 little more than a clouded gleam in Mr. Reagan's eyes, today's American missile defence systems, especially the Aegis system, have gone beyond the gleam-in-the-eye state, even though critics still question the Aegis system's effectiveness, arguing that tests to date have not simulated true combat conditions and that counter-measures are readily available to get around the defences.[4]

The US still tries to persuade Russia to regard American land and sea-based missile interceptor forces as benign – targeted not on the declining Russian deterrent but on the potential nuclear threat from the likes of North Korea and Iran. But, once again, the Russians don't see it quite that

way. While they certainly accord it more stature than it deserves, it is hardly surprising that they don't take American assurances at face value. They argue, instead, that US missile defence preparations are way out of proportion to the foreseeable threats coming from rogue states – which must mean, they are inclined to conclude, that the expanding American interceptor arsenal poses a real challenge to the Russian deterrent forces. Hence, the Russians argue that if they agree to major further reductions in nuclear missile forces while the US continues to deploy land and sea-based missile defence systems, the same dynamic they worried about in 1986 still applies – once the Russian forces are down to low levels, the US will be potentially able to overwhelm the Russian deterrent, once again opening Russia to intimidation.

From the Russian point of view, the highly mobile ship-based Aegis system could easily roam into the Arctic and position itself in range of Russian missiles. As Anatoly Tsyganok of the Center for Military Forecasting in Moscow put it, "if NATO ships equipped with missile defense systems are sent to the Arctic Ocean, the capabilities of the Russian strategic nuclear forces will be put at risk, and therefore the task has fallen to the Northern Fleet to counter foreign sea-based missile defense systems."[5]

That is not to say that Russia's reassertion of an expanded Arctic military presence is premised primarily on missile defence concerns. Russia is of course heavily focused on developments related to resource extraction and increased activity on the Northern Sea Route. Russia's Navy Commander Viktor Chirkov describes the recent Northern Fleet expedition as "performing the task of gathering information about changing the navigation and hydrographic conditions, proof of maps and nautical sailing directions, hydro-meteorological observations and geodetic survey points in the [Franz Josef Land] archipelago, as well as studying the possibilities of sailing ships in the high latitudes."[6]

Similarly, the establishment of the new air base in the North Siberian Islands is said to be prompted by the need to "protect offshore oil and gas resources and keep an eye on the growing number of ships sailing along the Northern Sea Route" – although critics do remind us that there is currently no drilling in the waters of that region, nor has there yet been a dramatic increase in ships passing through the Northeast passage.[7]

But it remains that Russia's expanding military presence in the Arctic is increasingly characterized as a strategic assertion in response, not only to new dynamics within the region, but also to American missile defence planning and deployment, which Barak Obama's 2009 Presidential Directive on the Arctic describes as part of the US national security interest within the Arctic.[8]

The Pentagon's current expansion of its BMD mid-course interceptor squadron in Alaska,[9] along with issuing contracts for the next generation of Aegis system interceptor, feed the Russian strategic narrative (read, paranoia) regarding the Arctic. The new Aegis SM-3 Block 1B missile,

slated for deployment beginning in 2015, is designed for intercepting medium-range missiles in mid-course, the kind Iran might theoretically fire at Europe. But the US Missile Defense Agency also claims that a recent test reached record speed and heights[10] – the kinds of performances that bring the system closer to speeds needed to intercept long-range, or intercontinental, missiles early in their flight and before multiple warheads and decoys are released. The latter objective is still regarded as unrealistic by arms control critics,[11] but Russian military planning and decision-making are focused less on what may currently be realistic and more on worst-case assumptions about what might happen. So when Russians theorize about ship-based missiles, with designs on early intercepts of intercontinental ballistic missiles, entering Arctic waters, they are driven to two responses – a predilection to heighten their own combat-capable military presence in Arctic waters, and reluctance to go further in strategic arms control reductions.

The idea of missile defence, quite apart from any real capability it might eventually acquire, has been a pernicious presence in the global strategic environment and a debilitating factor in arms control diplomacy for a long time. And northern peoples have also long recognized its implications for the Arctic. In 1999 the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), in adopting a set of principles to guide their response to missile defence initiatives, called for strict adherence to the 1972 ABM Treaty and cautioned Arctic States that cooperative security arrangements within their region "should expressly specify that participation in these activities does not involve any commitment to take part in an active ballistic missile defence arrangement." Warning of the costly social, economic, and environmental consequences of arms races, then ICC President Aqqaluk Lynge (currently its Vice-Chair), said the unilateral pursuit of missile defence would put arms control agreements in jeopardy – "and then," he said, "we will be back in a very dangerous Cold War situation again, except with many more players eager to join this new race."[12]

Contemporary arms control experts confirm the ICC's concern. Missile defence remains "the main stumbling block to further bilateral US and Russian nuclear arms reductions."[13] And, as noted here before,[14] US-Russian and US-Chinese[15] tensions over BMD do not make it easier for them to cooperate in other contexts, say in Syria, and it would be unrealistic to assume that these tensions will not also at some level undermine cooperation in the Arctic.

When Reagan and Gorbachev came to Hofdi House 27 years ago, missile defence was a primary spoiler. And if the American and Russian Presidents were now to make another visit, missile defence, still more of an American aspiration than a militarily decisive reality, would still play its old spoiler role. For the rest of us, a visit to Reykjavik's Hofdi House must be the occasion to reflect on what might have been, and to lament that the lessons of the destructive impact of missile defence aspirations are still to be learned.

Notes

[1] James E. Goodby, "Looking Back: The 1986 Reykjavik Summit," The Arms Control Association. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2006_09/lookingback

[2] "Russia Wants to Compromise on US-NATO Missile Shield Plans," NTI Global Security Newswire, 28 October 2013. http://www.nationaljournal.com/global-security-newswire/russia-wants-to-compromise-on-u-s-nato-missile-shield-plans-20131028

[3] "Russia's arctic military moves seen as NATO missile shield response," UPI, 17 September 2013. http://www.upi.com/Science_News/Technology/2013/09/17/Russias-arctic-military-moves-seen-as-NATO-missile-shield-response/UPI-86771379390760/

[4] Professors George Lewis and Theodore Postol are quoted to that effect in: Ronald O'Rourke, "Navy Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) Program: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Report, 17 October 2013. http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL33745.pdf

[5] "Russia's arctic military moves seen as NATO missile shield response," UPI, 17 September 2013. http://www.upi.com/Science_News/Technology/2013/09/17/Russias-arctic-military-moves-seen-as-NATO-missile-shield-response/UPI-86771379390760/

[6] "Russia's arctic military moves seen as NATO missile shield response," UPI, 17 September 2013. http://www.upi.com/Science_News/Technology/2013/09/17/Russias-arctic-military-moves-seen-as-NATO-missile-shield-response/UPI-86771379390760/

[7] Atle Staalesen, "In remotest Russian Arctic, a new Navy base," The Barents Observer, 17 September 2013. http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2013/09/remotest-russian-arctic-new-navy-base-17-09

[8] National Security Presidential Directive/NSPD – 66; Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD – 25. The White House, 09 January 2009. http://www.nsf.gov/geo/plr/opp_advisory/briefings/may2009/nspd66_hspd25.pdf

[9] There are currently 26 interceptors deployed at Ft. Greely in Alaska, and plans for that be expanded to 40 by 2017. Defense Programs at a Glance, June 2013, the Arms Control Association. http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/usmissiledefense

[10] Leada Gore, "Missile Defense Agency's plans for 216 new SM-3s would boost work at Raytheon's Huntsville facility," AL.com, 18 October 2013. http://www.al.com/business/index.ssf/2013/10/raytheon_lands_3_billion_contr.html

[11] "European Phased Adaptive Approach at a Glance," *Arms Control Association*, May 2013. http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Phasedadaptiveapproach

[12] "Inuit Fearful of Missile Defence," *Nuclear Free News*. http://www.nuclear-free.com/english/iniut.htm

[13] Kingston Reif, "Does missile defense work?" 8 February 2013, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/columnists/kingston-reif/does-missile-defense-work

[14] "Missile Defence and the Arctic," 04 June 2013. http://www.thesimonsfoundation.ca/sites/all/files/Missile%20Defence%20and%20the%20Arctic-DAS%2C%20June%204%202013_1.pdf

[15] Part of the US interest is to extend missile defence in response to North Korea so that China is increasingly uncomfortable with it and thus may be more open to pressuring North Korea to alter its behaviour to prevent provoking BMD deployments that impinge upon China. "The new deployment is also intended to send a signal to China, which tried

but failed to block the more recent nuclear test, to rein in the North. 'We want to make it clear that there's a price to be paid for letting the North Koreans stay on the current path,' a senior official said Friday."
Tom Shanker, David E. Sanger and Martin Fackler, "US Is Bolstering Missile Defense to Deter North Korea," 15 March 2013, *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/world/asia/us-to-bolster-missile-defense-against-north-korea.html?pagewanted=all