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In Japan, Russia and China Find Common Ground

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The Kremlin's anxiety over the deployment of U.S. antiballistic missile (ABM) technology worldwide has grown to include the Asia-Pacific as the United States completes its export of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system to South Korea. (RALPH SCOTT/Missile Defense Agency/U.S. Department of Defense).

For the first time in three years, Russia and Japan have revived an avenue of negotiation that had stalled in the face of enduring tension between the two nations. Foreign and defense ministers from both countries met in Tokyo on Monday to hold 2+2 talks on security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. As expected, Japan took the opportunity to question Russia's recent attempts to bolster its defenses on the southern Kuril Islands, to which Tokyo has long laid claim. Russia fired back with its own objections to Japan's desire to build up its ballistic missile defenses as North Korea pushes ahead with its nuclear program.

For the Russians, not to mention Pyongyang's Chinese backers, the deployment of U.S. antiballistic missile (ABM) technology around the world is becoming a bigger and bigger concern. The Kremlin's anxiety, on clear display in Europe over the past few years, has more recently come to include the Asia-Pacific as the United States wraps up its delivery of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system to South Korea. That these systems will extend the coverage of missile defense radars operated by U.S. allies to include Chinese and Russian territory is an obvious concern to Beijing and Moscow, since the systems will enable

Washington to better track missile flights and tests in both countries. But their fears go far beyond these immediate consequences.
Instead, Russia and China worry that the United States' devotion to investing in ABM technology could severely undermine their nuclear deterrents in the long run. After all, the latest generation of ABM systems — which are fairly scarce as it is — are woefully inadequate for defending against the two countries' vast nuclear arsenals at present. But neither Moscow nor Beijing can afford to assume that it will stay this way forever. For one, ABM technology could easily continue to mature and spread worldwide. More important, however, ABM systems do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they complement the United States' strike capability. Russia and China fear that if the United States continues to simultaneously improve its ABM and strike capabilities, it could gain the ability to withstand a Russian or Chinese nuclear response in the wake of a crippling initial U.S. blow.

The recent progress Washington has made in developing more precise nuclear weapons — and faster, hardier delivery vehicles to carry them — has only added to Russia and China's growing unease. On March 1, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists issued a report on the United States' pursuit of a new capability called "super-fuzing." This technology replaces the traditional fixed-height fuse of the W76-1 nuclear warhead with a variable, self-measuring fuse that greatly enhances a warhead's ability to explode exactly at the optimal height over its target. Coupled with sturdier and speedier delivery vehicles, more precise nuclear weapons would give the United States room to reduce the number of warheads it would need to send to destroy each Chinese or Russian missile in the event of an attack.

Taken together, these strides in weapons technology could give Washington greater confidence in its ability to land the first blow in a nuclear war with China or Russia. In theory, a more devastating first strike on the United States' part would leave fewer Chinese or Russian missiles available for a reprisal attack. And that's where ABM systems come in: The more advanced Washington's ABM network, the better positioned it will be to act as a shield against the Chinese or Russian weapons that survive. Clearly, the concept of mutually assured destruction that has proved true of nuclear war doctrine for decades may not hold for much longer.

Of course, most of this scenario is based on events that may never unfold. There is no reason to assume, for example, that Washington would want to launch a first strike against Russia or China, a move with global economic and environmental ramifications that would be devastating to the United States itself. Moreover, Moscow and Beijing have also both invested heavily in technology that they hope will prevent the United States from pulling too far ahead in the nuclear arms race. To that end, they have worked to re-evaluate arms control treaties, design more powerful and robust missiles, and fund hypersonic missile research.

Still, neither Russia nor China will take any chances when it comes to preserving the credibility of their nuclear deterrents. And as Washington works to hone its nuclear capabilities, Moscow and Beijing can be expected to find common cause in stopping the United States from extending its ABM network's reach.