Romania’s relations with USA and Russia

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NOTE

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The essay looks at how Romania’s relations with USA and Russia evolved since 1989 until today. Where they were at the beginning of 1990s, how they developed in the first postcommunist decade, what were its main drivers in the following decade and what is the status today. The world is now a very different place compared to 25 years ago: there is more chaos, more challenges, and less stability. The article uses a historical perspective to highlight elements of continuity and those of novelty in Romania’s post communist foreign policy. It identifies factors that define the current global context and understand how Romania is positioning towards them, what is its present agenda, what are the big international dossiers of interest and how does Romania view and manage the relationship with the two key stakeholders in the system: Russia (superpower in decline, current geopolitical challenger) and USA (current superpower, in retreat, no more willing to step in to solve every crisis).

Relations with the United States

The U.S. BMD facility in Deveselu became officially operational on May 12, 2016. It is the embodiment of America’s security commitment to the region as well as the “flagship project” of the strategic partnership between Romania and United States of America. To many Romanian officials, the symbolism of the event was indicative of a certain mindset and of a broader strategic culture (“deeply embedded conceptions and notions of national security that take root among elites and the public alike”) that shaped their expectations during the 1990s and that reflected an attitude profoundly rooted in the tragedies of regional history and geography. As the Romanian MFA State Secretary for Strategic Affairs explained at a press conference prior to the inauguration ceremony at Deveselu: “since the end of the Second World War, for more than 70 years we were waiting for the Americans to come and save us from the ugly hands of communism. Now the Americans are here.” Beyond its symbolism, this is a framework to enhance stability in times of renewed geopolitical competition, a guarantee that “we are not reliving the interbellum period. The United States is here and with us now, not like in the 1930s.”

Overall, after 1989, relations between United States and Romania can be segmented in three different periods, each reflecting the larger global trends of the international security environment: the 1990s, post 9/11 and since 2008 until today.

2 https://nato.usmission.gov/may-11-2016-ambassador-douglas-lute-assistant-secretary-frank-rose-romanian-bmd-site/
3 George Maior (Chief of the Romanian domestic Intelligence Agency) quoted in Robert D. Kaplan, “In Europe’s Shadow. Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey Through Romania and Beyond” Random House, New York, 2016, p. 151.
The 1990s: A Balkan-centric security environment

In the context of the chronic instabilities of the post-Cold War world, America’s European arch-project in the 1990s aimed to secure the stability of the new democracies in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region by anchoring them firmly into the Euro-Atlantic community. The supporters of enlargement in the Clinton Administration argued that the implosion of Yugoslavia was an argument for “going forward” with the project of expanding NATO and persuade the skeptics that this was the best option for containing a potential contagion effect. It was not only a way of islanding them from the chaos and the ethnic conflicts that ravaged the Balkans at the time, but also an opportunity to incentivize major political domestic reforms and push for more democratization. All the former Warsaw Pact members in the New Europe saw the enlargement of NATO as a big prize, a modernization project and the clearest path for decisively leaving the communist past behind. For Romania, the last decade of the XX century represents the starting point of its most important strategic partnership.

In the mid-1990s, the image projected by Romania was far from ideal. Despite displaying strong pro-Western and pro-NATO public attitudes, the reforms were still incremental and modest compared to other CEE countries, where some of them embraced structural shock therapies immediately after the collapse of communism. On top of that, the government in Bucharest needed the support of some extreme nationalistic and anti-Semitic parties for its political survival. While Romania’s euroatlantic path is significantly boosted by the election of a pro-reformist president Emil Constantinescu, in November 1996, Bucharest’s profile remained still very far from that of a candidate that has essentially fulfilled the criteria for joining the Alliance. At the time, Romania tended to make a negative case for its performance, something completely unacceptable for Washington because its “strategy was just the opposite: we wanted to be in a position to argue that we were only bringing in the strongest countries that would strengthen the Alliance. (...) But we were not prepared to jettison the performance principle to meet the short-term political needs of a specific government even if we admired it. If a country’s argument for getting into NATO was that it would self-destruct if it did not, that was a reason not to invite it.” As a consolation prize, Washington would be willing to endorse instead the idea of a strategic partnership between the two countries (that was formally advanced in the meeting between prime minister Victor Ciorbea and vice-president Al Gore in June 1997). Using that very same opportunity, Romania pushed its luck by asking for more than a formal recognition of its regional leadership, pleading for hosting a major American military base on its territory in addition to a package of 2 billion $ in economic assistance. For Washington, this was definitely a bridge too far and “a reminder that Romania still had one foot in the Balkans.” In retrospective, the symbolic foundation of the strategic partnership between Romania and the United States remains the visit that president Bill Clinton made after the Madrid summit in 1997, when despite the rejection of its candidacy in the first post Cold-War NATO, he was cheered by 100,000 Romanians on the streets of Bucharest. It was the

5 Ibidem, p. 216.
6 Ibidem, p. 228.
first visit of an American president in Romania after the fall of communism. Later on, Romania bolstered its euro-Atlantic credentials during the Kosovo crisis, when the political authorities in Bucharest decided to open its air space for NATO operations against the Milosevic regime. In a similar move, Romania rejected a Russian request for granting its planes free access towards Serbia. While not in NATO, Romania behaved like a NATO member, it demonstrated solidarity and showed that it was a likeminded country.

The post 9/11 framework

The 9/11 attacks significantly altered the U.S. security optics. It was the beginning of a new era, the post-post-Cold War World (in the words of Richard Haass), where the principal aim of American foreign policy was “to integrate other countries into arrangements that will sustain a world consistent with U.S. interests and values, and thereby promote peace, prosperity, and justice as widely as possible.”

Romania was at forefront of the second round of NATO enlargement formally announced in Prague in 2002. In itself, the expansion of the Alliance was a continuation of the role assumed in the first decade after the Cold War in “helping democracy take root and maintaining stability in regions of Europe that have long suffered from political and social upheavals.” At the same time, the expansion of the Alliance reflected also a different logic, a particular need, one adapted for an “out of area operations” age. Most of the new NATO members were ready to support flexible coalitions of the willing around U.S. in military operations beyond Europe. In those years, the American center of gravity seemed to shift Eastward, as Pentagon pushed for a revised European posture – one focused on lighter and quicker units – where proximity to the battlefields of the “war on terror” provided an unexpected strategic value. It is in this new context that the profile of Romania with its military bases was significantly consolidated as part of the larger American framework of “lily pads for regional and global deployments”. In August 2004, president Bush presented a new overseas posture that made the case for restructuring the heavy footprint deployed in Old Europe, “while shifting some troops to smaller facilities in eastern Europe”, including the MK base in Romania. For Bucharest this was a unique window of opportunity. Traian Basescu, Romania’s new president – whose foreign policy was guided by the idea of a Bucharest-London-Washington axis – saw the opening for advancing a new regional architecture in the Black Sea, one that would emphasize “an international balance, able to ensure the expansion and strengthening of freedom and democracy.”

But, at the time, nobody in the region – especially not Ankara or Sofia – was prepared to support a “balance of power that favored freedom and democracy” (a terminology that framed the optics at the core of first U.S. National Security Strategy after the 9/11 attacks) in the wider Black Sea.

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8 Richard N. Haass, Director, Policy Planning Staff, “Charting a New Course in the Transatlantic Relationship”, Remarks to the Centre for European Reform London, U.K., June 10, 2002
The epoch will find Romania deeply embedded in the Rumsfeldian cleavage of the time triggered by the 2003 Iraq War’s controversy opposing the Continentalists (especially Germany and France) in the inner Europe to the Atlanticists in the outer Europe that were strong supporters of the U.S. agenda. On January 30, 2003, Wall Street Journal published the so-called “Letter of Eight” reuniting leaders from Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Portugal, and the Czech Republic in expressing their solidarity with United States. This was followed soon after (February 5, 2003) by another statement of solidarity with Washington signed by the Vilnius 10 (the countries that in May 2000 made a common diplomatic front to join the Alliance - Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania). Despite the fact that its symbolism will not be lost in Paris, all these Eastern European countries were very keen to “demonstrate, especially to the United States, their credentials as strong Atlantic allies committed to the alliance and its values.”

The return of great power revisionism

The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 significantly changed the security optics in New Europe. Key countries like Poland started to plead for something that a few years later, after Crimea, will become a standard euro-Atlantic discourse: strategic reassurance. Warsaw, in particular, was eager to determine NATO to revise its regional posture and to spread it “more evenly over its territory” in order to end the artificial division inside the Alliance between “the areas of higher and lower security.” In fact, Poland was articulating a worry that many countries in the region had at the time, “a doubt about the West actually coming to their defense in a crisis” as Ronald Asmus would later point out. For many in the region, the solidarity (“pledges and forces that would actually materialize in a crisis”) didn’t seem to be there. Of course everyone was aiming for the big prize, U.S. boots on the ground, as the working assumption was “that countries that have U.S. soldiers on their territory do not get invaded.” In the end, the whole logic of this aspiration – widely shared in the region especially after Georgia happened – was about fixing the structural imbalance between Old and New Europe, a legacy of two successive Alliance enlargement rounds after the Cold War.

It was in this larger regional state of mind that Bucharest was searching for its own additional security guarantees via a more consolidated U.S. presence on the Romanian territory. But, at the time, the Alliance as a whole didn’t see any real need and it was not ready to support an Eastern Flank pivot. After all, we were in the first stages of the reset policy between Moscow and Washington. For Bucharest, the lucky compromise came when the Obama Administration decided to change the geographical distribution of the initial BMD architecture developed under the Bush administration, a

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12 Ibidem, p. 132
move that pushed Romania at the forefront of the new realignment. In hindsight, this project can be best understood as an indirect way to bolster the credibility of collective defense guarantees received by Romania (in the first stage) and by Poland (in the second phase) at a time when the Alliance had no priority or interest in correcting the existing imbalance on the Eastern Flank. This symbolism is well captured by Robert Gates who suggested in his memoirs that while for Washington the BMD was a way to counterbalance “a rapidly evolving Iranian missile threat”, for the CEE countries “the goals were political, having everything to do with Russia: the U.S. deployments on their sole would be a concrete manifestation of U.S. security guarantees against Russia beyond our commitments under the NATO treaty.”

From this perspective, the year 2011 remains a milestone in the development of the partnership between Romania and the United States. The U.S. BMD facility in Deveselu is the tangible, physical embodiment of a core relationship anchored in two essential documents: the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century Between the United States of America and Romania as well as the Agreement Between the United States of America and Romania on the Deployment of the United States Ballistic Missile Defense System in Romania. The corollary of both documents remains the solidarity embodied in the so-called collective defense pledge at the center of NATO Treaty, the musketeers’ clause under which “an armed attack against one NATO member shall be considered an armed attack against them all”. Specifically, in this logic, U.S. is “firmly committed to defend Romania against a potential ballistic missile attack.” All these key ingredients define Bucharest’s national security policy for which U.S. presence as a European power remains “the strategic binder that gives consistency”, credibility and effectiveness to a North Atlantic Alliance perceived as providing the main security umbrella for Romania.

Relations with the Russian Federation

The 1989 December revolution that toppled Nicolae Ceausescu and the communist regime in Romania was not anti-Soviet in character. In article 9 of the communique issued by the National Salvation Front Council on December 22, the new power in Bucharest said it would continue to observe the Warsaw Treaty. More than that, the Soviet Union supported the regime change in Romania. Gradually, the communist reformers – who came to power riding the Perestroika wave – in Berlin, Prague, Budapest, and later Sofia, were removed.

For the former satellites, freshly liberated from Moscow’s embrace, the priority became their relations with the West, and negotiations with Moscow were aimed, first and foremost, at setting conditions for the pullout of Soviet troops stationed in some of these countries.

Romania was the exception to the rule, following a reverse course, of coming closer to Moscow, against the background of Western mistrust of the newly installed power in Bucharest. It may seem paradoxical, but it was not Iliescu who initiated this policy, but Nicolae Ceausescu himself, in the last

years of the decade, when he was embraced by the West, which was now laying its bets on the Gorbachev card.

The deadlocks that occurred when Gorbachev visited Bucharest (May 1987) and Ceausescu visited Moscow (October 1988) were overcome when Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevarnadze, on January 6, 1990 gave for instance, the green light to open cultural centers in Moscow and Bucharest, which Ceausescu kept delaying (the agreement was finally signed on October 10, 1990). Ahead of this visit, Ion Iliescu appointed ambassador to Moscow Vasile Sandru, former university colleague of his at the Energy Institute in Moscow. Sandru’s indisputable professionalism, as well as the relationships he had established at the Soviet Foreign Ministry and in the world of activists with the International Relations Section of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, were guarantees for the success of his mandate.

In the first months of 1990, the Petre Roman government discovered the road to Moscow. The intensity of Romanian-Soviet contacts was exceptional. The visit by Soviet Deputy Premier P. Mastovoi of February 13 opened up a long list of Romanian ministers who took the road to Moscow, starting with Foreign Minister Sergiu Celac (March 8), continuing with Minister of Culture Andrei Plesu (21 March), Defense Minister Victor Stanculescu (April 9-10) and Foreign Trade Minister Al. Margaritescu (April 26-27), etc.

Some visits, such as that paid by a large military delegation headed by Minister Stanculescu, were very important. That is when they arranged to send officers to study at the major military academies in Moscow, preparing them to be liaison officers with the Warsaw Treaty. The moment when Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary recalled their students from the International Relations Institute with the Soviet Foreign Ministry, the first Romanian students from the Romanian Foreign Ministry started enrolling. It was clear that Romania was seriously in the process of preparing cadre in view of a solid collaboration with the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the communist regime in the former satellites of the Soviet Union generated a debate among analysts in Moscow (rather small in scope, actually) on the future of the Warsaw Treaty. The most likely scenario was one according to which the Warsaw Pact had reduced its military importance, but ‘maintained its political value’. Moreover, the Warsaw Treaty ‘is necessary to prevent the emergence of Balkanization elements in Eastern Europe’ (S. Karaganov, one of the best known analysts in Moscow). But the fate of the treaty was sealed, and most analysts agreed that the Warsaw Treaty was going to disappear ‘sooner or later’. Aside from Gorbachev, the only other leader interested in restructuring and keeping alive the Warsaw Pact was Romania’s president, Ion Iliescu.

The efforts made by the Iliescu-Gorbachev pair were thwarted by the determination with which Hungarian Premier Antall called for the immediate dismantling of military structures. He announced that if an agreement could not be reached at this point, Hungary would unilaterally leave the alliance by the end of 1991. Hungary was immediately joined by Czechoslovakia and Poland (USSR Foreign Ministry Activity Report, Nov. 1989–Dec. 1990, in ‘Mezhdunarodnaya Zhishi’, nr. 3, 19910). Moreover, the unification of Germany (October 1990) practically paralyzed the already dwindling activity of the
pact’s military structures. Therefore, the decision made in late 1990 to dismantle the military structures of the Warsaw Pact by the end of the following year was quite logical.

On February 25, 1991, at the Duna International Hotel in Budapest, the document dismantling the military structures of the Warsaw Pact Treaty Organization was signed. The demise took place a few months later. On July 1, in Prague, the Warsaw Pact was officially laid to rest. To compensate for the loss of the Treaty, Moscow wanted to sign bilateral friendship and cooperation treaties with its former satellites, by which these countries were supposed to be kept away from NATO and CEE. In the end, Romania was the only country that took the course of the Soviet scenario.

Ion Iliescu – as Gorbachev believed – should have been an example for the other Eastern and Central European countries. The former Socialist countries were to become, according to the forecast of Sergei Karaganov, a 'buffer zone' between the West and the USSR ("Mezhdunarodnaya zhizni", nr. 6, 1990, p. 92).

The collaboration, good neighborhood and friendship treaty between Romania and the USSR was signed in Moscow on 5 April 1991. The most important article, as far as the USSR was concerned, was Art. 4: 'Romania and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics shall not take part in any alliance aimed against the other.

None of the Contracting Parties shall allow its territory to be used by a third party in order to commit aggression against the other Contracting Party.

None of them shall place at the disposal of a third party, for this purpose, its transportation and communications, as well as other types of infrastructure, nor will they grant any kind of support to such a state that may enter into armed conflict with the other Contracting Party.'

The treaty was announced at the last moment. Even the fact that the date was set for Friday, 5 April, right before Easter, sparked suspicions. The central Soviet press displayed total discretion in relation to the treaty; Pravda, on April 6, published a few lines: 'Upon invitation from the President of the USSR, Romanian President Ion Iliescu arrived in Moscow on April 4. He was met at the airport by USSR Vice-president G. I. Yanaev, alongside other officials.'

Moscow’s strategy for CEE was starting to bear fruit. Romania, as Gorbachev said then, 'became the first country to show it was prepared' to sign a treaty with the USSR after the downfall of the Socialist bloc. Soviet Foreign Minister A.A. Bessmertnikh, was even more explicit, in an interview with the Itar Tass agency: 'The new treaty with Romania opens the road to signing similar treaties with other countries in Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia.'

Why on earth would Romania feel in danger after the Warsaw Treaty fell? It was the only former communist bloc country to sign a treaty with the USSR, valid for 15 years, a treaty that practically removed any other security option. Had that treaty been ratified, Romania could have not been a member of NATO today.
Maybe the political leaders in Bucharest felt in danger. The U.S. News and World Report and the Times announced in early January 1991 that Iliescu would be removed from power by a ‘real revolution’. Maybe the Visegrad Trilateral, formed by the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary on 15 February 1991, convinced Romanian dignitaries that they were assisting powerlessly to a reshuffling in the world, and the only umbrella under which there were some seats available was that of the Soviet Union. Or maybe it is simply that Romanian diplomats, analysts and experts were surprised by the evolution of events, and didn’t understand that the USSR had one foot in the grave.

If security issues were settled in Article 4 of the Romanian-Soviet treaty signed in Moscow on 5 April 1991 by presidents Iliescu and Gorbachev, the issue of Bessarabia, of economic cooperation between Romania and the USSR, of the national treasury and of Serpent Island were issues on the agenda of talks between the two presidents.

The failed coup of August 1991, followed by the dismantling of the USSR, December 1991, did not lead to a relaunch in relations between Moscow and Bucharest, as happened with relations with the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. The first half of 1992 was marked by tensions between Romania and Russia because of the war in Transdnestr. Bucharest embraced Chisinau’s cause, while Moscow supported the separatists in Tiraspol. Meanwhile, Russia signed new treaties with the former satellites in Central and Eastern Europe, except Romania. In 1993, when negotiations resumed at the insistence of the Romanian side, Moscow’s condition for discussions to start was from the text of the April 1991 treaty signed by Iliescu and Gorbachev, suggesting that Bucharest would have nothing against ratifying that document, considering it had already been signed. This was the beginning of a long row of meetings that would last a decade, eventually leading to the signing of a foundation political treaty between Romania and the Russian Federation in 2003.

There was a moment, in April 1996, when the treaty was very close to being ratified. Sergei Krylov, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, visited Bucharest, April 3-4, 1996, preparing for that process. Public opinion knew that two issues were up in the air: Romania’s treasury and condemnation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Moscow was against mention of them being made in the text of the treaty, which is exactly what happened in the end. Unofficially, the deadlock was caused by the old Article 4, which provided that the two parties could not take part in alliances that may be pointed against the other. This provision wiped out any perspective of Romania joining NATO. What is certain is that the April 28-29, 1996 visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Primakov did not result in the ratification of the fundamental political treaty between Romania and Russia.

The fact that the democratic opposition won the autumn 1996 elections was not seen with much enthusiasm in Moscow, which did not answer in kind to the wish manifested by the Romanian government to improve relations with Russia.

Only when Romania was invited to join NATO did the negotiations on the political treaty start to progress. This in turn allowed the treaty to be signed by presidents Iliescu and Vladimir Putin in Moscow on July 4, 2003. The projects to relaunch political, economic, cultural and academic relations, announced at that point by President Iliescu and PM Adrian Nastase, were abandoned after 2005 by
the new president, Traian Basescu, who made a name for himself as using an aggressive rhetoric towards Moscow, and who favored relations with the U.S., especially in defense and security.

Only when the Social-Liberal Union came to power (a coalition made up of the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party) had the new PM, Victor Ponta, made special efforts to relaunch relations with Russia and China. In spite of the insistence with which he pursued an invitation to Moscow for an official visit, the details were discussed as late as February 2014, at the opening of the Sochi Olympics. The visit made by Premier Ponta to Moscow had been scheduled for the summer of 2014, and it was supposed to relaunch Romanian-Russian bilateral relations, now that President Basescu's second term was coming to an end. But, the Ukrainian crisis, the occupation and annexation of Crimea, EU sanctions on Russia, caused the project of Ponta's visit to Moscow to fail, along with the relaunch of Romanian-Russian relations.

A quarter century after the downfall of the Soviet Union, Bucharest still has difficulties in building a bilateral relationship with Moscow. It is not so much the historical legacy, most often invoked (meaning the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, annexation of Bessarabia, or Romania's treasure, evacuated to Russia in WWI and never returned) that prevent an articulation of a better bilateral political relationship. It is rather about mistrust and the inability to formulate an agenda, especially considering that Russian investments in Romania are numerous and quite sizable, and Russian companies are very active in a variety of sectors of the Romanian economy.

Conclusion

The 25 year relationship between Bucharest and Moscow was dominated by Romania's maladroitness. Always in counter-step, Iliescu was the only leader in the former socialist bloc who rushed to sign a friendship treaty with Gorbachev, at a time when no one else would. When Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary were negotiating and signing bilateral treaties and were developing their relationship with Boris Yeltsin's Russia, Romania had reverted to a hostile policy. When Basescu committed rhetorical excesses, freezing the bilateral relationship, Romania's neighbors were rushing to do business with Russia. And, finally, when the Ponta government rushed to relaunch the relationship with Moscow, the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea thwarted the project. How does one explain this counter-step? Most likely it stems from an acute lack of understanding of the domestic situation in Russia, and an inability to understand what mechanisms drive the Kremlin's foreign policy.

On the other hand, the importance of the strategic partnership between Romania and the United States has doubled down, especially since 2014. For many in Europe, Crimea's annexation was a moment of truth, the end of the post-Cold War hangover, the return of raw great power politics, a moment when
everyone realized that “Russia has thrown the rulebook out of the window. The world is back in a zero-sum paradigm”.\(^{15}\)

It is in this broader tectonic context that the relations with both Russia and the United States should be understood. From a regional perspective, the geographical proximity to the main theater of Russian revisionism makes Romania a frontline state. From a meta perspective, global politics is entering uncharted waters ripe for systemic shifts: “\textit{revisionist powers are on the move. From eastern Ukraine and the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea, large rivals of the United States are modernizing their military forces, grabbing strategic real estate, and threatening vulnerable U.S. allies. Their goal is not just to assert hegemony over their neighborhoods but to rearrange the global security order as we have known it since the end of the Second World War.}”\(^{16}\) Therefore, Romania should borrow a lesson from the history of the Cold War: \textit{détente} works best only when it’s supported by a strong, credible and effective deterrence. The Romanian–U.S. partnership should be ready to go to the next level: counterbalancing an intensive Crimean military build-up that evolved in a fully mature anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bastion that risks enveloping the whole Black Sea. While historical in its decisions, readjusting significantly the posture on the Eastern Flank, the Alliance didn’t go far enough at its latest summit in Warsaw. In fact, the Warsaw summit has imposed a new strategic reality: the North and South of NATO’s Eastern Flank are now in different solidarity leagues. The problem is that while the whole attention is focused on the Nordic part of the Eastern Flank, the wider Black Sea area could rapidly become a sample of regional A2/AD probing. The unfinished business of NATO’s Warsaw summit must be completed.
