

Is Russia's Opposition to U.S. Missile Defense System Justified?

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The U.S. ballistic missile defense system planned for Europe continues to be the subject of harsh criticism by Moscow, even after President Barack Obama's adopted in September 2009 the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA). In January 2012 Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned Washington that, if the US attempted to deploy any ballistic missile defense systems in Europe, Moscow could withdraw from the New START Treaty (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), which entered into force on February 5, 2011 and is expected to last until 2021, and deploy Iskander missiles, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, in Luga, a small city in the outside St. Petersburg in the Leningrad Region.

Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's Ambassador to NATO and Medvedev's Special Envoy for Missile Defense until December 23, 2011, did not refrain from criticizing Washington's plans. The basing of separate parts of an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system in the "New Europe," he said in October 2011, is a "reckless and dangerous move," and is inconsistent with the installation of a broader joint Russia-U.S. missile defense system, a project advocated by the Medvedev administration. The position of the Russian ministry of Foreign Affairs is clear on the EPAA: the U.S. plans to deploy an ABM shield in Europe continue to be implemented against the backdrop of inconclusive bilateral negotiations on the issue.

Furthermore, Moscow claims that the U.S. missile defense system in Eastern Europe represents a threat to its own national security. The Kremlin is particularly critical of plans to install various components of the system at the Romanian Air Base at Deveselu as part of the second phase of the EPAA. That section of the overall project is an air defense system engaged in the detection, tracking, interception and destruction of attacking short-range and nuclear-armed Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). The plan consists of the gradual fielding between now and 2020 of increasingly advanced missile interceptors at land bases in Poland and Romania and on U.S. battleships home ported in Spain. A radar system, located in Turkey and collecting data on potential high-altitude missile threats, would support the interceptors based in Eastern Europe.

One of Russia's key arguments is that the Romanian facility is located only 500 kilometers from the Russian Sevastopol naval base in Crimea, home to Russia's Black Sea fleet. Russia is also concerned with the Obama administration's decision to deploy 24 American interceptor missiles, which form an integral part of a NATO missile shield, on Polish bases by 2018. At the end of February 2012 the Commanding General of US Army forces in Europe, Mark P. Hertling, confirmed for the first time that a long-range radar system is now established in Turkey and fully operational. Rogozin reacted and told that this move would allow the U.S. missile defense system to target sites as far as Russia's Ural Mountains, and thus would partially override the Western defense zone of Russia's own intercontinental ballistic missile system.

Yet, Russia's claims are difficult to substantiate. For example, the Sevastopol base is in Ukraine, not Russia, and both Russian and Ukrainian warships, which may at some point

be used as part of Russia-Ukraine defensive alliance, are harbored there. In addition, Russia has military bases in Kaliningrad, the Southern Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East.

It is obvious that finding a site in Europe for the deployment of a U.S. ballistic missile defense system that can keep track of incoming missiles from Middle East states, all the while avoiding encroaching on Russian military facilities and space, is almost impossible. Russia is somewhat overstating the actual threat that a U.S. ABM system would pose to its territory, all the more so since placing any defensive systems in Poland, Romania and other European countries is not likely to neutralize, as American officials keep repeating, Russia's own long-range nuclear arsenal.

Russia's actual motives in objecting to the U.S. plans are based on pragmatic considerations above all. A missile defense shield built in Eastern European countries would further integrate the region into the Western security structure under the aegis of the United States. This in turn would add to Eastern Europe's already close relationship with the United States. The end result would be to significantly boost the status of Eastern European countries in the international arena. Such a situation is unacceptable for Russia, which seeks to remain a major international player in its own right. Russia is also afraid to be militarily outpaced by other nations. The U.S. presence in Eastern Europe is worrisome to Moscow and is perceived at home as a destabilizing force that can potentially marginalize Russia in Eurasia.

Other factors explain Moscow's reaction. After being moved into Romania and Poland, U.S. components and technology could soon spillover into the former Soviet space, and this is a challenge to the neo-imperial ambitions of Russia. The Kremlin considers American incursion into Eastern Europe as an "insult." On the other hand, remaining silent about U.S. missile defense plans could be interpreted in Washington as a tacit admission by the Russians of the superiority of the American system over the Russian one. According to most military experts, Russia's A-35, A-135 and S-300 systems are obsolete and should be soon mothballed. The manufacturers of the new S-400 have not yet received a new order from the Ministry of Defense to start production of the latest defense system generation. In addition, the complex S-500 missile defense system has run into major difficulties. Therefore, Moscow has virtually no effective means of countering certain components of the EPAA.

Conversely, the Kremlin understands that if it continues to actively oppose U.S. plans, this may pose problems for the U.S. and NATO, the Western military alliance. If Washington cannot agree with Moscow on the European ABM system issue before the upcoming NATO summit on May 20-21 in Chicago, this and other important decisions may be delayed or the prospect of stopping U.S. plans may disappear altogether.

Russia has consistently emphasized that having elements of a U.S. missile defense in Europe threatens its national security. Therefore, before making concessions to the West over this issue Moscow may require a payoff in other areas of international politics. It is then possible to view the "aggressive" Russian rhetoric as a last ditch attempt to gain present and future negotiating chips.

Finally, if a political agreement on missile defense cooperation is reached with the United States in the coming months, Russia is expected to attempt to influence U.S plans by insisting for a joint verification system. It is also expected that in order to increase the level of “mutual trust” Russia will seek a legally binding agreement that provides for the inspection of missile defense facilities in Europe, a limit on the quantity of missile interceptors to be deployed and a map of their locations.

The Obama administration has recently floated alternative ideas to assuage Russian concerns, real or otherwise. For instance, it has invited Russian observation missions to observe the future Aegis SM-3 missile defense flight tests scheduled to take place in Hawaii. The Americans seek to convince the Russians that interceptors to be deployed in Eastern Europe are technically incapable of shooting down Russian strategic missiles. Moscow, however, has generally not been forthcoming to these American proposals. One can expect that talks between Russia and the United States on building a cooperative missile defense system in Europe are to go nowhere until after the U.S. Presidential Elections in November 2012.

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