

## The Fifth Missile Defense Crisis

ALEXEI ARBATOV

### SUMMARY

- Despite the negligible impact it would have on Russia's nuclear deterrent, Moscow could not simply ignore the American plan to establish a "third site" missile defense in Europe, since it could be an "open-ended program."
- In the event that America continues unilateral development of missile defense systems in the more distant future, Russia could take a broad range of asymmetrical measures in response, from building up the ability of its strategic nuclear forces to penetrate missile defense systems to developing various systems to directly destroy hypothetical American BMD air-, sea- and space-based echelons.
- To provide a solution to the tangle of contradictions, the U.S. and Russia could start with an agreement to jointly use the Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan and upgrade the missile launch data exchange center in Moscow to receive and process real-time data from the radar (and perhaps also from the Armavir radar in Russia).
- An agreement could be reached that any deployment of interceptor missiles in Europe and its surrounding waters must be commensurate with the actual threat that Iranian intermediate-range missiles or prospective ICBMs might pose. A joint commission of American and Russian experts could be created to assess Iran's activities.
- Political will is necessary to overcome discord and achieve a mutually acceptable agreement. The history of all existing security agreements between the U.S. and Russia is above all a chronicle of how common sense has triumphed over ignorance and uncompromising forces in both Moscow and Washington.

The latest crisis over missile defense in U.S.-Russian relations was sparked by U.S. plans to deploy by 2013 a radar station in the Czech Republic and 10 interceptor missiles in Poland to track and destroy Iranian missiles. The Democratic administration's revision of these plans opens a way out of the crisis. New plans would cut funding for the program by 15%, halt the deployment of

strategic interceptors in Alaska (there will remain 26 interceptors there and four in California), abandon the development of multiple independently targeted warheads for interceptor missiles and a new boost-phase interceptor, and cancel the purchase of a second air-based laser. Instead, Washington's emphasis will shift to tactical land- and sea-based missile defense systems (such

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as the Patriot, THAAD and Aegis).<sup>1</sup> This change of tack, however, does not mean that the missile defense issue is now off the strategic agenda once and for all. A closer look at the situation is in order.

### Precedents

There have been four missile defense crises between the U.S. and the USSR/Russia before this one. The first dates back to the late 1960s, when the Soviet Union pioneered missile defense development by deploying a system around Moscow (the A-35 system), which caused great concern in the United States. At a summit in Glassboro, New Jersey, in 1967, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara proposed to Soviet Prime Minister Alexey Kosygin that the two sides conclude an agreement prohibiting or limiting missile defense systems, but Kosygin declined, declaring that missile defenses were a humane type of weapon intended to protect people from nuclear attacks.

The United States responded with countermeasures: it developed its own missile defense system (Sentinel-Safeguard) and deployed land-based ICBMs and sea-based SLBMs with multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) to penetrate Soviet defenses. In response, the Soviet Union also began deploying land- and sea-based missiles with MIRV warheads starting in the mid-1970s. Incidentally, the missile defense system around Moscow was modernized in the 1990s (and became known as the A-135). Unlike the American programs, the Russian missile defense system does not have a global scale and covers only the Moscow region, but its capability probably surpasses the current American missile defenses in California and Alaska, as well as the third base that was planned for Europe.

Despite restrictions on missile defense systems put in place by the 1972 ABM Treaty, the second crisis flared up in the early 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan

launched the Star Wars program (the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI). Washington essentially used the same logic as Kosygin to justify the program. After lengthy debate, the U.S. Congress decided not to allow such a broad interpretation of the ABM Treaty, and the SDI program did not reach large-scale testing.

The third spike in tension came in the mid-1990s, this time over America's theater missile defense program, which was resolved by the 1997 agreement delimiting strategic and theater missile defenses. The fourth round of tension came in 2002, when President George W. Bush withdrew the U.S. from the ABM Treaty and launched a program to build a missile defense system with initial bases in Alaska and California. The latest crisis is thus the fifth.

### Politics and military technology

There is no question that American plans to deploy a radar station and interceptors in Europe were highly provocative towards Russia, first and foremost from a political standpoint. Indeed, for some of those pushing the idea, particularly in Warsaw, the political aspect may have been the primary objective. Aside from anything else, the plan, in regards to which Moscow was not even given timely information, violated the spirit of the 2002 U.S.-Russia Declaration on New Strategic Relations, in which the two countries pledged to cooperate on developing specifically such systems.

From a military-technical perspective, the number and technical characteristics of the interceptors to be deployed in Poland and the radar in the Czech Republic would have had little impact on Russia's nuclear deterrent capability. Most of Russia's ICBMs are based a lot farther northeast than the range of the planned U.S. military facility on Polish territory (and this is even truer of the Russian Northern Fleet's sea-based missiles). According to

the laws of ballistics, their trajectories are plotted across the Arctic Circle. The curvature of the Earth's surface would have made it impossible for the radar in the Czech Republic to track test launches from the Plesetsk space launch range and Russia's northern seas, and in any case the radar would have added little to the existing radar in Norway. The American GBI interceptors that were to have been deployed in Poland are not technically capable of intercepting ICBMs during the boost phase of their trajectory.

Studies carried out by liberal American experts opposed to the plans (Theodore Postol and George Lewis) show that U.S. interceptors in Poland could "catch up" to ICBMs launched from Russia's westernmost or southernmost bases, but only in the most favorable combination of circumstances and only if the ICBMs targeted the East Coast of the United States (Boston, New York, Washington). However, these interceptors have never actually been tested under these conditions, and Russia deploys only a part of its nuclear forces at these bases.

Despite the minuscule impact it would have on Russia's nuclear deterrent, Moscow could not simply ignore the American plan to establish a "third site" missile defense. After all, to use the Americans' own term, this was an open-ended program. In other words, neither the U.S. nor its allies provided any guarantee that things would stop at one radar installation and one base with ten GBI interceptors.

Washington gave no guarantees that there would not eventually be 100 or 1,000 missiles deployed, not just in Poland, but also at other bases (closer to the trajectories that Russian ICBMs would be expected to follow), and that the system would not be further enhanced with interceptors able to intercept missiles during the boost phase, and with the addition of sea-, air- and space-based echelons, including systems

based on new physical principles (laser systems, etc.).

NATO expansion, which began in 1997 as a one-time event to include three new countries in Central Europe, but soon grew to include 12 new members, with the prospect being discussed that Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan might also join in the future, had already taught Moscow the importance of giving a timely and unambiguous response. This experience, and the likelihood that missile defenses might be deployed on the territory of potential new NATO members in the countries of the former Soviet Union, only further soured Russia's disposition towards the whole project.

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Of course, a substantial expansion of the missile defense system would take not years but decades, but military-technical countermeasures also require time and money, and in the political sense it is better to state one's firm opposition to such programs right from the start. Enough time had already been lost. Moscow should have started considering its response back in 2002, when the U.S. withdrew from the ABM Treaty, but at that time Russia's reaction was restrained, and the two sides signed the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty, which gave the political green light to the American missile defense program. (Russia's leadership took this stance despite attempts by parliamentarians from the Yabloko Democratic Party to sound the alarm.)

In the long term, the missile defense issue, along with the issue of how to respond

to it, is much broader in scope. Russia's strategic nuclear forces command declared that if the need arose to threaten the missile defense installations in Poland and the Czech Republic, Topol-M ICBMs (which in any case would be equipped with MIRV warheads) could target them. In the event that America continued unilateral development of missile defense systems, Russia could take a broad range of asymmetrical measures in response, from building up the ability of its strategic nuclear forces to penetrate missile defense systems to developing various systems to directly destroy hypothetical American ballistic missile defense (BMD) air-, sea- and space-based echelons.

### Missile defenses and intermediate-range missiles

On a number of occasions over the course of 2007-2008, Russia's political and military leaders raised the prospect of Russia's unilateral withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) signed between the U.S. and the USSR in 1987, with Russia as the USSR's successor (see, for example, *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye* # 31, 2006). Before taking such a step, however, it is imperative to weigh carefully all the pros and cons and calculate the likely strategic, economic and political consequences.

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This is all the more essential because the INF Treaty is one of the few cornerstone

nuclear disarmament agreements still in place after eight years of the George W. Bush administration's destructive policies. These policies have come under fire around the world, including in the U.S. itself, and the new administration in Washington is in the process of revising them.

If necessary, instead of undertaking a new intermediate-range missile program, Russia could deploy several additional Topol-M ICBM regiments at far less cost or develop high-precision conventional warheads to equip its existing ballistic and cruise missiles not banned by the INF Treaty. Deployment of Topol-M missiles, with single or MIRV warheads, nuclear or conventional, is not in any way limited by the 2002 Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions, and the nuclear warhead ceilings proposed by the next START Treaty (1,500-1,675 warheads) still leave Russia with plenty of margin to deploy such systems. But the expediency of targeting any class of missiles with conventional warheads at missile defense installations has not been clearly justified.

### The road to an agreement

Although complex, this problem can be resolved if the two sides show goodwill and are able to engage their respective representatives in fruitful discussions.

Proposals made by the Russian president in the summer of 2007 could become the basis for an agreement on missile defense. The proposed idea was to use the Gabala early-warning radar station in Azerbaijan to detect and track missile launches from the south (with some adjustments to the radar, it would cover launches from Iran, as well as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India), instead of planned American installations in Central and Eastern Europe. The radar could be linked to the missile launch data exchange center in Moscow, work on which began in accordance with

the American-Russian agreement of 1998, but which was subsequently frozen. Vladimir Putin proposed to upgrade the center, so that it would not simply collect data but would operate in real time, react immediately to any missile launch and distribute the relevant information. This was followed by a proposal to tie into the system a next-generation Voronezh-type radar station near Armavir and establish a similar data exchange center in Brussels, so as to give the whole system a multilateral nature within the NATO framework.

This proposal reflects serious shifts in Russian policy. First, Russia has recognized that missile launches from the south are a serious threat, though without naming a specific country (incidentally, the Gabala radar station's reach does not extend to Israel). Second, Russia has for the first time expressed the desire to cooperate with the U.S. and NATO on a vital military security issue in the post-Soviet space, where, previously, any Western military presence aroused great opposition in Moscow. Third, the idea of a joint American-Russian missile-launch early-warning system implies a qualitatively new strategic partnership and a move away from the mutual nuclear deterrence of the past, despite the current emphasis on nuclear deterrence as the foundation of Russia's defense capability (which stems from America's superiority in conventional forces).

Not surprisingly, the response from the U.S. was rather evasive. It did not reject Russia's proposal, but at that time reiterated its commitment to the plans already approved. It was easier for the new administration to renounce those plans on technical and financial grounds, as well as on the basis of a reassessment of the threats posed by Iran's missile programs. The desire to cooperate with Russia on a new START treaty and on the Iranian issue was also a motivation.

But if the threat of future missile launches from Iran and other countries in the

south is taken seriously, as Moscow's proposals on the Gabala radar station imply, it

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is obvious that radars alone cannot offer protection against missile strikes, but can only provide warnings. Furthermore, the radar stations in Gabala and Armavir can track missile launches only during the boost phase of the trajectory (no farther north than the latitude of Armavir). Tracking them farther and guiding the interceptors would require additional radar stations able to follow them during the mid-course phase of their trajectory. Russia has made no official comments on these points, although it was said on one occasion that the interception could be made with anti-aircraft missiles launched from ships in the Persian Gulf. However, American interceptor missiles would probably not be able to catch up with Iranian ballistic missiles launched on a northern trajectory.

Iran has not yet deployed intermediate-range missiles able to pose a threat to Europe (although it has tested them), not to mention ICBMs able to reach U.S. territory, and it does not actually possess nuclear weapons at this point. In this context, any unilateral U.S. or NATO moves to deploy a missile defense system in Europe is inevitably perceived in Moscow as the first stage of a program directed against Russia's nuclear deterrent. However, because the deployment of even a limited BMD system is a process requiring many years, it would be too late to wait until Iran actually has



long-range missiles to begin the work. Such complex and costly weapons systems as missile defenses need to be developed in a timely manner. Such are the contradictory circumstances surrounding the current missile defense crisis.

The following steps could provide a solution to this tangle of contradictions. First of all, an agreement could be concluded on joint American-Russian use of the Gabala radar station and upgrading the Moscow missile launch data exchange center to receive and process real-time data from the radar (and perhaps from the Armavir radar, as well). As for the interceptors, an agreement could be reached that deployment of interceptor missiles in Europe and its surrounding waters must be commensurate with the actual threat of Iranian intermediate-range missiles or future ICBMs. The threat posed by Iranian missiles could be assessed by a specially created joint commission of American and Russian experts. Under certain conditions, Russia could work together with the U.S. and its allies to develop these BMD systems.

Russia would be assured in this case that it is not the target of the missile defense system. It would also give Russia a powerful incentive to use all possible means of influence at its disposal to slow down or halt Iran's missile program. But the major obstacle is trust: Moscow would be unlikely to accept a "gentlemen's agreement" on missile defense, recalling the broken promises given by the leaders of NATO members in the late 1980s that the alliance would not expand eastward. Rather, Moscow would probably insist on a legally binding agreement, and this is unlikely to be accepted in Washington, as it would amount to a new version of a treaty setting limits on missile defense systems. Russia would perhaps also raise the question of setting limits on other components of the U.S. global missile defense system. The U.S. Senate, which has

enough members with a negative attitude toward Russia and enough supporters of missile defense and military superiority in general, would oppose any such decision.

As far as Moscow's approach is concerned, distinction should be made between the real problems that the American missile defense program could create for strategic stability and new agreements, on the one hand, and the imagination of various Russian military, political and media representatives on the other hand; the latter are using missile defense as a convenient argument in their campaign to blow the alleged "American threat" out of all reasonable proportion. These particular circles do not want any agreements with the U.S. and see no differences among the various components of the American ruling elite, or between the previous administration and its successor. They are ideologically mistrustful and hostile toward Washington and/or think that any cooperation with America would by definition have negative fallout for Russia's foreign or domestic policies. They consider themselves true patriots, but are contemptuous of Russia's people and government, acting on the premise that contact with the West "corrodes" Russia (not the other way around!), and that the West will either buy Moscow's diplomats and military officials or bend them to their will. Another negativist paradigm is rooted not in ideological hostility to the U.S., but in the premise that America is technologically superior and therefore will pursue the pragmatic goal of ultimately depriving Russia of its nuclear deterrent capability (supporters of this view seem to put themselves in America's place and base their opinions on the notion of undisputed U.S. military and technological superiority).

For these people, any U.S. initiative is unacceptable in principle. They would reject a proposal from the new administration to abandon the American missile defense program in return for Russia's help in stopping

Iran's missile and nuclear programs, on the grounds that this would be merely a pretext for subsequent missile defense deployment when Russia fails to achieve this objective. They say that the American program is directed not against Iran but against Russia, but when voices in Washington suggest the possibility of a joint American-Russian missile defense system, these same people reject it as an attempt to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran. If the Americans propose deploying missile defense installations on Russian soil, they accuse the Americans of trying to draw Russia into a program that "would undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent capability." Even though this would seemingly put the keys to missile defense in Russia's hands, the die-hard opponents are convinced from the start that the Americans will never agree to such an idea and therefore do not even want to discuss such options.

With the missile defense system still not actually deployed, they interpret any deal as an exchange of empty promises on the American side for very real disarmament concessions on the Russian side. No sooner is it announced that missile defenses will not be deployed in Europe than opposition shifts instead to the interceptor bases in Alaska, California, and on board ships (while preferring to overlook the strategic missile defense system around Moscow).<sup>2</sup> This line of reasoning results from an obsession with playing a "zero-sum game" that excludes any mutually acceptable solution to the problem. Trying to disprove it with logic or facts does not work. The only way out is by political means.

The history of all existing security agreements between the U.S. and Russia is above all a chronicle of how common sense has triumphed over ignorance and uncompromising forces in both Moscow and Washington.

Of course, the option proposed above is not the only possible solution to this com-

plex tangle of political and strategic contradictions. However, the acceptance or rejection of this kind of proposal or something similar will be a real test of how serious the two countries are about the issue of missile

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(or missile and nuclear) proliferation as one of the most immediate threats to international security today. Neutralizing this threat requires not rivalry, but honest cooperation between the U.S., Russia and other countries.

In this respect, the noted Russian specialist Gen. Vladimir Dvorkin rightly pointed out that "proliferation cannot be prevented using purely technical measures, such as missile defense, but requires a broad range of prevention measures addressing the whole spectrum of threats, and this can be based only on cooperation among major powers and their allies. Development of a multilateral missile defense system, with U.S., E.U. and Russian participation, could create the conditions for restraining the proliferation of nuclear materials, nuclear weapons and missiles. Of course, this does not rule out attempts to use other methods of delivering nuclear weapons, but it will be much easier to address this if there is strategic cooperation between major powers in countering common security threats, including the formation of a joint policy to settle existing nuclear crises more effectively, strengthen the NPT, transform the Missile Technology Control Regime into a legally binding agreement and bolster collective counter-proliferation measures."<sup>3</sup> ■

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## RESOURCES

- <sup>1</sup> See S. Rogov, "Obama formiruyet novuyu amerikanskuyu strategiyu," *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, #19, June 5-8, 2009, PP. 1-4.
- <sup>2</sup> On the A-35 missile defense system see, for example, "Naivysheye dostizheniye nauchno-tekhnicheskoy mysli svoego vremeni," *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaya oborona*, # 3(46), 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> V. Z. Dvorkin, "Protivoraketnaya oborona na novom etape razvitiya," in *Yadernoye rasprostraneniye: noviye tekhnologii, vooruzheniya i dogovory*, ed. A. Arbatov and V. M. Dvorkin, Carnegie Moscow Center, PP. 178-179 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2009).

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