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Poking the Russian Bear: The European Missile Defense Shield

By JEREMY ANDERSON

In December 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev resigned, the hammer and sickle was lowered for the last time over Moscow, and the USSR was dissolved. For the first time in four decades America and Russia breathed a sigh of relief—the Cold War was over. Apparently though, Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin never got the memo.

Russian/U.S. relations have declined during the past two years, to the point that some scholars, such as Ariel Cohen, have labeled the current situation a "cool war."[1] Both leaders predictably point the finger at the other for this "cooling." In truth, both leaders are to blame.

The Bush Administration's dogged insistence on the European Missile Shield, a costly program of marginal operational ability and marginal necessity, provokes Russia, and is reminiscent of the Cold War mindset. Putin frequently voices his displeasure with this proposed shield, but when he states that, "[It is] too early to speak of an end to the arms race"[2] as he did in a 2006 speech, his rhetoric sounds like he lifted it from the old Soviet playbook.

In addition to the rhetoric, Russia's recent actions too often mirror that of the Soviet era. Putin portrays Russia as a facilitator of peace, a leader of the global community, and a promoter of human rights and democracy. This is a difficult pill to swallow. This is, after all, the same "democratic" Russia that recently turned off gas and oil supplies to Estonia, Ukraine, and Belarus; fomented unrest in Georgia; violently crushed its Chechen population; threatened to aim its nuclear missiles at points from Paris to Kiev; and has begun probing NATO defenses with its long-range bombers. Compared with the Soviet era, this may be a kinder, gentler Russian bear, but it is a bear nonetheless—a fact U.S. policymakers should not forget.

Although American officials publicly deny that they are implementing the European Missile Shield with Russia in mind, the proposed shield is to some extent, it seems, a response to Russia's recent actions. In truth, the shield is only the newest wrinkle in a long line of disagreements between the two countries regarding eastward NATO expansion.

Russia, per its most recent National Security Concept, views both eastward expansion of NATO and the positioning of military contingents near its borders as a threat. According to Russia's views, NATO expansion is not, as the West claims, the means to promoting values of stability, personal liberty, democracy, and peace. It is instead an explicit attempt to weaken Russia and threaten its security. After all, NATO by its very nature is a collective defense alliance. To mask it as something else is an affront to Russia's intelligence, or so Russia avers.

Moscow can decry NATO expansion all it likes, but it has no legitimate right to prevent it. The Warsaw Pact is long dead, and sovereign countries are entitled to petition for entrance into NATO and the security it provides. Russia can, however, argue against NATO establishing military installations in new NATO member states. In 1997, the "Founding Act on Mutual Relations" stipulated that NATO would not station *permanent and substantial combat forces* in new member states. Furthermore, NATO secu-

rity arrangements would not infringe upon the sovereign rights of other states and shall take into account their *legitimate security concerns*.[3]

Moscow alleges that the United States' attempt to place a missile defense shield in Poland as well as a complimentary radar base in the Czech Republic is a breach of this contract. The United States counters with the semantic argument that one missile defense shield, although permanent, is hardly substantial, nor does this shield constitute a legitimate security concern for Russia as it is too small to undermine Russia's ballistic missile capabilities.

In 2007, Putin remarked, "If a new missile defense system will be deployed in Europe, then we need to warn you today that we will come with a response."[4] Putin later threatened to aim the Russian nuclear arsenal towards European targets. The United States, never one to be bullied, pushed forward and inked an "agreement in principle" with Poland to place the shield in Polish territory. Russia, never one to limit its displeasure to the rhetoric realm, buzzed a U.S. aircraft carrier in response—twice.

Not only does this shield have deleterious effects on Russian-American relations, but the U.S. Congress has also criticized it for its sizeable price tag of $76-$110 billion and inconsistent results.[5]

The Missile Defense Agency's Ground Based Missile Defense (GMD) tests have yielded mixed results. The theory behind this defense is that an incoming enemy missile will hit the interceptor missile's "kill vehicle" and explode upon impact. Tests so far have raised doubts about the effectiveness of this method—almost as many missiles get past the kill vehicle as collide with it. As of May 2007, only five out of nine tests were a success.[6] Defense experts often remark that this type of defense is like "hitting a bullet with a bullet."[7]

Furthermore, critics argue that these tests are attempting to hit a bullet with a bullet under ideal and controlled—and therefore optimum—circumstances. Tests are conducted with the "defender" knowing the time of attack, the type of attacking missile, its trajectory and intended target, and the makeup of its payload. This is not information an enemy would conveniently disclose. The Pentagon's Office of the Director of Operational Test and Evaluation released a statement in January 2006, which cautioned that the "flight tests still lack operational realism."[8]

The other problem facing the missile shield is that enemies can deploy counter-decoys to fool the missile shield. The simplest way to foil the shield is to overwhelm it by firing more missiles than the defense can intercept. The enemy could also deploy replica decoys, disguise the warhead among debris from the exploded booster rocket, jam the signaling radar, and more.

The Patriot Ground Based System is the one missile defense system that has worked, albeit not always to perfection. Designed to protect U.S. troops from Iraqi Scuds, the Patriot Defense System got off to an ignominious start in the Persian Gulf War. It failed in most or all of its Scud engagements even though the enemy employed no obvious counter-measures. In Desert Storm, the U.S. Army fired 158 Patriot missiles at 47 Scud missiles but "hit no more than four, and possibly hit none."[9] It performed significantly better in 2003's Operation Iraqi Freedom, intercepting all enemy missiles within range. Unfortunately, it also intercepted a British RAF Tornado, a Navy F-18, and an Airforce F-16, killing three pilots.

Even if the missile shield worked properly the United States and NATO have not presented a convincing argument as to why it is necessary. U.S. officials insist the shield is intended to protect American interests and allies from rogue states, and even then, could only prevent a limited attack of one or two "unsophisticated" missiles. The European missile shield could not defend the continent against a large-scale attack like the one Russia could launch—a point U.S. officials willingly concede. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer is of like mind: "Ten interceptors cannot and will not

affect the strategic balance and 10 interceptors can also not pose a threat to Russia."[10]

These statements have done little to assuage Moscow's fears. Russia is confident that it could overwhelm one shield right now. It is, however, worried that one shield will open the door to an entire global system of shields that would undermine its nuclear capabilities. U.S. officials insist, at least publicly, that they have no plans for a global missile defense system. The most recent U.S. National Security Strategy explicitly states that the missile shield is designed to protect its European allies from a nuclear threat from rogue states, specifically Iran and North Korea.[11]

Putin is not buying this claim. The Kremlin believes that Russia, not Iran, is the target of this shield because Iran does not have nuclear missile capabilities—a point substantiated by the recent National Intelligence Estimate.[12] As Putin remarked, "We are being told the anti-missile defense system is targeted against something that does not exist. Doesn't it seem funny to you?"[13]

The U.S. intelligence community is not laughing; it believes Iran's ballistic missile inventory is among the largest in the Middle East. Iran possesses several hundred foreign short range Scud-B and Scud-C missiles, as well as their own Zelzal, Samid, and Fateh missiles. The centerpiece of their ballistic missile effort is the Shahab-3, which supposedly has a range of 1200m, placing Israel and southeastern Europe easily within reach. It is also rumored that Iran possess the Shahab-5 (2,500 mile range), and an ICBM dubbed Kowsar.[14]

If Iran were to fire these missiles, and we are to believe Iranian Presidents Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, Israel would be a more likely target than Europe. A missile shield in Poland, though, would not protect Israel. Since Iran is much closer to Israel than Poland the interceptor missile would never reach Iran's missile in time. The proposed shield would not even protect fellow NATO member Turkey.

It is also unclear how a European Missile Shield would protect America's allies from North Korean missiles. North Korea has become markedly less menacing in recent months since Pyongyang promised to dismantle the country's nuclear program. North Korea may not possess nuclear weapons but it does possess short-range missiles, which it demonstrated by firing a Taepodong-1 over Japan's bow in 1998.

It is also widely believed that North Korea possesses a long-range Taepodong-2 that is capable of reaching the United States. This would be less worrisome if Kim Jong-Il had not threatened a "relentless, annihilating strike" in response to any U.S. preemptive strike against his missiles, which he conveniently likes to test without diverging the flight trajectory or landing zone.[15] Still, it is unclear how a missile shield in Europe protects the American continent, or America's ally Japan, from a North Korean missile.

Furthermore, if a rogue state wanted to detonate a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) in Europe, it would not likely choose to deliver this weapon via ballistic missiles, even if it had the capability. Sending a missile is the equivalent of sending a calling card. In this age of terrorism, missiles are not the weapon of choice because it is too easy to link the missile back to the offending agent(s). Car bombs, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), airplanes, and rocket-propelled grenades are the preferred weapons. The missile defense shield would be useless against these types of attacks.

The United States' dogged insistence on this European shield is troubling. America is spending billions of dollars per year on a system that may or may not work, to guard against a threat that likely does not exist. What is known for certain, though, is that this missile shield is provoking Russia at a time when the United States can ill afford another enemy.

Other actions can deter a rogue country from firing a missile at U.S. targets. Ultimately, humanity, not technology, will act as the greatest deterrent against potential enemies. As former Assistant Secretary of De-

fense Philip Coyle remarked, "Dollar for dollar, [our diplomats] are the most cost-effective missile defense system the United States ever had."[16] Americans should take comfort because this approach has worked before. After all, diplomacy, not a preventative military strike, brought the Cuban missile crisis to an end. Likewise, the Cold War was not won solely through arms races, military displays of force and proxy wars. Diplomacy was equally as important in achieving victory.

Russia, more than ever, is an important ally for the United States. The United States needs Russia to stay within the fold and not facilitate Iran's nuclear ambitions. It also needs Russia's help in the War on Terror, especially as the North Caucasus and Central Asia have become more radicalized. The United States should look for ways to engage Russia, not enrage it.

Unfortunately, this is what the European missile shield, a costly program of marginal necessity and marginal operational ability, is doing. America should abandon this pursuit as a sign of good faith towards the Russian Federation. Currently, there is no need for such a shield and, ironically, building the shield may actually necessitate the need for one, a classic example of the security dilemma. This is a point too many policy makers and politicians have overlooked. Rudy Giuliani, for one, recently remarked, "The best answer to Putin would be a substantial increase in the size of our military."[17]

A military buildup is the wrong approach. It was precisely this military one-ups-manship that fueled the Cold War in the first place. And despite what Bush and Putin may believe, the Cold War is over—the United States won, it does not need to fight it again. Abandoning the European Missile Shield is one way to prevent the return of another Cold War. American children already have to remove their shoes at the airport; should they really have to practice the duck-and-cover under their desks again?

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