

Missile Offense

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According to Condeleeza Rice it is “ludicrous” to believe that the planned US missile defence system in Europe would be a threat to Russia. Putin basically intends to send the message to the rest of the world that the period of post-Cold War humiliation is over. Others argue that 2008 is an election year in Russia and that playing hard-ball by Moscow yields votes.

However, to interpret Putin’s reaction only as another indication of Russia’s strengthened assertiveness, either for external or domestic reasons, would be a mistake. What the US calls ‘missile defence’, is in Russia perceived as missile offence. If the US installs missile interceptors in Poland and an advanced X-band radar in the Czech Republic, Russia’s nuclear deterrent - and therefore Russia’s security - will be weakened. If the American missile shield is further expanded in the future, and it is “ludicrous” to believe that that will not happen, Russia’s deterrent may become more or less a paper tiger. To limit the number of interceptors through an arms control treaty is at best a theoretical one, knowing that the Bush administration undermined the whole arms control regime by unilaterally withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, by refusing to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and by refusing to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).

Postmodernists will argue that I am hallucinating. The Cold War is over, and it is never going to come back. Are Russia and the US not strategic partners, and do they not cooperate within the framework of NATO? Yes and no. Formally, they do come together now and then in Brussels. But, in practice, these gatherings are not intellectually inspiring. There remains a lot of mistrust between the former superpowers, and the remaining level of trust is rapidly deteriorating. Russian strategists are deeply worried about the American plans to initiate missile defence in Europe.

Others may argue that barking dogs do not bite, referring to the period right before the Bush administration unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in December 2001. At that time, Putin had also warned that ‘we will withdraw not only from the START II Treaty but also from the

entire system of treaty relations on the limitation and control over strategic and conventional armaments'. In the first months of 2002 nothing happened. Russia's reaction was tepid. While this view is to a certain extent correct, it is also misleading. Russia did withdraw from START II in June 2002, exactly one day after the ABM Treaty expired.

That scenario seems to have repeated itself this time. After having threatened to re-target Russian missiles against Europe, and after having threatened to leave the Intermediate Range Nuclear Weapons (INF) treaty in the first half of 2007, President Putin effectively suspended the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in July 2007, the only post-Cold War arms control treaty that limits the number of tanks and fighter planes.

There is good reason to believe that this negative action-reaction spiral is only the beginning. The Russian Parliament added during the ratification procedure of SORT – the follow-up arms reduction treaty of START II concluded in 2002 – a provision on the possibility of withdrawing from SORT if another state deploys missile defence systems that could undermine the effectiveness of the strategic force of the Russian federation. In what follows, it will become clear that the latter is indeed the case. The whole arms reduction process – both nuclear and conventional - that was set up after the end of the Cold War may indeed come to an end.

Moreover, it is the combination of American nuclear primacy and missile defence that leads to an unprecedented and dangerous imbalance between the US and Russia. According to the Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC), the US and Russia currently possess 5,236 and 3,339 deployed strategic nuclear weapons respectively, and thousands more in reserve. By the way, these huge numbers are another indication that the Cold War is not completely over.

Due to the modernization of the US nuclear weapons arsenal over the last decade and, more significantly, due to the gradual erosion of the Russian arsenal after the Cold War, the US nowadays enjoys both a quantitatively and qualitatively advantage in terms of nuclear weapons capabilities and command and control systems, including early-warning satellites. The gap is so large that the US has never been in a better position to launch a nuclear strike against Russia.

Keir Lieber and Daryll Press claim that when Russian nuclear weapons are not on alert, an American first strike may leave only six(!) strategic Russian warheads intact [see their Foreign Affairs and International Security article in 2006]. American missiles are much more accurate, which means that the US can bomb more targets than Russia with an equal number of missiles. Further, Russia has usually no nuclear submarines at sea, while there are on average always four American nuclear submarines on routine patrol. In addition, it is also widely known that the current Russian early-warning capabilities contain wide holes. If the US launches a sea-launched ballistic missile from the Pacific, the warhead will probably explode before Russia would have noticed it.

In principle, six survivable nuclear weapons on behalf of Russia should be sufficient to deter the US to strike first. Or is any future American president going to risk the loss of a couple of American cities? Advocates of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) will answer this question with a classic 'no'. They will argue that nuclear deterrence still works, even with the existing unbalance between the US and Russia.

The above mentioned calculus by the MAD advocates, however, changes fundamentally in case the US on top of its modern nuclear weapons arsenal also erects a missile defence system. While the current US plans for missile defence do not aim at neutralizing thousands, or even hundreds, of offensive missiles, it is eventually meant to be able to destroy 'tens' of missiles in flight. Although this capacity may currently still not be available, the US Missile Defence Agency starts from the assumption that it will be available in the foreseeable future. At that time, the US missile shield will therefore be able – at least in theory - to shoot down the six remaining Russian intercontinental missiles after an 'out of the blue' American first-strike. In other words, the US will have the capacity to launch an offensive nuclear first-strike against Russia without any risk. As long as the relationship between the US and Russia is not like the one between the US and the UK, and there is no indication whatsoever that that will be the case in the foreseeable future, American missile defence in Europe is a nightmare scenario for any Russian strategist (as for any American strategist if it had been the other way around).

The likelihood that missile defence will not work always exists, but Russia cannot start from that 'best-case' assumption. Further, if missile defence does not work, why would the US install it in the first place ?

The Bush administration defends itself by saying that US missile defence is not aimed against Russia. It claims that it is built to shoot down missiles from "rogue states", read Iran and North Korea (although there is a chance that the latter may leave this category soon). From a Russian perspective, this is extremely hard to believe. First, neither North Korea nor Iran is currently able to launch intercontinental missiles with a nuclear warhead on top of it, because they do not possess such missiles, and are unlikely to get them in the foreseeable future. Even in the unlikely event that they do succeed in building such intercontinental missiles in ten or twenty years time, what would be the military use for them of launching these missiles against the US, knowing very well that it will be answered by a similar (or larger) counterattack ? Teheran and Pyong Yang are very much aware that such an attack would be suicidal. If these countries really want to attack the US or the West, there are much more effective instruments available: an anonymous nuclear terrorist attack by truck, ship or small plane. No missile defence system can prevent such attacks.

Second, the American defensive missiles will not be "programmed" only to eliminate Iranian or North Korean missiles. They can be used for destroying missiles coming from any country, including from Russia or China. Many experts, indeed, contend that US missile defence is built not to counter "rogue states" but to neutralize a Russian or Chinese authorized or unauthorized attack.

Third, the US itself admitted in private talks to the Russians in January 2000 that Russia better kept at least 1,500 missiles on high alert in order to be able to circumvent US national missile defence. While this may be an indication that US missile defence is not directly meant to neutralize the Russian deterrent, it certainly acknowledges that US missile defence may have substantial adverse consequences for Russia's security.

Missile defence puts also a cap on further nuclear weapon reductions. Even without the complications that go together with missile defence, both Russia and the US are unfortunately not very keen to materialize deep cuts. Although both former superpowers are obliged by the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty (NPT) to disarm and eventually eliminate their nuclear weapons arsenals, the speed of reductions in the last decade has slowed tremendously. Anno 2007, there are still 27,000 (deployed and non-deployed) nuclear weapons on earth, 90% belonging to Russia and the US. With missile defence, nuclear weapons reductions will be even further away. As the non-nuclear weapon states rightly expect deep cuts, missile defence may also have a deteriorating effect on the non-proliferation regime, which is already in crisis.

If American missile defence is bad for Russia, it is even worse for China. China only possesses 18 single-warhead missiles that can hit continental US territory. Many Western experts believe that China is building more intercontinental missiles with nuclear warheads. American missile defence would give China the perfect pretext for a renewed arms race in Asia. If there is one law with nearly mechanistic characteristics in the history of war and peace, it is that the build-up of offensive weapons systems always leads to a defensive reaction, and vice versa.

In short, American missile defence is not going to make the world – including the US - safer, except if you believe that more nuclear missiles means more security, and that missile defence will be quasi-100% waterproof. The latter is a pipe dream. Deployments of missile defence interceptors in Alaska and California in 2004 – right before the elections - had to circumvent the existing US legal procedures that require operational testing with war-fighting capability, by calling it instead “capability-based acquisition”. The existing missile shield is simply not able to do what it pretends to do.

Only when the knowledge and infrastructure is shared throughout the world and all states could “enjoy” this defence shield, (strategic) missile defence could be legitimized. You do not have to be a Realist to understand that the latter is utopian.

Instead, the US and NATO should limit themselves to build theatre missile defence (TMD) instead of national (or strategic) missile defence (NMD). Theatre missile defence aims to protect military troops in the field, while national (or strategic) missile defence has the ambition to protect a whole country or even continent. TMD is geo-strategically not destabilizing. Technically speaking, TMD will be the only realistic option for a very long time. Most of the NMD tests have failed. And those that did not fail did not accurately replicate real-world conditions. Defensive test missiles know from the beginning when the offensive test missile will be launched, from which direction, and with what kind of speed. One can only wonder whether a real-world enemy – whoever that may be – will announce in advance when an attack will take place, with which type of rocket and using which ballistic track. In addition, each state that is capable of launching ICBMs is also able to produce decoys to disguise the warhead. Decoys make it nearly impossible for defensive missiles to succeed.

Why does the Bush administration want to push the American missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic through? Possible explanations are: to bind the (“new”) Europeans closer to the US; to give a clear signal to Russia and China to halt their support to offensive missile and nuclear weapons programs in countries like Iran and North Korea; to make it politically easier to expand the current limited NATO missile defence plans; to subsidize the defence industry. Not one of these benefits weighs up against the higher mentioned negative effects.

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