

Missile Defense in Europe: Defensive Defence or New Cold War?

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This missile defense cooperation ... is about threats to Europe from rogue states. It is not about and does not pose a threat to Russia. Hopefully, it is also not about threats from Russia.

(US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, 4 June, 2007)

The notion that the deployment of ten missile interceptors and a radar station to Central Europe as part of the Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) project can somehow be seen as an aggressive threat to Russia has been rejected by more than a few American government policymakers. Supporters of the expansion of TMD to Poland and the Czech Republic have pointed to the following as evidence that the US has no hostile intent toward Moscow: first, that at no point has the US ever threatened to initiate armed conflict against Russia (episodes such as the Cuban Missile Crisis were in response to Soviet provocation); second, that TMD consists of strictly defensive weaponry. These arguments are, however, open to challenge. If we attempt to place ourselves in the shoes of the government in Moscow, it may be possible to recognise Moscow's concern over TMD to some extent.

Although Washington has a benign self-image of its expansion of TMD, that benign self-image is not shared by the Kremlin. Over the last two centuries, Russia has faced three major invasions from Western Europe (by Napoleon, Wilhelm Kaiser, and Hitler), numerous smaller conflicts (the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War, foreign intervention during the Russian Civil War, and the Ussuri War with China), and numerous threats of nuclear attack from the US (most clearly during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962). The sheer devastation has left behind its mark on the Russian national psyche – more than 20 million Soviet citizens died during the Nazi invasion. Furthermore, the presence of rival states with territorial claims on the western, eastern and southern flanks of Russian territory has led to a certain amount of paranoia amongst Russian leaders in interpreting the intentions of other states. Although several policymakers in the Bush administration have declared that they have no intention of attacking Russia, this has not sufficed

in reassuring the Kremlin, as deeply entrenched images of a hostile outside world often die hard. Faced with a historical legacy built on decades of conflict and invasion, it is prudent for Russian leaders to adopt worst-case scenario thinking in interpreting the intentions of others, even in a security environment that may be benign, as there is no guarantee that such a political setting will continue. Rather, policymakers often face the problem of ‘future uncertainty’, or the possibility that an apparently benign political environment may unexpectedly be replaced by a hostile one due to internal domestic political processes, in the manner that the Weimar Republic was replaced by Hitler.

A second criticism of Russian hostility towards the introduction of TMD contends that the ten missile interceptors to be deployed are designed only to intercept and destroy incoming ballistic missiles, and thus do not have the capability to seize enemy territory in a war of conquest. Such a deployment should thus be seen as a defensive defence, with no offensive capability. Yet, the distinction between offensive and defensive military postures is often unclear. As the Spanish statesman Salvador de Madariaga noted at the 1934 World Disarmament Conference, ‘A weapon system is either offensive or defensive according to which end of it you are looking at.’ Two scenarios can be identified where the ‘defensive’ nature of TMD may be seen as offensive by the Kremlin.

The first scenario hypothesizes the possibility of a nuclear exchange between NATO and Russia. Expansion of TMD would protect European and North American cities from attack by Russian nuclear missiles; the leaders of NATO member states would thus have no nuclear hostages that Russia could threaten in the event of a crisis. At the same time, the absence of a comparable missile defence in Russia would leave Russian cities unprotected against nuclear attack by NATO. The resulting strategic situation would become one where Russia would be vulnerable to NATO’s nuclear warheads, but without being able to threaten NATO members states in retaliation due to the US deployment of TMD. This, in short, constitutes Russian strategic nuclear vulnerability to NATO.

In a second scenario involving conventional conflict, it is probable that the greatest fear of Russian military commanders would be the deployment of substantial ground reinforcements from the US, as this would provide NATO with the potential capability to conduct offensive operations against Russian soil. Given the deteriorating state of Russia's conventional armed forces, it is unlikely that Russia would be able to fight off such a conventional invasion. In the event of such a conflict, it is probable that the Russian military would rely on cruise missiles to interdict air, sea and land lines of communication (LOCs). The deployment of TMD to Central Europe would seriously undermine Russian abilities to conduct an effective campaign of missile interdiction. Thus, although missile defenses cannot be used to spearhead an invasion of Russia, they can still be used to defend LOCs through which offensive military assets such as armoured and mechanised infantry divisions are deployed for such an invasion.

In light of this difficulty in distinguishing offensive military postures from defensive ones, can we see a 'New Cold War' looming over the horizon? Not in the immediate future, as Russia's continuing economic difficulties prevent the Kremlin from embarking on the development of a military juggernaut comparable to that wielded by the Soviet Union. Over the long term, however, it is not inconceivable that increasing Russian resentment over what it perceives to be Washington's arrogance in the Kremlin's backyard leads to a resurgent militaristic Russian nationalism, leading to renewed confrontation between Moscow and Washington. Neither is it inconceivable that, within such a scenario, a resurgent Russia may ally itself with China (whose military-industrial complex is by no means in doldrums) to balance against US power. Should such a scenario occur, escalating security competition between Russia, China, and the US, as well as with other powers such as Japan, India and the EU, may culminate in an arms race not unlike that of the Cold War.

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Links

'Son of Star Wars no threat to Russian nuclear arsenal', The Times, 4 June 2007
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article1883844.ece>

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/russia/article/0,,2096433,00.html>

'Chastising Putin, Bush Says Russia Derails Reform', The New York Times, 5 June 2007

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/06/world/europe/06prexy.html?_r=1&oref=slogin