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Blank, Stephen

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

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Russia Targets Missile Defense

By Stephen Blank

Since spring 2006, Russian military commanders, and, subsequently, political leaders, consistently have attacked America's plans to station missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic and argued against the possible emplacement of such defenses in Ukraine and Georgia. (1) These programs appear to be leading to the revival of the idea that the US and NATO are the main threats to Russian security, a familiar, and perhaps congenial, position for the armed forces. (2) In this vein, in April President Putin announced the suspension of Russia's observance of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) because of these planned defenses. (3) Last month, Putin announced his decision to withdraw Russia from the CFE completely. Obviously, the missile defense plans bring together two things Moscow greatly opposes: NATO enlargement and the movement of American military power into the former Warsaw Pact area. Although Russian officials clearly view these systems in the wider context of NATO enlargement, they have focused attention on the missile defense plans with an ever-louder campaign against them. While a forceful attack on these plans was part of Putin's February 2007 speech to the annual Munich Wehrkunde conference, the campaign has gathered momentum since then. (4) But, clearly, it has not shaken America's resolve to move forward with its defense policy.

In their campaign against deployment of the missile defenses, Russian officials have offered several different charges concerning the motives, consequences, and negative implications of US actions. This relentless rhetoric resembles nothing so much as earlier Soviet efforts against NATO's actions to ensure European security against perceived Soviet threats. And like those campaigns, a prime Russian objective apparently is to divide NATO members against one another and against America. (5)

Unfortunately, this campaign not only resembles its Soviet predecessors in goals, tone, and volume but in truthfulness, as well. Russia's current arguments against this planned deployment are for the most part groundless, even mendacious.

For example, Moscow consistently charges that these defenses are being introduced without Russia having been consulted. In fact, it has received at least ten detailed technical briefings about missile defenses, including a full briefing at the NATO-Russia Council. (6) Thus, this demand for consultations reflects Russia's abiding demand for a veto over US and NATO defense policies. Similarly, Russia's claim that European states have not been consulted and that this program exemplifies an American unilateralism that is driving Europe closer to war against its own interests is equally false, as the negotiations between America and its European allies show. (7) Moreover, Russia portrays itself as Europe's defender, a claim that is nothing short of ridiculous, given that one of the cornerstones of Russian foreign policy is to forestall, by whatever means possible, the completion of European integration. (8) Thus, these charges about America's unilateralism, rush to military action, and disregard for European interests, while insisting that Russia itself has Europe's welfare at heart, merely repeat earlier efforts at denying the legitimacy of America's interests in—and protection—of Europe, while seeking to divide Europe and America. Neither has Russia's military and political leadership helped by repeatedly threatening to target Poland and the Czech Republic with its missiles. (9) If anything, such postures justify Prague and Warsaw's support for these defenses. As Franklin Roosevelt once noted about his rivals, one does not mention rope in the house of someone who has been hanged.

President Putin and his supporters frequently have said that there is no threat that justifies these anti-missile defenses. For example, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov complains "we are being called upon to fight a hypothetical threat (i.e., intermediate range missiles from Iran that could hit Europe) while a real threat to our security is looming." (10) Iran, they claim, has no capability to launch IRBMs (Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles) against Europe anytime soon. This charge is again wholly mendacious. Chief of Staff General Yuri Baluevsky already stated in 2002 that Iran

actually had nuclear weapons, even if he doubted it would attack America. Meanwhile Iran's missile program, based on European assessments, clearly encompasses a threat to Europe. (11) A Slovak assessment in 2006 observed that, "The development of carriers of warheads is currently centered on the improvement of rockets of the class Shahab, Shahab-1, with flying range up to 330Km; and Shahab-2 with flying range up to 700Km—still in the category of short-range ballistic missiles. Shahab-3A and 3B with flying ranges up to 15000 and 2000 Km are intermediate range missiles. Development focuses on missiles of the Ghador-110 type with flying range of about 3000Km." (12)

Such Iranian missiles easily would have the capacity to target much of the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia, as well as, eventually, Europe. Furthermore, in remarks made in February 2006, and subsequently, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov publicly observed that Russia's neighbors (Iran, China, Pakistan) have IRBMs and only Russia and America do not possess these missiles. (13) Therefore, Ivanov and his subordinates at the Ministry publicly have floated the idea of leaving the treaty on Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) and building IRBMS, in spite of all the readily apparent dangers and disadvantages that such a course would bring to Russia. (14) Russia's private statements to American officials in the Pentagon mirror its public complaints that all of its neighbors are arming themselves with such weapons and show conclusively that Moscow recognizes all too well the nature of the Iranian and Chinese threats. (15) Russian private reactions to the American plan apparently are much more positive than are public responses, suggesting divided counsels in Moscow or "a good cop – bad cop" strategy. (16) Conceivably, the existence of such divisions is what has led Putin, Ivanov, et. al. to adopt so uncompromising a tone in public, in the hope of stifling domestic debate and forcing American and European concessions.

Nevertheless, abundant ironies exist in Russia's position. First, it is a sad commentary on Moscow's foreign policy that the only powers that can threaten it with missiles, and which are regarded as potential threats, are Russia's so-called friends, Iran and China. Second and even worse, Russian technology and assistance has been instrumental in enhancing both countries' conventional and missile capabilities. Meanwhile, Russia has

long been engaged with China's military in talks and cooperation on missile defenses and space activities and has materially assisted Iran's space program. (17) At the same time, withdrawal from the INF treaty, another Russian threat, would allow everyone, including these neighbors and America, to produce IRBMs again. Certainly, NATO could then station IRBMs in the Baltic region and Poland. However, Russia's capability for producing IRBMs is strained and could only come at the expense of producing ICBMs, the cornerstone of its military deterrent capability. Thus, withdrawal from the INF will not give Russia more security, but will achieve quite the opposite. (18) Indeed, withdrawal from the INF treaty makes no sense unless one believes that Russia is genuinely—and more importantly—imminently threatened by NATO and cannot meet or deter that threat except by returning to the classic Cold War strategy of holding Europe hostage to nuclear attack, so as to deter Washington and NATO. Of course, that would prompt everyone to build IRBMs as fast as possible for deterrence. Thus the argument that there is no IRBM threat is self-evidently non-credible.

The concurrent charge that these missile defenses represent a real threat only to Russia's deterrent or military capabilities also is a non-starter. Alexei Arbatov already has demolished that argument in public; the many briefings given by the US to Moscow clearly reflect that fact, as Russian scientists and military-political figures well know. (19) Indeed, in typical Soviet style, the charges regarding American threats simultaneously are mixed with ominous statements by generals and other figures that if these missile defenses are installed, Moscow will have to take "adequate" measures, among them targeting those defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic. (20) Indeed, one almost wishes that they would do so, for it is precisely Russia's irresponsibility in regard to arms sales and missile proliferation that has helped to create this threat. "Adequate" measures against Iranian, North Korean, Pakistani, and Chinese proliferation are definitely to be encouraged.

To compound the ridiculous nature of these charges, Putin, Ivanov, and several Russian generals also have made innumerable statements that these missile defenses actually pose no threat because Russia already has missiles that could penetrate any missile

defense. (21) If this be true, then what is the problem? And if it is not true why are they lying? After all, a November 17, 2006 article in RIA Novosti, citing Col. General Vladimir Zaritsky, commander of the missile forces and artillery, revealed that two-thirds of Russia's missiles were obsolete. Nonetheless, its rearmament plans through 2015 do not betray any undue alarm about these deployments. (22) So, in fact, there is no urgent threat from America or NATO.

Finally, these military leaders also postulate that these proposed deployments could serve as the basis of the development of a whole series of interceptors, air-launched weapons, including missiles, and a defense infrastructure that could threaten Russia and its military capabilities. If Russia already can penetrate or spoof missile defenses, it probably can figure out how to counter those other capabilities and is certainly not devoid of its own robust and growing military capabilities, including ICBMs, which could deter Washington. Admittedly, Washington and NATO are planning for an integrated missile shield to defend all of Europe against what both sides know to be real and potential threats in the future. Yet, if there is a potential threat, then why has Russia hitherto spurned American offers of joint collaboration on missile defense? (23) Beyond these questions, this kind of reasoning shows that Russia's armed forces and government still think in terms of worst-case scenarios. The military's demand for expensive weapons systems is predicated on the basis that there is an ontological Western or American enemy, a posture that wholly contradicts the logic proclaimed by both Moscow and Washington in the Moscow treaty of 2002 on Strategic Offensive Reductions of nuclear weapons (SORT treaty).

The perception that these planned defenses actually form the basis for a future threat reflects more than a strategy of worst-case scenario building for the purpose of securing more funds and weapons for an army. It shows also that Russia's government and military are postulating an inherent East-West enmity that is only partially and incompletely buttressed by mutual deterrence. Worse yet, mutual deterrence arguably makes no sense in today's strategic climate, especially when virtually every Russian military leader proclaims, as did Baluevsky, that no plan for war with NATO is under

consideration and, further, that the main threat to Russia is terrorism, not NATO or America. (24) Evidently, the army still needs to postulate an external NATO or American enemy, even though it can hardly perform its domestic mission and is corroded by rising corruption and such phenomena as *dedovshchina* (hazing), and pervasive brutality towards its soldiers. (25) Thus it would appear, as it does to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, that the real threat is the rise of neighboring states' short and medium-range missile capabilities, i.e. Iran and China. (26) But, Russia dare not admit that publicly.

What, then, lies behind this campaign? While it is difficult to assign priorities to Russia's goals as Russia sees them, it is clear that this campaign, like a Swiss army knife, cuts in many directions at once. For the military, it is another opportunity to demand more money against what it has always perceived as an existential and now growing threat. For example, in addition to Ivanov, General Vladimir Vasilenko also raised the issue of withdrawal from the INF treaty in 2005, though it is difficult to see what Russia would gain from this move. (27) Vasilenko stated that the nature and composition of any future US/NATO missile defense would determine the nature and number of future Russian missile forces and systems, even though, admittedly, any such missile defense systems could only defend against a few missiles at a time. Thus, he said that, "Russia should give priority to high-survivable mobile ground and naval missile systems when planning the development of the force in the near and far future....The quality of the strategic nuclear forces of Russia will have to be significantly improved in terms of adding to their capability of penetrating [missile defense] barriers and increasing the survivability of combat elements and enhancing the properties of surveillance and control systems." (28)

This is clearly a call for more investment in nuclear forces beyond what the government already has allocated in its rebuilding program through 2015. The program outlined below, according to Ivanov, will allow Russia to replace 45% of its existing arsenals with modern weapons by 2015. By that date, the program intends to build: 50 new Topol-M ICBM missile complexes on mobile launchers, 34 new silo-based Topol-M missiles and

control units, 50 new bombers, 31 ships, and fully rearm 40 tank, 97 infantry, and 50 parachute battalions. Forty Topol-M silo-based missiles already have been deployed. In 2007 alone the military would get seventeen new ballistic missiles, rather than four a year as has recently been the case, four spacecraft and booster rockets, overhaul a long-range aviation squadron, six helicopter and combat aviation squadrons, seven tank and thirteen motor rifle battalions. Eleven billion dollars will be spent in 2007 alone on new weapons. Thirty-one new ships will be commissioned, including eight SSBNs carrying ICBMs (presumably the forthcoming Bulava missile). And in 2009-2010, Russia will decide whether or not to build a new shipyard for the construction of aircraft carriers. Fifty Tu-160 Blackjack and Tu-95 Bear Strategic Bombers would operate over this period as well. Doctrinally, Russia also will retain its right to launch preemptive strikes. (29) This program hardly squares with the demands being voiced by Vasilenko, et. al.

For political figures this campaign offers an opportunity to pit Russia against America and to foster divisions within the West. But, they also see a threat here, i.e. NATO and the US military's growing entrenchment in Eastern Europe, as well as NATO membership aspirations in the CIS, specifically in Ukraine and Georgia. That trend is anathema to Moscow, which sees it as presaging the realization of all its nightmares: a unified democratic Europe backed by Washington, permanent strategic inferiority, an end to the neo-imperial fantasies that drive Russia's foreign policy, and overwhelming external pressure for reform. Since empire and autocracy are conjoined in Putin's Russia as they were for his Soviet and Tsarist predecessors, the end of one, as in the past, logically entails the end of the other. Since the elite can conceive of no justification for its power and rent-seeking other than the invocation of Russia as a great power, i.e. an empire that acts independently and autocratically at home and abroad (a.k.a. a "sovereign democracy") any threat to the imperial mystique entails a threat to autocracy. And the enlargement of the sphere of European democracy entails threats to empire, autocracy, and Russia's cherished unilateralism. Nonetheless, it still demands "total equality, including equality in the analysis of threats, in finding solutions, and making decisions." (30)

Perhaps Russia also perceives the proposed missile defenses as another example of American disregard for its interests and prestige. But, Moscow certainly has no answer to the threat posed by Iranian or other proliferation. Indeed, it is offering Middle Eastern states nuclear power, hardly the most responsible action. (31) At the same time, the temptation to attempt to estrange America from Europe, both of whom Moscow regards as declining powers, obviously appeals to many in the political elite for whom such a policy remains almost a reflex. However, these quarrels advance neither Russia's nor anyone else's security. Indeed, Secretary of State Rice stated that the notion that these defenses threaten Russia is "ludicrous." (32) If Washington and Moscow are both strategic partners, as the SORT Treaty implies, then it is high time that they move forward together on a broad arms control agenda, to meet common threats and get beyond the structures of mutual deterrence, in which their nuclear forces are currently deployed.

Apart from the missile defense issue, there are many points on the arms control agenda where Russia has more legitimate interests and points of view and where America would be well advised to discuss them seriously, e.g. Moscow's proposals for a START-3 treaty (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty). Here, Moscow has called repeatedly for negotiating a new treaty to replace the START-1 Treaty that expires in 2009, but the US Administration has rebuffed its calls until now, claiming it prefers not to have each side's nuclear arsenals define their relationship. In other words, the US still chases the mirage of unencumbered nuclear and strategic unilateralism. (33) Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on the other hand, has outlined an entirely contrary approach for Russia – but one admittedly possessing much realism. "Our main criterion is ensuring the Russian Federation's security and maintaining strategic stability as much as possible....We have started such consultations already. I am convinced that we need a substantive discussion on how those lethal weapons could be curbed on the basis of mutual trust and balance of forces and interests. We will insist particularly on this approach. We do not need just the talk that we are no longer enemies and therefore we should not have restrictions for each other. This is not the right approach.

It is fraught with an arms race, in fact, because, it is very unlikely that either of us will be ready to lag behind a lot.” (34)

Here, Lavrov puts his finger on the fact that in an atmosphere of political mistrust, where both sides’ deployments are still based on deterrence and mutually assured destruction, strategic unilateralism is both unacceptable and, indeed, dangerous because it stimulates arms races across the world. This argument cuts both ways, e.g. Russian withdrawal from the INF Treaty would lead both NATO and China to build more such missiles aimed at Russia, as Alexei Arbatov has observed. (35) Similarly, withdrawal from the CFE treaty opens up the prospect of both a conventional and nuclear arms race in Europe, a race that Russia cannot win and that can lead only to further disasters. At the same time, however, Washington’s quest for ever more credible options for deterrence, dissuasion, and even nuclear warfighting scenarios, only stimulates other countries’ insecurities and desire to achieve their own means of deterring or dissuading America. (36) Simultaneously, strategic stability and bilateralism also would reverse the trend toward greater reliance on nuclear weapons as warfighting instruments that has been in effect at least since 2000, with the added benefit of possibly reducing the attractiveness of such weapons to would-be proliferators. (37)

The foregoing analysis thus shows that proliferation is another issue that requires cooperation, not spite, which, as Lenin observed at the end of his life, plays the very worst role in politics. These are the real issues that urgently require great power cooperation. Missile defense, however, is not one of them and Moscow’s exploitation of this issue is unworthy of a state claiming to be a great power.

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End Notes:

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