Missile Defense in Central Europe: The View from Moscow

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In January 2007, the United States announced that it would begin formal negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic over the possibility of installing elements of a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system on their territory. According to the Bush administration, this system would be aimed at defending the United States and its friends and allies against an Iranian missile attack. The American proposal has received sharp criticism from the Russian Federation, however. The Kremlin sees the planned antimissile shield as a serious national security threat even though the White House insists that it is a limited system targeted at ballistic missiles launched from Iran and would be no match for Russia’s vast nuclear arsenal. This paper will argue that Russia’s response to the proposed BMD installations is not exaggerated; Moscow has good reason to oppose this system because it could be eventually upgraded to enhance US offensive capabilities in Europe and undermine Russia’s deterrent power.

Russian president Vladimir Putin and other senior government officials in the Russian Federation have sharply criticized the George W. Bush administration’s plans to deploy elements of a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system in Central Europe. The American proposal calls for the emplacement of ten interceptor missiles in Poland and the construction of a radar station in the Czech Republic. According to the White House, these installations are meant to defend the United States and its European allies against long-range missiles launched from Iran. From the Kremlin’s perspective, however, this system would pose a threat to Russia’s security. In an apparent response to the proposed antimissile shield, Moscow has threatened to abrogate
the landmark Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987. The Russians also say they are prepared to target Poland and the Czech Republic with their own missiles if the U.S. goes ahead with its plans. During a February 2007 speech at a security conference in Munich, President Putin criticized the U.S. for seeking a “world of one master, one sovereign” and he warned of an “inevitable arms race.” Despite his alarm, many analysts in the U.S., Europe, and Russia maintain that ten interceptors in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic would be no match for Russia’s vast ballistic missile force. If this is the case, then why does Russia regard the American missile defense initiative as a security threat? This paper argues that Russia’s response to the BMD installations is not exaggerated; Moscow has good reason to oppose this system because it could be eventually upgraded to enhance U.S. offensive capabilities in Europe and undermine Russia’s deterrent power. I develop this argument at three levels. First, I provide an overview of the U.S. ballistic missile defense program and its significance for national security. Second, I briefly discuss current U.S.-Russian security relations and how they have been affected by the planned U.S. deployment of missile defenses in Central Europe. And finally, I examine the military-technical basis of Russian concerns over this project.

The “Son of Star Wars”

In the United States, the idea of strategic missile defense first garnered widespread public attention during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. President Reagan announced his Strategic Defense

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1 The full name of the INF Treaty is the “Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles”. This treaty was a critical arms-control agreement because it eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapon delivery systems (ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers).

Initiative (SDI) for a space-based defensive shield against Soviet nuclear weapons in 1983. Dubbed “Star Wars” by its detractors, the SDI was never realized and gradually faded from the U.S. political agenda after the end of the Cold War. With the release of a report from a Donald Rumsfeld-led commission in 1998, however, calls for the development of a missile defense system resurfaced. The bipartisan commission’s findings suggested that the U.S. had underestimated the missile threat posed by hostile (rogue) states in the developing world. More specifically, it warned that Iran and North Korea could be just five years away from possessing the capabilities to attack the U.S. with ballistic missiles. The following year, President Bill Clinton signed into law the National Missile Defense Act of 1999, authorizing the U.S. to deploy a national missile defense system capable of defending American territory against limited ballistic missile attacks as soon as one became available.

The development and deployment of missile defenses has been one of President George W. Bush’s top national security priorities. The Bush administration has argued that the U.S. and its friends and allies are threatened by unpredictable “rogue states” that are pursuing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles of increasing range that could deliver them. To deter such threats, the White House has promoted the development of a BMD system and increased the budget of the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), the Department of Defense office in charge of managing this program. The current missile defense system, which has been labeled by some observers as the


5 The MDA will receive $9.4 billion in fiscal year 2007 and its annual budget is expected to increase to as much as $15-19 billion in the year 2013. Since 1985, the US government has spent approximately $110 billion on missile defense programs.
“son of Star Wars,” is meant to defend against ballistic missiles by intercepting them in all phases (initial, middle, and terminal) of flight.\(^6\) The distinction between “national” and “theater” missile defenses\(^7\) no longer exists, however. Instead, the Pentagon prefers to use the generic classification “missile defense.”\(^8\)

According to the Bush administration, this system is designed to do the following:

The defenses we will develop and deploy must be capable of not only defending the United States and our deployed forces, but also friends and allies. The distinction between theater and national defenses was largely a product of the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty and is outmoded. For example, some of the systems we are pursuing, such as boost-phase defenses, are inherently capable of intercepting missiles of all ranges, blurring the distinction between theater and national defenses; and the terms “theater” and “national” are interchangeable depending on the circumstances, and thus are not a meaningful means of categorizing missile defenses. For example, some of the systems being pursued by the United States to protect deployed forces are capable of defending the entire national territory of

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\(^7\) There is an important difference between national and theater missile defense systems, which are aimed at intermediate-to-long range missiles and shorter-range missiles, respectively. The latter is relatively uncontroversial since it does not threaten the deterrents of other major nuclear powers while the former is controversial precisely because it has the potential do so. See James Lindsay and Michael O’Hanlon, “Missile defense after the ABM Treaty,” *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2002): 164.

\(^8\) Ibid.
some friends and allies, thereby meeting the definition of a “national” missile defense system. The U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 allowed the Bush administration to move forward with its BMD plans. Although the BMD program is multi-faceted, the MDA has focused on developing Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) with ground-based interceptor missiles and radar locators. In theory, the GMD would intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by sending “booster rockets that would deliver kill vehicles into space, where they would be set on a computer-generated collision course with the targeted warhead.” In practice, the effectiveness of the GMD remains to be proven. Since 2002, a number of flight tests have been conducted with mixed results, leading some U.S. experts to question the system’s technical feasibility. The intended mission of the GMD has been frequently compared to an attempt to shoot down a bullet with another bullet. Furthermore, some members of Congress have argued that these tests are highly scripted and simpler than what the GMD would actually face in a crisis situation. Despite these concerns, the U.S. has deployed ground-based interceptors in silos in Alaska and California to defend against missile threats from North Korea. These sites are part of an integrated BMD system capability, which includes “a number of ground-based radars in operation around the world,

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10 The ABM Treaty was signed between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1972. This agreement prohibited the deployment of a strategic missile defense system.
11 ICBMs are long-range missiles that can travel over 5,500 kilometers.
space-based assets supporting the BMD [system] mission, command and control networks throughout the United States and the Pacific, as well as ground-mobile and sea-based systems for shorter-range BMD.\textsuperscript{15}

The White House also plans on installing elements of its BMD system in Europe to optimize defensive coverage of the US and Europe against a missile attack launched from Iran.\textsuperscript{16} In 2002, the U.S. initiated informal talks with Poland and the Czech Republic over the possibility of establishing missile defense facilities on their territory.\textsuperscript{17} In January 2007, the White House announced that formal negotiations would begin. If these negotiations are successful, the deployment is expected to be completed in 2013 at a cost of approximately $4.04 billion.\textsuperscript{18} Although the Polish and Czech governments have been generally supportive of the U.S. proposal, the same cannot be said about the local populations. Numerous public opinion polls have indicated that most Poles and Czechs are unwilling to host the BMD system. This reaction mainly stems from a belief that the presence of an American missile defense system on their soil would diminish rather than increase their national security and damage their relations with neighboring states, especially with Russia.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, some are skeptical of the purported Iranian missile threat.

Until recently, unclassified U.S. intelligence reports estimated that Iran could have a long-range missile capable of reaching the United States by 2015.\textsuperscript{20} However, the December 2007 release of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran’s nuclear program has cast doubt on previous assessments.\textsuperscript{21} The

\textsuperscript{15} Hildreth and Ek 2007, 2.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{21} Mark Thompson, “Europe’s Missile Shield: NIE Casualty?” \textit{Time}, December 6, 2007,
NIE suggests that Iran presents no imminent nuclear missile danger to the United States. Apparently, Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003. Some analysts have argued that this weakens the Bush administration’s case for deploying an antimissile shield in Central Europe. Nonetheless, the Department of Defense insists that the new NIE has not affected its missile defense plans. Shortly after parts of the NIE were made available to the public, Rick Lehner, the Pentagon’s chief missile defense spokesman, noted that “there has been no impact to our plans for a European deployment, because our missile-defense program is not geared to any kind of specific defense against a specific weapon. It’s a defense against ballistic missiles—chemical, biological, high-explosive, and nuclear, of course.” In addition, President Bush contends that Iran is still dangerous and the Czech government issued a statement saying that the NIE would not affect its missile defense negotiations with the U.S. Thus, for the time being, it appears that the U.S. will go forward with its missile defense initiative in Central Europe.

A Strained Bilateral Relationship

Russia has been the most vocal opponent of the planned U.S. antimissile shield in Central Europe. In one attempt to dissuade the U.S. from going ahead with its plans, Moscow has threatened to withdraw from the INF Treaty. This would put an end to one of the core components of the U.S.-Russian disarmament agenda. Furthermore, General Yuri Bakuyevsky, the Russian

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 According to Article XV of the INF Treaty, “Each Party shall, in exercising its national sovereignty, have the right to withdraw from this Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests.” The full text of the INF Treaty is available at http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/inf/text/inf.htm.
military’s chief of staff has said, “If we see that the [missile defense] facilities pose a threat to Russia’s security, the facilities will be objects for plans of our forces.” More specifically, First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov warned that Russian missiles could be deployed in Kaliningrad to target the proposed GMD sites. As previously noted, senior government officials in Washington insist that this antimissile shield would be a limited system aimed at protecting Europe and the U.S. from Iranian long-range ballistic missile attacks. In an April 2007 article published in the Daily Telegraph, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argue that the GMD in Central Europe would be “oriented against a potential enemy with a small arsenal, attempting to blackmail our people, sow chaos, and sap our collective will” and that the “system is of no use against a huge nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal, such as that possessed by Russia.”

These assurances have not persuaded the Kremlin, however. First, Russian officials contend that the United States is overstating the missile threat posed by Iran. Second, the proximity of the proposed GMD system to European-based Russian ICBMs has been met with much suspicion in Moscow.

27 Since January 2007, Secretaries Rice and Gates have met with their respective Russian counterparts on numerous occasions to discuss the White House’s European missile defense plans.
29 Ibid.
30 George Lewis and Theodore Postol, “European Missile Defense: The Technological Basis of Russian Concerns,” Arms Control Today 37, no. 8
The Kremlin has suggested that if the missile defenses were actually intended to deter an Iranian missile threat, it would make more sense to station them closer to the Middle East. During a G-8 summit meeting in June 2007, Putin offered to partner with the White House on missile defense by sharing data from a Soviet-era radar station in Azerbaijan with the United States. One month later during a meeting with President Bush in Kennebunkport, Maine, he extended his original proposal to include a more sophisticated radar facility in southern Russia. Although Bush described the Russian president’s offer as “very sincere” and “innovative,” the Pentagon has only expressed interest in accepting the sites in Azerbaijan and southern Russia as an “additional capability” to complement the planned elements of the BMD system in Central Europe.

The unease in Moscow is best understood within the broader context of current U.S.-Russian relations. According to Jack Mendelsohn, a former deputy director of the U.S. Arms Control Agency, “Russia has increasingly come to believe that, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been exploiting Russia’s relative weakness to advance U.S. security interests.” Under President Putin’s leadership, U.S.-Russian relations have been strained by the unresolved status of Kosovo, U.S. support for pro-Western leaders in some of the former states of the Soviet Union, and the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), among other factors. For example, the Kremlin has criticized NATO enlargement for two main reasons. First, Moscow was not pleased when the alliance incorporated Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, three states that were once part of the Soviet Union. It

31 Hildreth and Ek 2007, 10.
32 Ibid.
also strongly disapproves of possible Georgian and Ukrainian NATO membership. Russia sees the integration of former Soviet republics into the organization as a Western incursion into its traditional sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Second, the Kremlin views the construction of American military bases in Bulgaria and Romania and the possible deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Central Europe as violations of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, according to which NATO promised to refrain from stationing substantial combat forces in new member states.\footnote{Andrei Zagorski, “Moscow Seeks to Renegotiate Relations with the West,” \textit{Center for Security Studies (CSS) Russian Analytical Digest}, no. 26 (2007) http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/details cf m?lng=en&id=38752 (accessed September 20, 2007).} Thus, the Bush administration’s missile defense initiative has aggravated already existing tensions between Washington and Moscow.

\textbf{Spiral Development}

Baluyevsky was quoted as saying, “Many countries are developing and perfecting medium-range rockets...unfortunately, by adhering to the INF Treaty, Russia lost many unique missiles.”

Nonetheless, the Kremlin’s opposition to the planned GMD facilities in Central Europe should not be dismissed simply as a bluff. From a military-technical standpoint, Moscow has good reason to be concerned about the Bush administration’s plans. Before this paper addresses the basis of Moscow’s concerns, it is important to note that Russian officials acknowledge that the prospective emplacement of ten interceptors in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic would not threaten Russia’s strategic deterrent. The flight paths of Russian strategic missiles pass outside the proposed antimissile operation zone in Europe. Due to their proximity to Russian ICBMs based west of the Ural Mountains, U.S. missile defense installations in Central Europe would have to intercept missiles at the boost (initial) stage of flight. This would be beyond the scope of the GMD’s capabilities, since the current system is designed to destroy warheads in mid-flight.

However, Russian officials believe that the possible GMD deployments are likely just the harbinger of a more ambitious program. The fear is that the U.S. could eventually install additional interceptors in Poland and in other European states that could attack European-based Russian ICBMs at the boost stage of flight. The U.S. has been unwilling to impose binding, long-term limitations on the antimissile shield, insisting that the

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38 Ibid.
39 Dvorkin 2007, 28.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Hildreth and Ek 2007, 10.
system’s “architecture” has not yet been fully decided.\textsuperscript{45} This can be attributed to the Pentagon’s “spiral development” policy, which is best encapsulated in the following statement issued by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in May 2003:

> Take, for example, the approach to ballistic missile defense. Instead of taking a decade or more to develop someone’s vision of a ‘perfect’ shield, we have instead decided to develop and put in place a rudimentary system by 2004 – one which should make us somewhat safer than we are now – and then build on that foundation with increasingly effective capabilities as the technologies mature. We intend to apply this ‘spiral development’ approach to a number of systems.\textsuperscript{46}

Rumsfeld’s statement was preceded by the National Security Presidential Directive 23 (NSPD-23), signed by President Bush on December 6, 2002. It stated that the U.S. would begin to deploy missile defenses in 2004 “as a starting point for fielding improved and expanded missile defenses later.”\textsuperscript{47} In other words, BMD systems could be upgraded to something far more capable as U.S. missile defense activities advance.\textsuperscript{48} This policy is behind the deployment of GMD installations in Alaska and California and the planned facilities in Central Europe. Currently, the radar proposed for the Czech Republic would only have the capability to detect a limited number of targets at once. The Pentagon could overcome this limitation by improving the radar station’s antennae, for example.\textsuperscript{49} Furthermore, it would not be too

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{47} Lewis and Postol 2007.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
difficult for the U.S. to deploy more interceptor missiles in Poland. Once interceptor-manufacturing facilities are in operation, additional interceptors could be obtained by extending manufacturing runs and/or expanding manufacturing facilities.\(^{50}\) Thus, an initially limited BMD system in Central Europe could eventually develop into one that consists of a vast stockpile of interceptor missiles and a radar station with the capacity to detect hundreds of warheads simultaneously.

Theoretically, a missile defense system of this nature could enhance the first-strike capability of the United States. According to Keir Lieber of the University of Notre Dame and Daryl Press of the University of Pennsylvania, Russia’s nuclear deterrent is highly vulnerable to a surprise U.S. attack.\(^{51}\) Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has made significant improvements to its nuclear arsenal while Russia’s nuclear forces have sharply deteriorated.\(^{52}\) For example, the U.S. has replaced the ballistic missiles on its submarines with Trident II D-5 missiles, which are more accurate and can carry larger yield warheads.\(^{53}\) The U.S. has also modernized its B-52 bombers by equipping them with nuclear armed-cruise missiles that cannot be easily spotted by Russian air-defense radar.\(^{54}\) Meanwhile, the Russian Federation has 39 percent fewer long-range bombers, 58 percent fewer ICBMs and 80 percent fewer ballistic-missile-launching submarines than the Soviet Union fielded shortly before it disintegrated.\(^{55}\) Furthermore, Moscow has failed to develop satellites capable of reliably detecting missiles launched from American submarines in the Pacific Ocean.\(^{56}\) Given these developments, a hypothetical U.S. nuclear first-strike against Russia could destroy a substantial portion of the latter’s nuclear

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
\(^{52}\) Beehner 2007.
\(^{53}\) Lieber and Press 2006, 45.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 46.
arsenal. At that point, even a modest or imperfect missile defense system would offer considerable protection to the U.S. against any retaliatory strikes, because the devastated enemy would have few warheads left.\textsuperscript{57} In this way, an upgraded antimissile shield in Central Europe would be valuable to the US in an offensive context, not a defensive one.\textsuperscript{58} This possibility, however remote it would seem, would certainly provide the Kremlin with a compelling reason to be concerned about future American GMD facilities in Central Europe.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The main objective of this paper has been to examine Russia’s response to the planned U.S. antimissile shield in Central Europe. The White House intends to deploy ten interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic by 2013. It insists that these installations are only meant to defend the United States and Europe against ballistic missiles launched from Iran. The Kremlin, however, believes that this system would threaten Russia’s security. High level government officials in Moscow say that they are prepared to abrogate the INF Treaty and target Poland and the Czech Republic with Russian missiles if the United States moves forward with this missile defense initiative. The Bush administration has actively promoted the development and deployment of a BMD system to counter the missile threats posed by “rogue states” such as Iran and North Korea. BMD facilities are currently deployed in Alaska and California, but the US has argued that two additional sites in Central Europe are needed to provide optimal defense against possible Iranian attacks. Although the proposed system would not be effective against a vast nuclear arsenal such as that possessed by the Russian Federation, the U.S. could eventually upgrade the system’s capabilities. This would be consistent with the

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\item[57] Ibid., 52.
\item[58] Ibid.
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Pentagon’s “spiral development” policy, which aims to install rudimentary missile defenses and enhance their capabilities as soon as the necessary technology becomes available. In this way, an improved antimissile shield in Europe could undermine Russia’s already vulnerable nuclear deterrent. Given the existing tensions between Washington and Moscow, and U.S. efforts to modernize its nuclear forces, it is hardly surprising that the Kremlin is staunchly opposed to the planned missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Bibliography


