Making or Breaking U.S.-Russia Relations: The Potential for American ABM Policy to Change the World Dynamic

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Over the past decade, the relationship between the United States and Russia has soured considerably, owing largely to stubborn leadership on both sides. One of the most recent and serious threats to the state of U.S.-Russia relations is the Bush administration’s plan to construct anti-ballistic missile defense components in Central Europe, which Russia views as both unnecessary and threatening. At the advent of a new U.S. presidency, this relationship is at a critical, albeit fragile, juncture. It is imperative that the Obama administration rethink the need for missile defense in Europe, as it has extensive economic and security implications for the U.S. Not only is the realization of such a project exceedingly expensive, it falls short of addressing the real threats to the U.S. and it undermines U.S. legitimacy in the realm of arms control and adherence to international accords. Additionally, it shuts out both Russia and Iran, thus eliminating the prospects of more favorable economic ties with the former and greater transparency and dialogue with the latter. The Obama administration must reengage diplomatically with Russia in key areas such as this in order to bring about a more collaborative, mutually beneficial bond, and thereby capitalize on what is undoubtedly a unique opportunity for Washington and Moscow alike.

Recent years have seen a notable decline in relations between the United States and Russia, marked by an encompassing and fundamental corrosion of communication and diplomacy in a number of key areas. This divergence can be largely attributed to the realist-based, “go-it-alone” mentality followed by the Bush administration for nearly a
decade, up until its recent departure. One of the latest and most pressing challenges to U.S.-Russian affairs is the former Bush administration’s decision to install anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense facilities in Central Europe as part of a prospective globe-spanning ballistic missile defense system. The nature of the project as well as its proximity to Russia have incited unease, anger, and even direct threats from Moscow, which the US has essentially ignored heretofore. Arms control has always been a defining issue area for U.S.-Russian relations, and accordingly, such contention must be taken seriously.

As Barack Obama begins his presidency, this is a crucial time for Washington to undertake a critical reassessment of the need for large-scale international missile defenses, as ABM policy alone has decisive and far-reaching economic and security implications for the U.S. Ultimately, placing ABM installations in Central Europe is costly, it fails to address the real threats to the U.S., and it undercuts American credibility in the area of regulating and curbing global arms proliferation. For these reasons, it is both unnecessary and impractical. Instead, it is critical that the U.S. capitalize on this period of transition to pursue a legitimate and comprehensive cooperation with Russia, and settling on the ABM issue is an indispensable first step. With this in mind, the U.S. must halt construction of missile defenses in Europe and reengage in dialogue with Russia on a viable alternative, as the current plan is worth neither the monetary cost nor the diplomatic fallout with both Russia and the international community.

**ABM Treaty: Background and Present Status**

In 1972, the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems (ABM Treaty) was signed and entered into force as a mutual agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union to each substantially limit their own anti-ballistic missile capacities. It was seen as a key step in preventing a potential arms race between both powers. With each party restricted to a set
number of anti-ballistic missiles which it could not exceed, neither side would feel compelled to increase arms production in order to maintain the capability to overwhelm the other's defenses. Upon being amended in 1974, the treaty limited each side to one ABM deployment area to shield either the capital or an ICBM field, housing no more than 100 interceptor missiles and 100 launchers, and was to be of unlimited duration.¹

In December 2001, President Bush gave Russia six months notice that the United States would remove itself from the ABM Treaty, much to the chagrin of the Russian government. On June 13, 2002, the U.S. officially withdrew from the accord, with the intent to pursue a comprehensive ballistic missile defense system (BMDS).² Former President Bush cited the threat of rogue nations with the potential to build and employ inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) outfitted with nuclear warheads, such as Iran and North Korea, to justify construction of such a missile shield. He also implied that the treaty itself was obsolete and thus inapplicable in today's global climate, referring to it as a "relic" of the Cold War years, which only serves to sustain the notion of "mutually assured destruction."³

Resulting from the U.S. disengagement from the treaty and its obligations, President Bush took various steps towards building a robust ABM system. In late 2004, the U.S. Department of Defense began to position long-range missile interceptors in

Alaska and California to address the prospective threat of ICBMs from North Korea, and has more recently implemented various mobile radar and interceptor systems in Japan for the same reason. In the past year, the U.S. has finalized plans to deploy ABM facilities in Central Europe, which is due to be completed in 2013. The plan includes locating ten silo-based long-range interceptors in Poland and a Midcourse X-Band Radar in the Czech Republic, in order to monitor and react to a tactical ballistic missile launch from Iran targeting Western Europe or the U.S.

The decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty and begin construction of ballistic missile defenses in Central Europe has elicited a decidedly negative response from Russia, and could bring about potentially dangerous repercussions for U.S.-Russian relations. Russia considers the prospect of ABM installations being built in nearby Central Europe an imminent threat, and it has prompted comments from Russian officials regarding the potential for a new arms race. Considering its current arsenal, it is clear to all sides that Russia’s ballistic missile launch capabilities would remain wholly unchallenged by the proposed maximum of 10 interceptors in Poland. Russia’s primary concern, however, lies within the possibility of an eventual U.S. augmentation of the system. While the U.S. has assured Russia no such thing would happen, the 2007 Missile Defense Agency (MDA) proposal for the project leaves room for discussion on the matter:

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“U.S. PATRIOT, Aegis/SM-3, and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) could be made available to provide augmenting coverage for short- and medium-range threats. These assets could be used to support emerging NATO and national capabilities as needed to ensure layered coverage for all European nations requiring such protection.”

This sort of language serves to validate Russia’s anxiety, as major construction on these facilities has not even begun and yet the MDA is already discussing the option of supplementing the region with additional, secondary systems.

**Economic Implications**

Construction of anti-ballistic missile defenses in Central Europe and throughout the world as a whole will bring about a wide-ranging set of economic consequences that will inevitably detract from, if not hamper U.S. interests. Missile defense is an exceedingly costly proposition: the Central European facilities alone will cost at least $4 billion, and the comprehensive layered BMDS envisioned by the Bush administration could ultimately cost an estimated $1.2 trillion. Considering the sites already installed in Alaska and California, not to mention the U.S. mobile defenses in Japan, the entire plan will require massive budget allocations for decades to come. Additionally, many of these expense projections do not factor in regular maintenance and updates to the system, which will only increase with the size of the missile shield. Finally, new threats will appear over time from different places, which the system will need to adapt to in order to address, by way of further expansion. Thus, it will be impossible to effectively establish a realistic project deadline, and

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8 Hildreth and Ek, 2.
in this way both the venture itself and the spending will be inexorably indefinite.

At a time when the U.S. is undergoing one of the worst economic downturns in its history, investing in global missile defense is simply not practical, and initiating new projects such as that in Central Europe is entirely counterproductive. On top of the money the U.S. will need to put forth to realize this plan, it is important to recognize the potential economic opportunity with Russia that will undoubtedly be lost if the missile shield is brought to fruition. Pursuing closer and more favorable ties with Russia, which will hinge on the outcome of this particular issue, needs to be a major priority for the U.S.

Behind Saudi Arabia, Russia is the second largest oil-exporting nation on Earth, and yet its oil comprises a relatively insignificant percentage of the total U.S. petroleum imports. In November 2008, the U.S. imported 450,000 barrels of petroleum per day from Russia. That same month, the U.S. imported 1,236,000 barrels per day from Venezuela and 1,514,000 barrels per day from Saudi Arabia, two countries whose relationships with the U.S. are, at best, quite tense. In this way, the U.S. stands to gain a great deal from cooperation with Russia. Economic collaboration between the two would substantially reduce American dependence on states and leaders that are known opponents’ for vital resources. That said, given the way in which talks alone of ABM construction in Central Europe have upset Russia to such an extent, following through with the plan would surely derail any dialogue on expanding U.S.-Russian trade

possibilities. Thus, the opportunity is there, though as it stands it is contingent upon the U.S. deciding to freeze its ABM deployment in Central Europe.

**Security Implications**

Economics aside, there is a broad range of security implications associated with installing ABM components in Central Europe, as well as with pursuing a global missile shield, that the U.S. must take into account. Although the prospective layered BMDS is designed to provide America uncompromising protection from "rogue" nations, in reality it represents a gross misclassification of what the real threats are to the United States. With thousands of strategic nuclear weapons alone, Russia poses the greatest physical threat to the U.S.\(^{12}\) In response to the ABM plans for Poland and the Czech Republic, Russia has suspended its commitment to the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which provides added security for U.S. NATO allies by restricting the number of heavy weapons deployed between the Ural Mountains and the Atlantic.\(^{13}\) On top of this, Moscow has discussed the possibility of withdrawing from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, under which the U.S. and Russia committed to eliminate existing stock and cease production of all mid-range ballistic and cruise missiles.\(^{14}\) President Dmitri' Medvedev has even warned that Russia may deploy Iskander tactical missiles to Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave that borders Poland, unless the U.S. reverses its plan to install ABM facilities in Central Europe.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) Hildreth and Ek, 2.
Although Russia is not likely to mount an attack against the U.S. or its allies any time in the foreseeable future, it makes little sense to pursue policies that breed tension between the two. Taking into account the extent of Russia’s arsenal, it is still clearly in the best interest of Washington to push for discussion and transparency with the Kremlin on the matter. That being said, the most tangible and pressing threat to the U.S. is irrefutably that of terrorism. Unlike concerns about Russia and international pariahs like Iran, which are speculative, the threat from terrorists is real and proven, having materialized on several occasions. An ABM system, either in Europe or worldwide, would do nothing to address terrorism, and therefore does not align with U.S. defense priorities.

On the other hand, Russia would be a critical ally to the U.S. both in the war on terror and in bringing Iran to the table. A close partnership with Russia is vital to successfully combating terrorism for four key reasons. First, Russia is situated in a very strategic geographic location, as it has extensive borders with Europe and Asia, and can act as a gateway to the Middle East. An involved cooperation with Russia would give the U.S. much easier access to parts of the world that have historically produced terrorists and disseminated intense anti-Americanism. Second, Russia will undoubtedly share a firm commitment to aggressively targeting terrorists, due to its own enduring struggle with terrorist activity, primarily from Chechen separatist organizations. It has long been a concern for Moscow, and therefore enthusiasm on the part of the Russian government will likely match that of the U.S.

Third, the U.S. has a vested interest in establishing an environment of transparency and open communication with Russia regarding its stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Russia has many borders to monitor, and the potential for nuclear weapons to be compromised and obtained by a third party, notably a terrorist organization, is not entirely far-fetched. This is a worst-
case scenario for the U.S. that would almost certainly bring about devastating consequences, but a close cooperation with Russia on the issue would grant Washington much more control in preventing it. Finally, Russia recently became the world leader in arms deals, and many of its primary customers are vociferously anti-American countries, including Iran and Venezuela. Of major concern here is how such trade facilitates the siphoning of arms from the state down to state-sponsored groups that, by ‘Western’ standards, carry out terrorist activities. For example, during its month-long war with Hezbollah in 2006, Israel discovered Russian-made anti-tank weapons that had been effectively employed against their tanks.\textsuperscript{16} The U.S. needs to engage with Russia closely, on friendly terms, so that it can work to curb such transactions, or at least better monitor them. If the Obama administration continues with the construction of the projected missile defenses in Central Europe, Russia will surely be disinclined to cooperate with the U.S. on virtually any plan in the arena of arms control.

In this way, we can see how the future of the war on terror is inextricably, if indirectly, linked to U.S. ABM policy. Of equal consequence, however, are the implications of an ABM system in Europe for potential future U.S. policies towards Iran. To proceed with missile defenses, and in so doing anger Russia and wholly ostracize Iran, demonstrates a lack of both foresight and judgment. This is an unprecedented opportunity for the U.S. to secure a direct dialogue with Iran and yield real results by exploiting its dependence on Russia. Russia is Iran’s chief arms supplier, having sold it hundreds of major weapons systems since the early 1990s worth billions of dollars, including tanks, missiles, combat aircraft and more. In addition, Russia has recently built a nuclear reactor at Bushehr, in Iran.\textsuperscript{17} Due to the nature of this


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}
relationship, Russia has significant economic leverage over Iran. The U.S., on the other hand, is hardly on speaking terms with Iran, and yet it is one of Washington’s primary concerns: so much that the U.S. is prepared to spend billions of dollars to defend against the possibility of an Iranian attack that may in fact never happen. To follow through and complete the ABM project in Europe would be to close the door on Russia and to end any chances at discourse with Iran. It would perpetuate a mindset of secrecy, unilateralism, and militarism, thus breeding further opacity and mistrust, which is the last thing the U.S. should encourage in this part of the world.

Instead, it is essential that the U.S. take advantage of the current situation. It is exceedingly clear that Moscow does not want American ABM components in Central Europe, which gives Washington a degree of leverage. Considering this, the U.S. can incentivize Russia to “coerce” Iran, by economic means, into greater compliance with the world community. If it means the U.S. will stall or cancel the ABM project in Europe, Russia will likely cooperate, and to prevent potential economic restrictions from Russia, Iran will likely cooperate. In this way, the U.S. can demand a legitimate transparency from Iran with regards to its arms deals, missile production and its nuclear program, including full conformity to IAEA inspections and safeguards. This will both address U.S. regional concerns and save substantial amounts of money, as such an approach would eliminate the need for a European ABM system altogether. With this as motivation, Russia will be very inclined to commit time and resources in order to produce results.

Finally, the construction of ABM defenses in Europe, in addition to the pursuit of a worldwide missile shield, will only further tarnish the U.S. reputation in the global community. Given its hegemonic status, anything the U.S. does is visible to the rest of the world and thereby subject to close scrutiny. Following through with the European missile defenses, considering the circumstances, is both contradictory to U.S. rhetoric calling for
global disarmament and counterproductive to the nonproliferation efforts it endorses. The U.S. will undoubtedly lose substantial credibility in the realm of international arms control as a country that is genuinely pushing to curtail the spread of weapons. In a time when the efficacy of international organizations and accords is frequently called into question, this would set a bad example for the rest of the world, further removing incentive for states to adhere to bi- and multilateral agreements. Furthermore, the pursuit of comprehensive missile defenses to shield oneself from threats anywhere in the world serves to perpetuate a sense of paranoia in the international community, and promotes the notion of competition over cooperation.

**Conclusions**

In summary, it is essential that the United States halt construction of ABM facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic and instead engage with Russia on friendly terms. It is also advisable that the U.S. reconsider the idea of building a layered ballistic missile defense network altogether. Missile defense is an exceptionally costly endeavor, and given the indefinite nature of the U.S. plan for a comprehensive system, it will come with an undeterminable, albeit unquestionably steep price tag. In a time of global recession, this is not a practical allocation of American funds from an already strapped federal budget. Conversely, the U.S. stands to benefit greatly from more favorable economic ties with Russia considering its status as an oil exporter, though this will be unattainable if the plans for a European missile shield proceed.

On top of this, devoting such a significant portion of U.S. defense capital, both monetary and intellectual, indicates an improper assessment of the threats that truly face America in the world today. Not only does the plan do nothing to address the problem of terrorism, it closes the door on what would be a pivotal alliance in the “war on terror” with Russia. Moreover, collaboration with Russia can be used as an effective means to
bring Iran into greater compliance with international regulatory regimes, and also to initiate a constructive dialogue between the U.S. and Iranian leadership. Such an approach addresses a number of U.S. concerns, and in an inexpensive and minimally confrontational manner, as it would negate the need for ABM defenses in Europe on the whole. Lastly, amid recent controversy involving human rights and selective adherence to international accords, the remaining vestiges of the United States’ reputation as a promoter of peace and cooperation would not likely survive the diplomatic fallout from such a project.

It is clear that the only practical choice for the U.S. is to abandon its ABM ambitions in Central Europe in favor of diplomacy. This will necessarily oblige the U.S. to reenter discussions on ABM policy with Russia in order to come to an agreement that is mutually satisfactory. This is hardly a concession for the U.S., taking into account both the dire backlash that will inevitably surface if Washington’s stance on the matter does not change, and the potential for economic and security gains that would accompany a more involved alliance with Russia. Ultimately the U.S. has much to gain from closer ties and an all around healthier relationship with Russia, though for anything to materialize, it is imperative that the Obama administration critically reassess ABM policy in Europe and worldwide.
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