

Missile Defense Collision Course

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When President George W. Bush withdrew from the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty five years ago, he asserted that “my decision to withdraw from the treaty will not, in any way, undermine our new relationship or Russian security.” Now, Bush’s latest proposal to site 10 ground-based interceptors in Poland and an advanced radar in the Czech Republic has severely compounded the Kremlin’s anxieties about growing U.S. offensive and defensive strategic capabilities.

President Vladimir Putin’s response to missile defense deployments in two former Warsaw Pact states has been hostile and counterproductive: he has threatened to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty; to target the sites with Russian missiles; and to stop work on a Joint Data Exchange Center intended to help avoid an accidental or mistaken nuclear attack.

For some Americans and Europeans, a rudimentary defense against a potential long-range missile threat from Iran may seem attractive. But for now, it is a flawed idea whose time has not come.

Russia’s concerns may be exaggerated, but that does not alter the reality that the European anti-missile plan is premature and the technology unproven. And, if Washington presses ahead despite Russian objections, it could trigger the renewal of U.S.-Russian missile competition and hamper efforts to further reduce each nation’s still massive nuclear warhead and missile arsenals.

In recent weeks, U.S. officials have crisscrossed Europe to say the proposed system is not designed to counter Russia’s nuclear-armed missiles and therefore does not threaten Russia’s security. To be sure, 10 U.S. interceptors would only provide a rudimentary defense against a handful of incoming missiles, let alone Russia’s current force of some 500 land-based missiles. Highly scripted tests involving prototypes of ground-based interceptors now deployed in California and Alaska have failed three out of five times since 2002. The proposed system in Europe would use a new type of interceptor that has yet to be built, let alone tested.

But just as U.S. officials are seeking missile defenses against an Iranian missile threat that does not exist, Russian leaders are worried they cannot maintain their strategic nuclear retaliatory capability against a porous strategic missile defense that has not been built and a potential U.S. nuclear buildup that will not likely materialize.

Why? Because old habits die hard. Russia and the United States each still deploy approximately 4,000 nuclear warheads on delivery vehicles on high alert, and as a result, military strategists on both sides plan for the worst. Under the flimsy 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), the United States will be able to maintain a large “hedge” arsenal of reserve warheads and excess missile capacity. After SORT expires in 2012, the United States could increase its deployed strategic arsenal from 2,200 to well over 4,000 nuclear warheads.

Russia is on a path to maintain approximately 2,000 deployed strategic warheads by 2012. But the size of Russia’s long-range missile force would be relatively smaller. Independent estimates are that Russia’s land-based missile force could shrink dramatically, down to as few as 150 by the year 2015.

Russia’s fear is that the larger and more accurate U.S. missile arsenal would be capable of delivering a decapitating first strike. U.S. missile defense assets could then counter the few remaining missiles

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based in Russia's European territory that might survive and be launched.

To avoid this scenario, Russia could slow its planned nuclear force reductions and accelerate deployment of new long-range missile systems, an option made easier if the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty is allowed to expire in 2009. But dismantling strategic arms reductions pacts in order to preserve Russia's ability to annihilate the United States does not make missile defense a better idea.

Unfortunately, Bush and Putin will not likely resolve their differences and avert a collision on missile defense any time soon. Putin's offer to use the Russian-leased Gabala radar in Azerbaijan to evaluate Iran's missile program and, if necessary, to use other basing plans that would not interfere with Russian missiles is worth exploring. Nevertheless, the White House seems determined to begin construction of the European system before Bush leaves office.

Such an approach is mistaken and reckless. There should be no rush to deploy an unproven system against a potential missile threat that will not likely materialize until 2015 or beyond. In any case, Congress is on track to cut the administration's \$310 million request for the European strategic missile defense project and focus U.S. efforts on more capable short- and medium-range interceptors.

The United States and its NATO partners should defer work on the European strategic missile defense project until Bush's and Putin's successors arrive. In the meantime, they should engage Russia in a meaningful dialogue to address its missile defense concerns, explore technical alternatives, and advance new proposals for deeper warhead and missile force cuts that would reduce tensions and erase Russian fears of U.S. nuclear supremacy.

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