

## Strategic Missile Defense: A Threat to Future Nuclear Arms Reductions?

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**Threat Assessment Brief**  
*Analysis on Effective Policy Responses to Weapons-Related  
Security Threats*

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As the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and the Phased Adaptive Approach for U.S. missile defenses in Europe are implemented, the threat to international stability from the U.S.-Russian dispute over missile defense is entering a dormant phase. U.S. strategic missile defenses, however, still lurk as a potential spoiler for achieving future reductions in offensive nuclear weapons. Whether or not such defenses prove capable of intercepting the limited number of long-range missiles that Iran and North Korea may deploy over the next 10 years, strategic missile interceptors are fully capable of shooting down prospects for further cuts in U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons. In order to continue shrinking Cold War nuclear arsenals and to prevent nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism, this challenge must be confronted and overcome.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- The United States successfully rebuffed Russia's attempts to incorporate limits on U.S. missile defense plans in New START and won Moscow's acknowledgment that current U.S. missile defenses do not threaten Russia's deterrent.
- President Barack Obama's decision to extend the time frame for introducing strategic missile defenses to Europe helped convince Russia it could accept New START reductions in strategic offensive forces without jeopardizing Russia's nuclear retaliatory capability.
- New START and renewed efforts to cooperate with Russia on missile defense have mitigated long-running tensions over strategic missile defenses, but future, unconstrained strategic U.S. missile defense deployments could make Russia increasingly resistant to further reductions in offensive nuclear forces.
- U.S. plans to deploy near the western borders of the former Soviet Union by 2020 interceptors with capabilities against long-range ballistic missiles are likely eventually to confront Washington with a range of difficult choices for nuclear arms control policy:
  - Continue exempting strategic missile defense from treaties, which may cause Russia to do what the United States would do in its place — avoid limits on strategic offensive forces to ensure that opposing missile defenses could be defeated;
  - Develop extensive means of strategic missile defense cooperation between the United States, NATO, and Russia; and/or
  - Accept modest constraints on strategic missile defenses, to avoid a countervailing buildup in Russian offensive forces.
- Although domestic political considerations may point toward the first choice, nonproliferation and stability objectives argue for the latter. It is an open question whether missile defense cooperation alone can bridge this divide.

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With [Russia's ratification](#) of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the stage is now set for new discussions between Washington and Moscow on further steps toward reducing the two states' enormous nuclear arsenals that together comprise more than 90 percent of total nuclear weapons worldwide. Based on statements in Russia's ratification documents and the statements of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, continued U.S.-Russian disagreements on missile defenses threaten to undermine those future talks. U.S. policymakers need to consider ways to prevent strategic missile defense system development and deployment from becoming an obstacle to progress in enhancing stability and reducing nuclear dangers. In his latest Threat Assessment Brief, ACA's senior fellow [Greg Thielmann](#) analyzes the nature of the U.S.-Russian missile defense

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