The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Missile Defense Talks Will Fail

By Ruslan Pukhov

May 26, 2011



At a news conference on May 18, President Dmitry Medvedev once again made the claim that the elements of a U.S. missile defense system to be deployed in Europe would actually be aimed against Russia because the "rogue" states for which they are ostensibly intended do not constitute a threat. Later, General Staff deputy chief Andrei Tretyak declared that the United States would be able to effectively intercept Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-based ballistic missiles by 2015 with the planned deployment of Washington's SM-3 missile defense system in Poland. U.S. President Barack Obama will visit Poland this weekend to discuss the missile defense plans.

A fatal flaw undermines Russia's objections. A technical analysis of the U.S. plans indicates that U.S. missile defenses, in their current configuration, will be unable to significantly reduce the strike potential of Russian ICBMs for the next 10 to 15 years. The 30 Ground Based Interceptor (GBI) systems currently deployed in Alaska and California are not capable of intercepting more than seven or eight Topol-M missiles. In their current Block I/IA configuration, the SM-3 missile defense systems deployed on U.S. ships are unlikely to be able to intercept Russian ICBMs and their warheads. Due to their location, the GBI systems

deployed in Alaska and California would probably also prove ineffective at intercepting Russian ICBMs and are more likely intended for countering a potential threat from North Korea.

Eastern Europe, however, does appear to be a logical location for deploying a missile defense system to intercept intermediate-range and intercontinental missiles launched from Iran — should Tehran eventually develop them. If those missiles were launched toward Europe or North America, Romania and Poland really would be the optimal geographic center for deploying an interceptor system. At the same time, the ground-based SM-3 system that the United States proposes deploying there would lack the necessary range to intercept Russian ICBMs launched from bases in Tatishchevo and Kozelsk.

That shows that the U.S. missile defense system is basically focused on countering the missile threat posed by rogue states. But that is only half the picture. The real reason for Washington's large-scale missile defense work is much more far reaching, and this is what gives Russian politicians and military chiefs legitimate cause for concern.

The fundamental motivation behind U.S. missile defense is a desire to ensure the complete security of U.S. territory. When the Soviet Union first threatened U.S. security with its nuclear missiles in the 1960s — thereby ending its historical invulnerability — it came as a shock to U.S. citizens and shook up Washington's defense policy. It is not surprising that Washington's strategic goal ever since has been to restore the status quo ante. But technological and economic factors make it impossible to create a missile defense system that could guarantee protection to all U.S. territory in the event of a massive nuclear missile attack.

That is why Washington has set the goal of creating a limited missile defense system that would fend off a rudimentary missile attack by rogue states. At the same time, such a move is an intermediate step or testing ground toward creating a full-scale system.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said something like: "Absolute security for one means a complete lack of security for everybody else." And that best describes Russia's position on U.S. missile defense. For Russia, preserving the effectiveness of its strategic nuclear forces is a categorical imperative to its national security. For relatively little expense, Russia's nuclear forces support the country's status as a great power, provide a military deterrent to other major powers, and enable it to maintain moderately sized conventional forces.

Even the hypothetical possibility that Russia's nuclear forces would be devalued threatens the foundation of Russia's military security. For that reason, opposition to an expanded U.S. missile defense system is one of the cornerstones of Russian security policy.

At the same time, Russia is unable to stop the U.S. missile defense program. A broad consensus exists in the United States for striving to provide the most complete protection possible against any missile attack on the country's territory. It is hopeless to hold talks with the United States on the subject of missile defense, just as there is no way to involve the United States in contractual obligations for chimerical "joint missile defense" projects.

President Dmitry Medvedev's proposal to create a pan-European missile defense system with Russia's participation also appears to be entirely unrealistic. Toward that end, Russia has

offered use of its missile attack early warning system, primarily the installation in Gabala, Azerbaijan, and the Voronezh-DM unit in Armavir. But the West sees the missile defense offer as an attempt to paralyze or slow the creation of a U.S. missile defense system in Europe and therefore has no intention of striking a deal with Moscow.

Meanwhile, the downside to Russia's talk on joint missile defense is that it implicitly gives legitimacy to U.S. plans to create a limited missile defense system and erodes the clarity and integrity of the Russian position on the issue. Russia's actions undermine its own argument against the deployment of U.S. missile defense installations in Romania and Poland. That is why Russia's Western partners are willing to continue talks on a joint missile defense system while having no intention of actually working with Russia in that area.

And despite the general consensus among the Russian elite regarding U.S. missile defense plans, Moscow's foreign policy on the subject lacks consistency and coherency.

Considering that it has no political or diplomatic leverage it can use to stop or at least slow developments in the U.S. missile defense program, Russia must rely on a military and technical approach for countering it. This primarily means that it must upgrade the quantity and quality of its nuclear forces, and should create a new generation of heavy, ground-based multistage missiles to replace its SS-18 Satan series.

Ruslan Pukhov is director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies and publisher of the journal Moscow Defense Brief.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/05/26/why-missile-defense-talks-will-fail-a7235