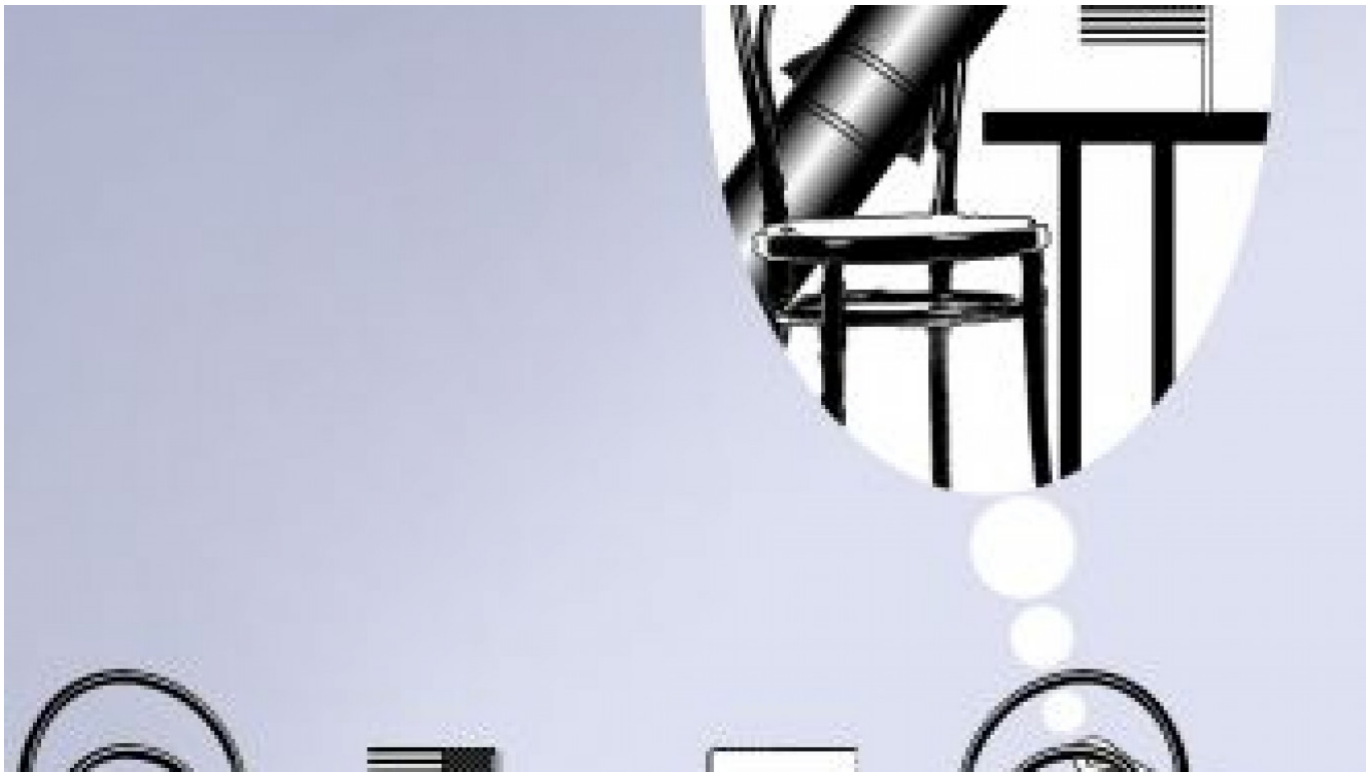
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The Missile Defense Hyperbole Game

By Greg Thielmann

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In principle, both Russia and the United States have endorsed cooperation on missile defense. Absent cooperation, the two countries are unlikely to make further progress on reducing their still bloated nuclear arsenals.

Senior officials from both countries — and NATO — have been engaged in discussions to work out modalities for missile defense cooperation, but concrete agreements have so far been elusive. A meeting on Wednesday in Brussels between Russian and NATO defense ministers will provide another opportunity to spell out how cooperation can work in practice.

If Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama show the necessary political will and leadership, it is still possible to provide mutual, written guarantees that any future strategic missile defense deployments will not be directed at the other. They can also develop a joint data fusion center on missile launches by third countries, such as Iran, that could pose a threat to Russia, Europe and perhaps the United States.

Unfortunately, opponents of arms control in the U.S. Congress have been trying to limit the extent of missile defense cooperation through legislation. At the same time, some portions of

Russia's military have been undermining the trust necessary to institutionalize cooperation by misrepresenting the facts on missile defense.

Even in this post-Cold War and financially constrained era, arms control efforts are still encumbered by the dynamics of worst-case scenario thinking and parochial defense budget advocacy. U.S. politicians and commentators regularly exaggerate the contribution of missile defenses against a nuclear-armed missile threat and the progress of the Iranian and North Korean ballistic missile forces against which U.S. missile defenses are directed. Their Russian counterparts exaggerate the potential of future U.S. missile defenses to threaten Moscow's sophisticated strategic nuclear forces.

Given lingering suspicions and the inherently subjective nature of estimating future capabilities, it may be too much to expect more realism in the discussion. But it is perfectly reasonable to expect national leaders — and the experts who advise them — to avoid willful misstatements and fatuous logic.

I have taken opponents of New START to task for distortions about Russian offensive nuclear capabilities and attempts by U.S. politicians to belittle Moscow's concerns about U.S. strategic missile defense programs. But some recent Russian commentary on missile defense is equally distorted and unhelpful to finding a mutually satisfactory path.

In 2009, Obama canceled the illogical plans of President George W. Bush to deploy U.S. strategic missile interceptors in Poland and a powerful radar in the Czech Republic by 2015, meanwhile leaving Southeastern Europe unprotected against Iran's existing medium-range missile threat. In its place, he announced a European Phased Adaptive Approach, or EPAA, which is much more closely oriented toward the actual and emerging ballistic missile threat from Iran.

In combination with New START, the Obama approach constituted an opportunity to "reset" the U.S.-Russian relationship. The new timetable bought several more years to resolve some of the acute conflicts between U.S. and Russian notions of how strategic missile defenses affect the overall balance of forces.

Only during the third phase of EPAA, starting in 2018, would enlarged SM-3 interceptors be deployed against a potential intermediate-range ballistic missile threat from the Middle East. Only in the fourth phase would additional refinements give the SM-3 a capability in 2020, or perhaps later, to enhance existing U.S.-based defenses against a handful of potential ICBMs from the Middle East.

Yet official Russian spokesmen have repeatedly made inaccurate or misleading statements about U.S. plans. Two weeks ago, General Staff deputy chief Andrei Tretyak claimed that Russian strategic nuclear weapons would be threatened by the third phase of EPAA, erroneously stating that this phase would start in 2015, three years before it is actually scheduled.

General Staff spokesman Vyacheslav Kondrashov asserted that neither Iran nor North Korea "presently possesses ballistic missiles capable of striking the United States or any NATO nation." Yet NATO member Turkey shares a border with Iran and is therefore within range of the numerous short- and medium-range ballistic missiles deployed by Iran.

While it might be easy to dismiss Russian official statements as careless but harmless hyperbole, On May 20, during the International Legal Forum in St. Petersburg, Medvedev himself used 2015 as "the beginning of the threat to Russia's security."

Russia insisted on including a preamble to New START stipulating that current strategic defensive systems should not "undermine the viability and effectiveness of the strategic offensive arms of the parties." Today, the United States has deployed 30 ground-based strategic interceptors in Alaska and California, designed to protect the U.S. homeland against limited ICBM attack. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov confirmed this on May 16, when he said "existing U.S. missile defense elements do not pose a threat to Russia."

Similar realism is very much needed from both sides in the delicate negotiations to achieve a level of U.S.-Russian cooperation on missile defenses. This will help Moscow and Washington address the mutual threat from emerging nuclear proliferators in the Middle East while satisfying Russia's legitimate concerns about protecting the credibility of its nuclear deterrent.

For Russian officials to exaggerate the perceived threat by misrepresenting U.S. plans and capabilities is destructive. It misleads the Russian public and fosters distrust in the United States about Moscow's motives, wasting the window of opportunity afforded by the Obama administration's policies to reduce U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals and engage other nuclear-armed states in the nuclear disarmament process.

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