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Holding the Reset Hostage

By Alejandro Sueldo

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U.S.-Russian relations are stalling. While U.S. officials hailed progress on eased visa rules and child adoptions as a highlight of bilateral relations, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov labeled missile defense as the greatest "irritant" and "key issue" to define U.S.-Russian talks in Washington last week. Russia has again stalled the "reset" and passed on an opportunity to move relations beyond security issues and historical confrontation.

Lavrov's statement comes as no surprise, however. Russia's nuclear arsenal plays a predominant role in sustaining the country's international prestige, and thus the Kremlin balks at any hint of a devaluing its strategic force by a U.S. missile defense system.

There is a fundamental disconnect in how Russia and the United States view missile defense and security threats. Because Russia does not view Iran — even a nuclear-armed Iran — as a real threat, it refutes the need for a sophisticated U.S.-designed missile defense system in Europe. First, Iran does not yet possess the missile capabilities sufficient to threaten Russia. Second, Russia believes it can use its nuclear arsenal and historic ties with Iran to ameliorate any possible threat. Comparisons can be drawn to Pakistan, India or North Korea, countries

that possess nuclear weapons capable of reaching Russian territory but pose no real threat because Russia could obliterate these countries with its existing nuclear force.

Concomitantly, the reality of an impending nuclear Iran drives a Russian policy that seeks to maintain constructive ties with Iran. This hedging policy is driven by the idea that Russia has more to gain from a friendly, nuclear-armed Iran to one that is resentful if Russia supports international efforts to constrain its nuclear program. This policy is also driven by three important factors: Russia's military-industrial complex seeks to gain economically from ties with Iran; the Kremlin views Iran and North Korea as key to restraining U.S. interests in their regions; and much like the West, Russia recognizes that short of a military strike, there is little Russia can do to seriously curtail Iran's nuclear program.

Russia privately recognizes that missile defense as planned does not currently pose a challenge mainly because the location, range and number of planned interceptors are too far, too short and too few to undermine Russia's strategic nuclear forces.

Much of Russia's opposition to missile defense is therefore driven by political posturing. Russia perceives that its influence in European affairs is limited and that missile defense establishes a precedent by sidelining Russia on a pivotal European security issue. What Russia's leadership must recognize, however, is that there is little Russia can do if the United States decides to move forward on missile defense with or without Russian cooperation.

Russia thus holds the "reset" hostage by stalling relations because of missile defense. While it does not need missile defense nor is threatened by it, Russia uses it to obtain support for its prerogatives in exchange for backing issues pivotal to the West, such as Afghanistan and Libya. It comes as no surprise that Lavrov was also keen on discussing with Washington Russia's long-pending membership to the World Trade Organization.

Much as it does with nuclear disarmament, Russia will spin out talks on missile defense for as long as possible, so as to maximize the benefits this garners, but will never publicly accept it. This is because it cannot be seen as bowing down to the United States, and because the real and perceived credibility of its nuclear deterrent is the key to its seat at the great powers' table. At the same time, Russia recognizes that its ability to influence European security is waning, and, that Russia risks being sidelined if it does not engage on missile defense.

It would be a lost opportunity if Russia did not take part in some missile defense project. Cooperation must satiate Russia's desire to be viewed as an equal with the United States.As the stronger partner, the United States can afford to be more accommodating to Russian concerns, namely regarding missile defense. This is also in line with historical U.S. efforts to break the inertia of negative trends in relations, such as the current "reset" policy. Doing so would hamper Russia's need to and rationale for holding bilateral relations hostage, and help foster greater cooperation on mutual concerns.

Alejandro Sueldo is a scholar with the Center for Strategic & International Studies and the author of "Contextualizing and Engaging Russian Nuclear Policy."

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