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The Kremlin's Missile Defense Follies

By Alexander Golts

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Every so often, a figure appears on the Russian political scene who acts as a pilot fish. By observing his actions, it is possible to deduce what the big sharks of domestic policy are up to.

Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's envoy to NATO, is the country's latest pilot fish. He declined to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections, telling reporters that it is much more important for him to continue working as the Kremlin's envoy for negotiations on missile defense.

Moscow's main goal is to drag out missile defense negotiations as long as possible. Rogozin sees more job security in this sphere than in the State Duma. We can already safely assume that Moscow will continue to place missile defense at the top of the U.S.-

Russia agenda. I have repeatedly stated in this column that former U.S. President George W. Bush created the global missile defense program in the early 2000s for purely political reasons. In the first place, neither Iran nor North Korea will be able to build long-range nuclear missiles capable of striking U.S. territory in the foreseeable future. Second, it is doubtful that missile defense technology will ever be capable of intercepting an incoming ballistic missile, particularly one with multiple decoys. That is like trying to hit one bullet with

another bullet.

Despite all of these inherent weaknesses in missile defense, Moscow has always claimed that the proposed U.S. missile defense system — both Bush's plan as well as the scaled-down plan of U.S. President Barack Obama — threatens to undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent. Nobody in Russia could come up with clear, intelligible reasons why missile defense could ever weaken Russia. Instead, the Kremlin's main motive was to find a pretext to protest U.S. foreign and defense policy.

That is precisely why President Dmitry Medvedev made the nonstarter proposal at the November NATO summit for a "sector-based" missile defense program in which Russia would ensure protection for NATO member states against missiles that originate from the south and pass over Russian territory bound for the United States or Europe.

The most amusing part of this proposal is that Russia does not have, nor will it have in the foreseeable future, the capabilities to work with the United States to jointly defend against intercontinental missiles. (Russia's main missile defense installation in the Moscow region is completely unsuitable for a joint system.) The S-400 missile defense systems are capable of intercepting cruise missiles only, and the S-500 system, intended to take out ballistic missiles, has not gotten further than the drawing board.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin stubbornly insists that it has the missile defense capabilities to protect European territory from an enemy missile. In pushing the sector-based proposal, Russia is dreaming that it can be on the same level as the United States. But Washington will never fall for this because it knows all too well how far Russia is behind the United States in terms of missile defense technology.

What makes Moscow's proposal even more absurd are the statements we hear from time to time from Russian hawks about the implied threat of a U.S. first nuclear strike against Russia. How can you talk seriously about any cooperation on missile defense — even the most modest cooperation — when senior Russian officials still hint that a U.S. nuclear attack is possible?

As for the Obama administration, U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Alexander Vershbow recently came to Moscow with a very reasonable offer. He proposed creating two joint missile defense centers with Russia. The first center would be for exchanging all information that the two countries' early warning radar stations gather concerning missile attacks and the deployment of satellites. The second would be for the joint planning of operations, in which, according to Vershbow, Russian and U.S. officers would work shoulder to shoulder 24/7, developing military response plans under different attack scenarios.

These proposals were the most that Washington could offer considering Moscow's stance and capabilities. At the same time, however, the United States hopes that even modest cooperation will convince Moscow that the missile defense system it plans to deploy does not threaten Russia in any way.

The problem, though, is that Russian officials have been given instructions to reject everything Washington proposes. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov demonstrated the Kremlin's obstinacy best when he said two weeks ago, "If the U.S. speaks so confidently that the missile defense system it is creating is not aimed at Russia, why can't it put that down on paper?"

Lavrov was referring to the Kremlin's proposal that Washington sign an agreement that no missile defense system will ever be aimed at Russia or threaten its security. The problem, of course, is that "threat to national security" has always been a very loose concept for the Kremlin. Considering Russia's strategy to spoil U.S.-Russian relations at all costs, even a change in U.S. army uniforms could be considered a threat to the country's national security.

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