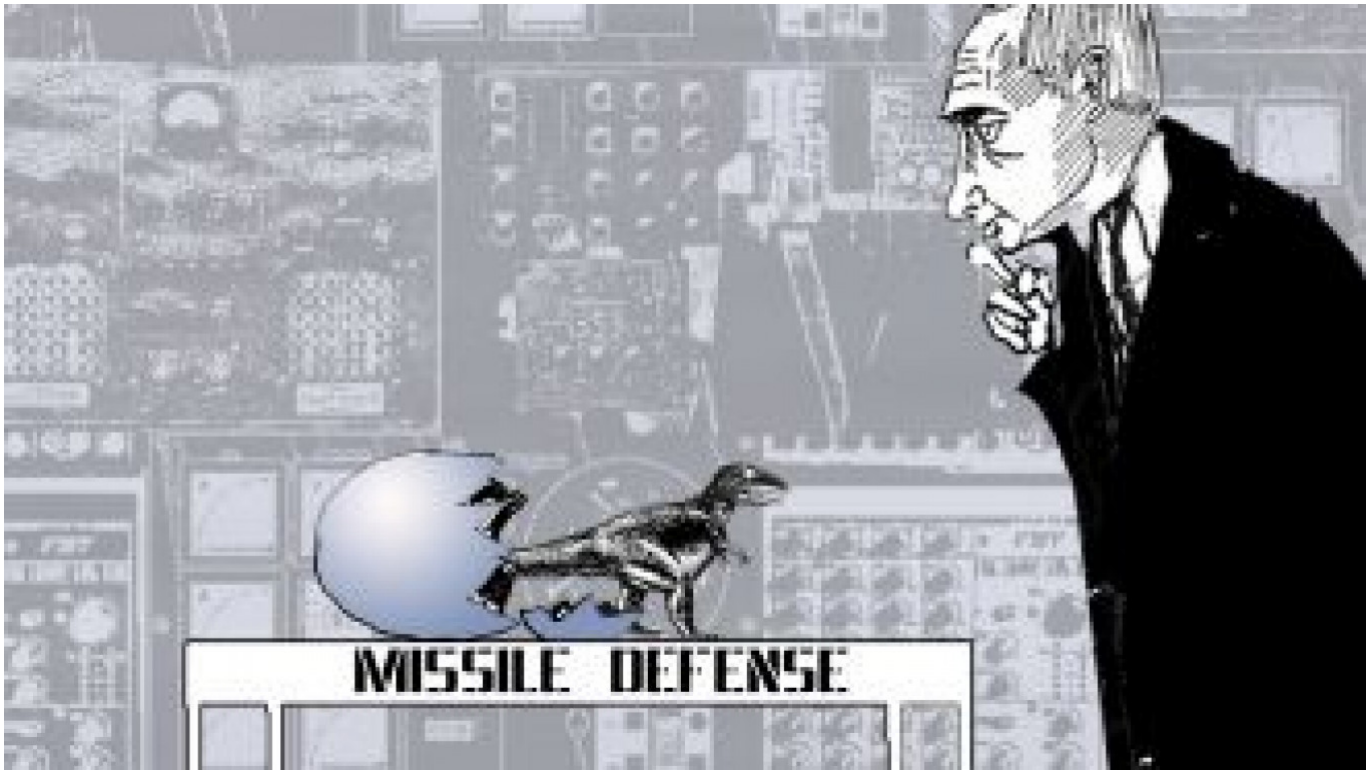
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The U.S. Obsession With Absolute Security

By Ruslan Pukhov

April 26, 2012



The United States is stepping up the creation of its missile defense system, which is based on two key elements. The first is the land- and sea-based Standard SM-3 interceptors, which are to be deployed in Europe and, at some point in the future, in Asia. The second consists of a limited number of the more high-energy GBI interceptors, already deployed in the United States.

Officially, the main purpose of the system is to defend against the potential intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM, and intermediate-range missile threat from Iran and North Korea. It is said that the system is not targeted against Russian or Chinese ICBMs. Washington has always argued that it is building a limited missile defense system that does not jeopardize the nuclear deterrence capability of the other nuclear powers.

There is no doubt that in its current form, the U.S. missile defense system does not pose a threat to Russia's strategic nuclear forces. Nor will it pose such a threat in the next 10 to 15 years.

The number of U.S. missile defense interceptors is limited. So is its ability to intercept high-speed targets such as ICBMs. That is why the system cannot intercept any significant proportion of the Russian ICBMs. The 30 GBI interceptors that have already been deployed in the United States can probably take out no more than seven or eight single-warhead ICBMs, such as the Topol or Topol-M.

The SM-3 interceptors that will be deployed in Europe probably lack any capability against ICBMs and their warheads at the midcourse and terminal phases of their trajectory. It is possible that the SM-3 Block IB interceptors, which are scheduled for deployment in 2015, will have some capability against ICBMs, especially during the terminal phase, but that capability will probably be limited. But in 2020-25, the United States plans to deploy about 200 SM-3 Block IIB interceptors, which will be able to take out about 50 ICBM warheads.

Although the U.S. missile defense system is, in the short term, targeted against pariah states, it is obvious that this is only half of the truth. The true goals behind the large-scale missile defense program are far more ambitious.

The broader reason for the long-term U.S. missile defense program is Washington's desire to make the United States completely secure against all missile attacks. That aspiration for complete invulnerability is at the core of Washington's strategy for national security.

After the Soviet Union developed strategic missile capability in the early 1960s, the United States' period of complete invulnerability against a nuclear attack abruptly ended. That came as a massive shock to the American psyche and worldview, and the United States has still not overcome the consequences of that shock. It is no wonder that the country's political and military strategists have always aimed to restore the absolute invulnerability that the United States once enjoyed. This is possible if the United States develops advanced missile defense technologies.

This is why Moscow believes all U.S. assurances that its missile defense system "will not be aimed against Russia" to be empty and absurd. How can they be taken seriously if the ultimate goal of all U.S. missile defense programs is to achieve the complete defense of U.S. territory against all nuclear missile strikes — something that would eventually negate Russia's strategic nuclear capability?

Based on current projections, the U.S. missile defense system will remain "limited" for another 20 years. It is estimated that during that period the system will lack the numbers and performance characteristics to pose any real threat to the Russian strategic nuclear forces. But after 2030, the growing size and improving performance of the U.S. missile shield will put serious pressures on Russia's strategic nuclear forces.

Russia regards preserving its strategic nuclear deterrence capability as an absolute national security imperative in the face of the much greater integrated military and economic potential of the United States, NATO and China. Russia's strategic nuclear forces enable it to maintain its status as a great power, as well as a "great equalizer" vis-a-vis the military capabilities of other global powers. The country's nuclear arsenal makes it possible to pursue a policy of military deterrence without maintaining a huge and expensive conventional army. Finally, its nuclear deterrent serves as a guarantee that Russia will not be dragged into an armed conflict against its own will.

That is why in the long run the development of the U.S. missile defense program is a threat to the very foundations of Russia's national security.

At the same time, however, Russia lacks any real instruments to prevent the United States from implementing its missile defense plans or even to slow their progress. There is a solid consensus among many Americans and in the political establishment that the United States must attain maximum, total security against all missile attacks, including those that could be launched by Russia and China.

Moscow has nothing to offer Washington in return for abandoning its pursuit of absolute security through missile defense. Remember the 1986 summit in Reykjavik, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev offered U.S. President Ronald Reagan complete nuclear disarmament in return for abandoning the Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan's enormous program for global missile defense. It was not surprising that Reagan turned down the offer.

The United States' pursuit of an advanced global missile defense system is tightly intertwined with the idea of U.S. global dominance. This goes to the very heart of U.S. foreign and defense policy. For that reason, all negotiations with the United States on limiting missile defense issues end up going nowhere, something we have witnessed over the past several years, if not the past three decades. Given that Russia is the weaker party in bilateral relations, there is no compelling reason for Washington to tie its hands on an issue it considers central to its military and national security strategy just for the sake of good relations with Russia.

For this reason, it is equally hopeless for Russia to try to extract any binding commitments from the United States on missile defense by linking the issue to strategic nuclear reductions. Nor is there much point in negotiating with Washington about developing joint missile defense projects.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said, "Absolute security for one state means absolute insecurity for all others." It was laudable that Kissinger openly acknowledged this axiom. Now, Russia has to take the necessary measure to make sure that Kissinger's axiom doesn't become reality.

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/2012/04/26/the-us-obsession-with-absolute-security-a14399