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# U.S. Becoming More Flexible on Missile Defense

By Ilya Ponomaryov

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The Associated Press reported on Saturday that the U.S. Government Accountability Office, or GAO, sent a "secret briefing" to Congress. The GAO report cited a study by the U.S. Department of Defense that called into question whether the missile defense system that Washington plans to deploy in Europe would be capable of protecting Europe and the U.S. from Iranian mid-range and long-range missiles.

If the U.S. missile defense system is so ineffective, shouldn't this give the Kremlin a good reason to savor the latest flop by the Americans? Can we now assume that Moscow will no longer fear the U.S. missile defense system?

For years, Russian politicians and the media have debated U.S. plans to deploy a missile defense system in Europe and how it might pose a threat to Russia's national security. The conventional Russian argument was that a U.S. system deployed near Russia's borders would be intended more for defending against Russian long-range missiles than Iranian ones. To be sure, Russians are more concerned about the U.S. missile defense system than they are

about Tehran's nuclear program, which the West claims will give Iran the ability to produce nuclear weapons in the near future.

Yet similar claims were made about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction before the U.S. invaded the country — claims that turned out to be completely unfounded. But that didn't stop the U.S. from destroying a Russian ally and upsetting the balance of power in the Middle East, a situation that radical Islamists continue to exploit to their own advantage.

In the end, the Kremlin considers the U.S. a more dangerous threat to Moscow than Iran if for no other reason than Washington has already used nuclear weapons once, whereas it hasn't ever been proved conclusively that Iran is even in the process of developing a nuclear weapons program.

As with Iraq, there is good reason to believe that Washington has ulterior motives behind its confrontation with Tehran and its plans to deploy a missile defense system in Europe. Washington is targeting Iran for three reasons: Iran is a major producer of oil and gas; Iran has strategic control of the Straits of Hormuz; and the U.S. anti-Iran campaign is a key concession to the Jewish lobby.

U.S. plans to deploy a Europe-based missile defense system are also intended as a friendly gesture to strengthen military and security ties with Washington's Eastern European allies. What's more, the shield is a counterbalance to overly independent and self-sufficient Germany and France, where grass-roots anti-U.S. sentiment has reached levels that possibly rival that in Russia.

Another reason U.S. missile defense plans looked suspicious is that it is not clear why Iran is singled out among potential or even existing nuclear powers. There are countries — India and Pakistan — that are not official members of the five-member "nuclear club" (the U.S., Russia, France, Britain and China) but possess significant stockpiles of nuclear weapons. In addition, there is Israel, which possess nuclear weapons without officially admitting it, as well as North Korea, which is much more advanced in its nuclear program than Iran. Just on Tuesday, North Korea confirmed it conducted its third nuclear test.

Washington's proposed missile defense system in Europe cannot defend against a single one of those potential threats. What's more, the danger posed by terrorists who gain control of a nuclear device is far greater than any coming from Iran, North Korea, India and Pakistan combined.

Until now, Washington's desire to gratify Poland and other eastern European members of NATO with missile defense deployment was seemingly more important than maintaining good relations with Russia. But the release of information about the GAO report came at a good time. It may push the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama into taking a new look at its priorities. Perhaps the White House will finally realize that fully deploying an ineffective and expensive missile defense program isn't worth spoiling relations with Moscow.

If so, Obama can fulfill the promise he made during a private conversation with President Dmitry Medvedev during a hot-mic incident in March — that he would be "more flexible" over the missile defense program after his re-election.

Will the Kremlin respect Obama for keeping his word, or sneer at him for showing weakness? Perhaps this will only further convince Russian lawmakers that they were right after all to ban U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children. If Obama fulfills his promise to Medvedev, the Kremlin could even argue that the adoption ban paid handsome dividends — in particular, that it forced Obama to become more "flexible" (that is, pliant) on missile defense after he saw a strong, bold and decisive Russia standing up for the rights of its orphans.

Unfortunately, there is little cause to be optimistic.

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