

Missile Defense Is a Nice Problem to Have

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U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel

Washington's decision to scrap the last phase of the planned NATO missile shield for Europe elicited expectations that U.S.-Russian relations might improve by removing a major stumbling block that had irked Moscow.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced Friday that the U.S. would not carry out Phase 4 of the shield, which envisaged land-based interceptors in Poland and Romania. Moscow had fiercely opposed those plans, arguing against boosting American military presence close to Russia's borders.

But any hopes for a rapid thaw were dashed Monday, when both the Foreign Ministry and prominent pro-Kremlin lawmakers said they were unimpressed by the move.

Analysts argued that the negative reaction proved that the country's hawkish foreign policy

makers need controversies, if only for domestic purposes.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told Kommersant that he felt "no euphoria" because he saw no concession to Russia. Instead, he stressed that Moscow would continue to seek legally binding agreements that all of the missile defense shield's elements were not aimed at the country's strategic nuclear forces.

Vyacheslav Nikonov, a first deputy chairman of the State Duma's Foreign Affairs Relations Committee, said that the move hardly changed the military balance with the U.S.

In an interview with Interfax, he argued that the missile shield's first three phases already offered enough of a threat. He added that the U.S. decision to instead station interceptors in Alaska created another problem because this was again close to the country's borders. "We are talking about a general buildup of American missile deployments," Nikonov, a member of the governing United Russia faction, was quoted as saying.

Committee chairman Alexei Pushkov even argued that the move unmasked Washington's dishonesty. "The U.S. told us over and over that a missile shield must be deployed in Poland to counter a rocket attack from North Korea. Now they are deploying it in Alaska. Why did they lie?" he wrote on [Twitter](#).

In comments carried by Interfax, Pushkov added that this justified Moscow's reservations and showed the failure of Washington's policies. "The U.S. has practically admitted that Russia was right and that they mislead us," he was quoted as saying.

Experts polled for this article said the missile shield was an example of a problem that is better to have than to solve.

"Very often having a problem can have its own advantages; you can pin other problems on it," said Pavel Bayev of the Peace Research Institute Oslo.

He added that while this can hold true for both sides, in the case of missile defense it is clearly in the interest of President Vladimir Putin to keep the conflict simmering, while Washington would rather tone down the rhetoric.

Bayev argued that missile defense has become an essential element of the Kremlin's anti-American campaigns, ranging from recent sanctions against U.S. non-governmental organizations to the infamous ban on American adoptions of Russian children.

"This has become a cornerstone of anti-American policy. If it is taken away, everything looks shaky," he said by telephone from Norway.

Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, argued that Moscow was shying away from any positive reaction because it would threaten the image of the West that it built up over the past years.

"Any concession from the West destroys the image of Russia as a fortress surrounded by enemies," he said.

Moscow Times defense columnist Alexander Golts argued that Russia needed missile defense

as its bogeyman vis-a-vis the West.

Another controversy that might be labeled advantageous is Moscow's persistent failure to even reach a modest visa deal with the European Union.

Earlier this month, hopes were raised that a so-called facilitation agreement, allowing businesspeople, journalists and NGO workers to get long-term multiple-entry visitor visas, could be imminent.

The perspective arose after Germany gave up its opposition to a Russian demand to include a waiver for government officials, which had held up negotiations for more than a year.

But European officials then poured cold water on those hopes, pointing to a previously unknown Transportation Ministry decree stipulating that airlines must pass on sensitive passenger data to law enforcement authorities.

The decree is supposed to come into force on July 1 and covers all foreign airline flights, even those that only pass through the country's vast airspace — meaning that some 19 million passengers will be affected annually, according to EU officials.

Stefano Manservigi, the European Commission's second-highest home affairs official, said last week that the 27-member bloc would likely agree on a visa deal only if a sharing agreement for so-called passenger name records is reached — because otherwise flights originating in Europe would violate EU law.

While Brussels has reached sharing agreements with the U.S. and other countries in the past, officials complain that Moscow did not warn its partners in time. "This was like a hand grenade thrown into the ring," a European diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

However, experts said the visa issue cuts both ways because some European countries, first and foremost Germany, have signaled that they oppose visa-free travel with Russia because of migration and security concerns.

Sergei Utkin, a researcher with the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, said there was an element of arbitrariness in the European opposition to granting Russian officials visa-free travel. "They could have agreed on that early on, as they did with Moldova and Ukraine," he argued.

Utkin said that introducing complications was standard negotiation practice, not just in international diplomacy. "It happens when you haggle over a car," he said.

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