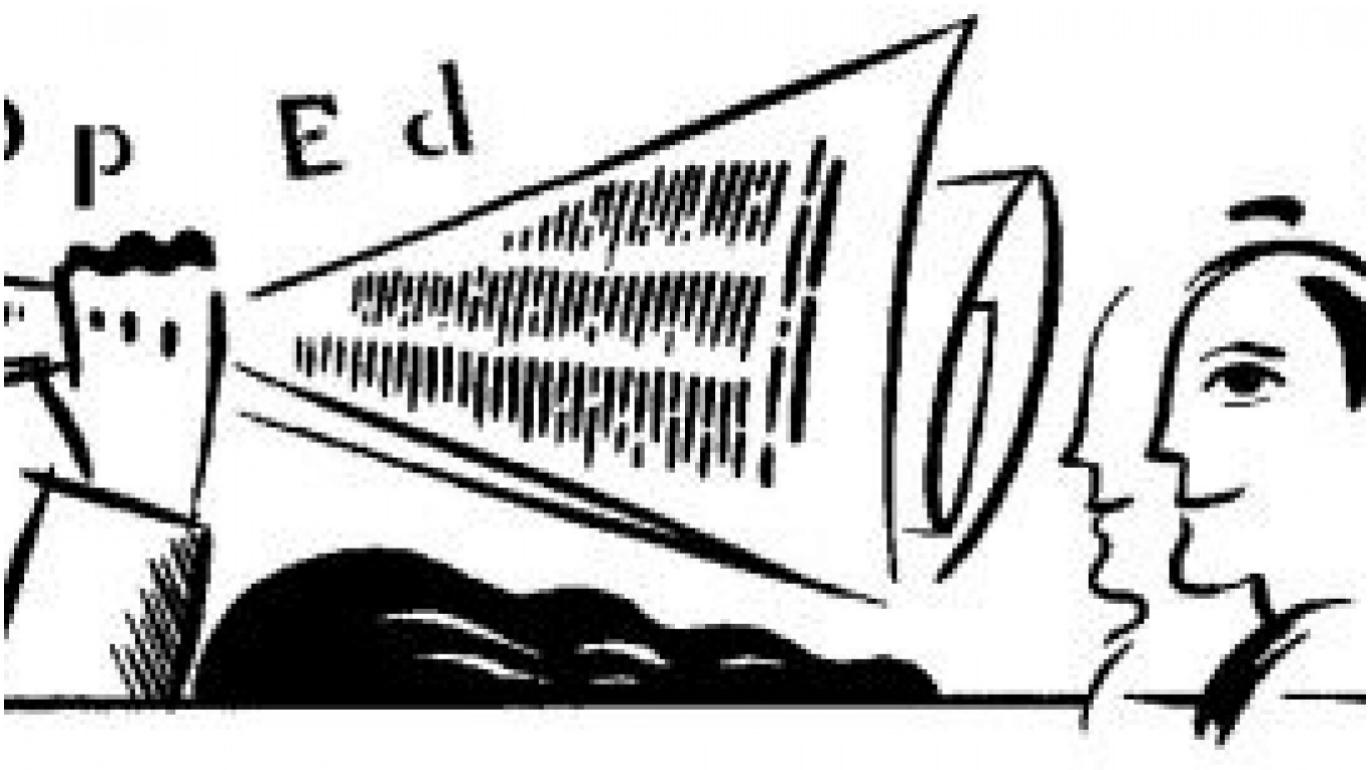
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How to Break the Deadlock on Missile Defense

By Daryl Kimball

May 26, 2013



When President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Barack Obama meet next month at the Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland and in St. Petersburg in September, they will have an important chance to move away from confrontation over missile defense and toward more cooperation. A good place to start is by accelerating the process of reducing their still massive and costly Cold War-era nuclear arsenals. Both sides should seize the opportunity.

Since 2011, U.S. and Russian leaders have failed to make progress on concepts for missile defense cooperation and data sharing, largely because of Russian concerns that U.S. plans for deployment of Standard Missile-3, or SM-3, IIB long-range interceptors in Poland by 2022 could threaten a portion of Russia's nuclear-armed ballistic missiles that are based in the European part of the country.

But on March 15, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced the effective cancellation of the program. He said the U.S. would "restructure" the SM-3 IIB program because of significant technical problems and funding shortfalls for the program, which would cost

about $10 billion just to develop.

Although Hagel only said the program was being "restructured" to sidestep potential criticism in Washington, it is clear from other statements and actions that the SM-3 IIB interceptor program is dead. On April 18, a senior State Department official said the SM-3 IIB "will no longer be developed or procured." As further proof, Obama administration's budget request for the coming year contains no funding for the SM-3 IIB program.

The shift in U.S. missile defense plans has been accompanied by an exchange of letters between Putin and Obama on a possible agreement on missile defense data sharing and on U.S. proposals for further offensive nuclear arms cuts. Last week, Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev delivered a letter from Putin responding to Obama's proposals.

Media accounts suggest that Russia is interested in data sharing but wants additional assurances that U.S. missile defense projects do not pose a threat to Russia's security before agreeing to new nuclear arms reduction talks. Further discussions are likely ahead of the Obama and Putin meeting in June.

What is clear to most Russian and U.S. experts is that in the absence of the SM-3 IIB program, there is no other U.S. missile interceptor capability in place nor under development in Europe or elsewhere that could plausibly threaten Russia's strategic nuclear retaliatory capability. The U.S. ground-based strategic interceptors in Alaska and California are limited in number — currently 30 with plans to increase to 44 over the next decade or so — and are not capable of defeating Russia's sophisticated ballistic missiles with their advanced penetration and decoy capabilities.

In an April 16 speech in London, even Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who is known for his hawkish stance on the U.S., said U.S. missile defense plans do not pose a threat to Moscow's strategic nuclear weapons. "We have solved the issue of penetrating the U.S. missile shield, and it poses no military threat to the country," Rogozin said.

Instead, the U.S. missile defense program will only have a limited capability to counter short- and medium-range missiles from Iran and North Korea and a handful of unsophisticated, long-range missiles that those two states might field in the years ahead.

These realities should open the way to a legally binding U.S.-Russian agreement for the regular exchange of information on missile defense programs. This would help Russia verify U.S. claims about its technical capabilities and limitations of its interceptors. Such an agreement should also be accompanied by a joint presidential statement providing clear assurances that the two countries' missile interceptor programs do not threaten each other's security.

Such a deal would provide Putin and Obama with a win-win deal that protects each nation's security by enhancing strategic stability. Some Russian observers argue that such an agreement might only be binding on the U.S. leader who signs it and that the next president in 3 1/2 years, particularly if he is a Republican, can disavow the agreement. But in practice, it would set a firm standard that future presidents would be very likely follow, and it is highly likely that the decision to cut off funding for more advanced U.S. interceptors in Europe will extend far beyond Obama's presidency.

An agreement on missile defense would also open the door to further cuts in each nation's bloated and expensive nuclear arsenals. Even under the New START, both sides deploy up to 1,550 strategic warheads on 700 missiles, submarines and long-range bombers until 2021.

These numbers far exceed what is necessary to deter nuclear attack from any current or future adversary. An analysis conducted in 2002 by Physicians for Social Responsibility shows that a Russian attack involving 300 thermonuclear warheads hitting U.S. urban areas would kill 77 million Americans from blast effects and firestorms in the first half hour. A U.S. attack of similar size would have the same devastating impact on Russia.

Even a "limited" nuclear exchange would destroy national communications and transportation networks, public health, sanitation and food distribution systems. In the months following this initial assault, tens of millions more would die from starvation, exposure, radiation poisoning and infectious disease. An attack involving just one-fifth of either country's strategic nuclear force would trigger such a global disaster.

Doing nothing is not in either country's best interests. Russia has already cut its arsenal below the New START warhead ceiling, and the U.S. has a significantly greater capacity to upload stored warheads on its missiles and bombers.

A new round of reductions could ensure that Russia and the U.S. have equal but significantly smaller strategic arsenals and would help reduce the enormous costs of planned strategic force modernization by both countries in the coming years.

Reductions to 1,000 or fewer deployed strategic warheads for each side would help draw China and the other nuclear-armed states into a multilateral nuclear arms control process, which Russia says is one of its key goals. Ideally, this should be done by a formal treaty. Otherwise, Obama and Putin could announce they will implement further strategic reductions through reciprocal actions, which could be verified through the existing New START framework.

Renewed U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control efforts should also consider new accounting and confidence-building measures relating to tactical nuclear weapons, which could finally lead to the withdrawal of the roughly 180 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons that are based in five European countries.

More than 20 years after the end of the Cold War, there is no military rationale for Russia to maintain some 2,000 tactical nuclear bombs, many of which are on obsolete naval and air defense systems. Nor is there any military requirement for the U.S. to keep 180 air-delivered nuclear bombs in Europe.

The U.S. and Russia will from time to time have their disagreements on geopolitical issues, but our leaders need to find ways to cooperate on missile defense and nuclear arms control that are in our national interests and increase global security. Putin and Obama should work more closely together to achieve these results.

Daryl Kimball is executive director of the independent, private Arms Control Association, based in Washington.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/05/26/how-to-break-the-deadlock-on-missile-defense-a24388