

Enemies From Outer Space

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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At an international conference in May, Defense Ministry officials tried to frighten their Western colleagues with what they claimed were new weapons that could counter the U.S. missile defense system. No sooner had the conference ended than the Defense Ministry conducted unannounced exercises of the recently created Aerospace Defense Forces, or ADF, a unit of long range military transport aviation, as well as Air Force and air defense units of the Western Military District.

In the maneuvers, four ADF regiments deployed to the Ashuluk test range in the Astrakhan region repelled attacks by multiple aircraft and cruise missiles simulating aircraft of the Western Strategic Command. The war-games scenario apparently represented a limited nuclear conflict in which Russian nuclear aircraft had to respond to an attack by its enemy. The media also reported that as part of the computer-based maneuvers, Western district air defenses repelled a direct air attack against Moscow. In a conference call, the Defense Minister and other top brass reported that all of the targets in the exercises were destroyed without problem, and the snap exercises perfectly illustrated that the creation of the ADF was justified.

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of addressing
Russia's real
threats,
the military is
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and money
to protect
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against
an attack
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In fact, the scenario of the surprise exercises and the manner in which they were carried out demonstrate the problem of the new forces. The maneuvers proved what some analysts had earlier contended: that the ADF is more a myth than reality. The problem is that missile and air defense systems have little in common. One system would have to destroy targets moving at very high speed through space, while the other would target objects flying more slowly through the air, and therefore both require completely different technologies. It is no coincidence that only air defense forces took part in the exercises, while space defense units seem to have been entirely absent. Those units are mostly responsible for the early warning system against missile attacks that includes a dozen radar detection stations and satellite groups.

The main task of missile defense systems is to detect a massive missile launch aimed against Russia as early as possible and inform the president of a nuclear attack so that he can make a decision regarding a counterstrike. The space defense forces also include missile defense units charged with protecting Moscow. Their task is to destroy enemy warheads with nuclear explosions as they fly through space toward the Russian capital. It is difficult to predict what effect a series of nuclear explosions in space over parts of Moscow and the Moscow region would have. But the goal of Russia's missile defense system is not to protect Moscow but to buy time for military chiefs to move to safe command centers.

Obviously, it is difficult to stage such complex military maneuvers as a surprise move. After all, if early warning systems manage to detect the launch of enemy missiles in time, the next step is to determine the nature of the counterstrike. But Moscow must give Washington advance notice before launching any missiles. The element of surprise for the exercises would therefore be lost if the maneuvers and the launch were laid out in advance, and all the more if a missile defense system in the Moscow region were employed.

This confirms my conviction that Russia's missile defense and air defense systems are incompatible. What's more, the surprise exercise clearly demonstrated the true value of the Defense Ministry's boasts that it can, under any conditions, intercept any missile flying over Russian territory. In their view, this explains why the U.S. and the European Union should not create their own missile defense system. But if they do create one, the Russian brass contend that it would not be intended to defend against missiles from Iran or North Korea but exclusively to upset the strategic balance with Russia.

This would seem like the perfect time for Moscow to demonstrate its ability to intercept any missiles flying over Russian territory, but military commanders have decided to play it safe and refrain from any such tests. The truth of the matter is that Russia relies for its protection entirely on the nuclear-armed missiles of missile defense system located in the Moscow region. It has been said that the new S-400 air defense system is capable of destroying ballistic missiles, but only three regiments have been deployed and the system has only a 400-kilometer range, which is far too short to protect the entire territory of this vast country.

And the most curious thing is that, even while Russia's military is perfecting its ability to repulse the make-believe threat from outer space — a danger posed only by Martians — everyone knows that in just one year this country will face a very real military threat emerging from Afghanistan. President Vladimir Putin recently made a somewhat unsuccessful attempt to induce his Central Asian allies to start preparations for confronting that impending threat. Of course, those efforts would be more effective if they were undertaken in cooperation with Washington, but Moscow is too busy spending time and money preparing for an attack by Martians.

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