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Missile Defense Arms Race

By Vladimir Kozin

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Alexander Vershbow, deputy secretary general of NATO and former U.S. ambassador to Russia, published a comment entitled "NATO Missile Defense Is No Threat to Russia" in The Moscow Times on Nov. 12.

In his comment, Vershbow said an Oct. 29 Rossiiskaya Gazeta article incorrectly stated that land-based and sea-launched interceptor missiles in the U.S. national missile defense system "are designed for the total destruction of the warheads of short-, intermediate- and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles."

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Vershbow urged readers to focus on the facts and physics, writing, "NATO's entire ballistic missile defense system, including the future site in Romania, will defend against short — and intermediate-range ballistic missiles." The interceptors to be deployed in all three phases of NATO's ballistic missile defense system "are not designed to defend against intercontinental missiles," Vershbow wrote.

For the sake of finding the truth on this issue, it is important to clarify the existing terminology of short-range ballistic missiles, medium-range ballistic missiles, intermediate-range ballistic missiles and intercontinental ballistic missiles. According to the Pentagon definition articulated by the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, short-range ballistic missiles are those that can fly up to 1,000 kilometers. Medium-range ballistic missiles have a range between 1,000 to 3,000 kilometers, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles can fly between 3,000 and 5,500 kilometers. Finally, intercontinental ballistic missiles have a range of 5,500 kilometers.

If Vershbow is correctly portraying the main mission of the future U.S. ballistic missile defense system in Romania and Poland, which will be deployed in 2015 and 2018, respectively, it would mean that they can hit the potential intermediate-range ballistic missiles at their maximum range of 5,500 kilometers and intercontinental missiles at their minimal range — the same 5,500 kilometers.

How, then, in real combat can anyone distinguish between the incoming ballistic missiles — whether they are intermediate-range ballistic missiles or intercontinental ballistic missiles — if their respective upper and lower limits coincide?

When Vice Admiral James Syring, the current director of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, spoke before the Senate Appropriations committee and Defense Subcommittee on July 17, he said, "In addition, we continue to develop the SM-3 Block IIA to enable U.S. and Japanese Aegis BMD ships to engage medium-range ballistic missiles and intermediate-range ballistic missiles and, when coupled with the upgraded Aegis missile defense weapon system, more sophisticated ballistic missile threats."

What did Syring mean by "more sophisticated ballistic missile threats"? Intercontinental ballistic missiles?

The U.S. did cancel Phase 4 of the European missile defense system, but Washington has not stopped research and development on these advanced interceptors, which means that they could be deployed in Europe in the future.

What is the difference for Moscow, if the U.S. and NATO deploy SM-3 Block IIA or SM-3 Block IIB systems near Russian territory if they both are still considered by the Pentagon as "forward-based weapons" in relation to Russia?

Moreover, Moscow does not have these missile defense systems and has no intention to store them near the U.S. As a result, an increasing number of analysts and members of the military are urging the Kremlin to respond more aggressively against U.S. missile defense installations.

The reaction is understandable. After 12 years of negotiations between Moscow and Washington on the missile defense problem, there are no legal checks and balances to contain the looming missile defense arms race between the two largest nuclear powers.

U.S.-Soviet relations during the last century was marked by a nuclear missiles arms race with a huge number of deployed and nondeployed strategic offensive nuclear arms and a very limited number of missile defense interceptors. Relations between the two countries during the current century are in danger of being marked by a missile defense arms race featured by a reverse strategic equation, when the number of interceptors could soon exceed the number of strategic offensive nuclear missiles.

Does the world really need another arms race in any form? Instead of ushering in a qualitatively new arms race, the nuclear powers have to hammer out a new multilateral Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

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