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Russia, U.S. Bicker Over Missile Defense Shield After Iran Agreement

By Matthew Bodner

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Russia has always been bitterly opposed to U.S. ambitions to develop an effective ballistic missile defense system.

With an international resolution on Iran's nuclear program in the bag, Russia is pushing the U.S. to honor an alleged 2009 promise by President Barack Obama to scrap plans to deploy a missile defense system in Europe to shield against Iranian missiles.

"President Obama in 2009 publicly said that if the Iranian nuclear issue was resolved, there would be no need for missile defense in Europe, but it seems that he was not telling the truth," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an interview with Channel NewsAsia last week.

But the U.S. State Department quickly responded to the allegation, claiming that Lavrov had twisted Obama's words — a point echoed by U.S. foreign policy analysts polled by The Moscow Times.

On the first day of her job as the Russian Foreign Ministry's official spokesperson, Maria Zakharova on Monday denied that Lavrov had taken Obama's words out of context, speaking to Russian state television station Rossiya 24.

"The Russian foreign minister quoted the American president. No one forced [Obama] to raise the issue, he said it himself several years ago — that solving the issue of Iran's nuclear program would allow the plans to deploy missile defense systems in Europe to be reviewed," Zakharova said.

Russia has always been bitterly opposed to U.S. ambitions to develop an effective ballistic missile defense system. Since at least 2009, Washington has responded to Russian criticisms of plans to field a missile shield in Europe by pointing to the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program.

Moscow military planners view missile defense as a threat to Russia's nuclear forces — the cornerstone of that country's national security strategy — and its capacity to retaliate against a U.S. nuclear strike. This in turn emboldens Washington's brazen foreign policy, Russia argues.

But, in the case of the 2009 promise, "Mr. Lavrov misquoted President Obama and almost certainly knows it," said Steven Pifer, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine and now a foreign policy expert at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington.

In 2009, amid Obama's reset in relations with Russia under then-President Dmitry Medvedev, the U.S. president said in a speech in Prague that "Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile activity poses a real threat, not just to the U.S., but to Iran's neighbors and our allies."

"As long as the threat from Iran persists, we will go forward with a missile defense system that is cost-effective and proven. If the Iranian threat is eliminated, we will have a stronger basis for security, and the driving force for missile defense construction in Europe will be removed," he said.

A Bad Deal?

The latest episode in the ongoing U.S.-Russia missile defense debate centers on the nature of the Iranian threat to the U.S. and its allies in Europe, and whether the Iran nuclear deal satisfies the conditions to abandon missile defense laid out in Obama's 2009 Prague speech.

According to U.S. analysts, the Iran deal in its final form most certainly doesn't end the Iranian missile threat, since it has no provisions forbidding or even curtailing Iranian work on a ballistic missile, which can be armed with conventional, non-nuclear warheads.

"If the Iran nuclear deal is implemented, it changes the nature of the Iranian ballistic missile threat to Europe ... but when Lavrov claims that the U.S. is misleading people on the reason for U.S. missile defense in Europe, he is misleading people about what Obama actually said," Pifer said.

Ilan Berman, a Russia and Iran expert at the Washington-based American Foreign Policy Council, told The Moscow Times that "when nuclear negotiations with Iran started the

ballistic missiles were never supposed to be off the table."

"The State Department took ballistic missiles off the table in pursuit of a more circumscribed deal, and frankly the Russians helped facilitate this more limited deal. So you ended up with a situation where all of the conditions that empower missile defense in the first place still exist," said Berman.

Though the nuclear deal effectively prevents Iran from developing a bomb in the next decade, Washington still sees some threat in the Iranian ballistic missile program.

Although ballistic missiles have limited use armed with conventional weapons, Berman argued that Iran could spend the next decade perfecting missiles as a nuclear delivery system, and then after the agreement expires turn them into a nuclear-armed delivery system in short order.

Berman also pointed to the $150 billion in frozen Iranian assets that will be freed under the nuclear deal, arguing that some of this money is likely to trickle into dormant military-industrial programs.

"So, one of the unintended consequences from all this is that the ballistic missile threat — not the nuclear missile threat — as a result of this deal could actually accelerate," he concluded.

Arms Race?

Although disagreements and suspicions over the intended purpose of U.S. missile defenses in Eastern Europe are nothing new to the increasingly strained U.S.-Russia relationship, Russia will likely use the continued pursuit of a missile shield to justify its nuclear missile modernization drive.

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia will spend 20 trillion rubles ($620 billion when the plan was announced in 2010) on new military hardware through 2020. This rearmament program will reportedly see all of Russia's nuclear missiles replaced by newer systems.

Failure for the two sides to come to terms on the issue may further fuel an arms race. Retired Russian General Yevgeny Buzhinsky told The Moscow Times that if the U.S. continues to push the issue, Russia will find asymmetrical means of responding to the anti-missile system.

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