

How Moscow Forces Washington's Hand (Op-Ed)

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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We are witnessing the birth of Russia's new diplomatic strategy — namely, if Moscow cannot offer anything constructive to the international dialogue, it must create new problems in order to remain relevant.

It was clear from the start that President Vladimir Putin could not offer anything positive that would serve as the basis of negotiations with the U.S. president. As viewers learned from Putin's recent interview on U.S. television, Moscow cannot withdraw its support for the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad or the separatists in Donbass.

What's more, Putin's initiative to form an international coalition to fight the Islamic State remains an empty gesture. Instead, Russia suddenly sent warplanes to Syria. And while those aircraft clearly cannot tip the scales in the war against the Islamic State, they can create a problem for U.S. President Barack Obama.

If U.S. and Russian aircraft simultaneously perform combat missions in the same air space,

any number of dangerous and undesirable incidents might result. In an even worse scenario, Washington could order an attack against Assad's forces and Russian troops could receive instructions to defend them. Therefore, Obama reluctantly agreed to meet with Putin despite his earlier emphatic refusals.

However, the subsequent squabble between Russia and the U.S. over who first requested the meeting leaves little hope of a successful outcome. No doubt Moscow will have to create more "negative incentives" in the near future to force Washington to give it the attention it desires.

In all likelihood, Moscow will raise the issue of tactical — that is, non-strategic — nuclear weapons in Europe as its next "negative incentive." Only days before Putin left for New York, the Foreign Ministry suddenly recalled that for the last five years the insidious U.S. has been implementing a program to modernize more than 200 nuclear bombs stationed in Europe. And even though another five years remain before the program's completion, Moscow chose this moment to sound the alarm.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova announced that the U.S. stands in violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) for adapting the B61-12 bomb for use on the "Tornado" aircraft used by its European allies. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov immediately joined the chorus, saying, "It can lead to a violation of the strategic balance in Europe, and of course it would therefore require Russia to take countermeasures and countermeasures to restore the balance and parity."

Unidentified sources with close ties to the Defense Ministry rushed to inform reporters that this meant the deployment of Iskander tactical missile systems to the Kaliningrad region and the repositioning of Tu-22M3 long-range bombers closer to Russia's western borders.

And then Putin rolled out the heavy artillery. In response to a question about the Russian military presence in Ukraine, he told U.S. television interviewer Charlie Rose: "Let us not forget that there are U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Does that mean that the U.S. has occupied Germany or that the U.S. never stopped the occupation after World War II and only transformed its occupation troops into NATO forces? And if we keep our troops on our territory at the border with some state, do you see that as a crime?"

Honestly, those claims hold little water. American atomic bombs have been stationed in Europe for decades and, according to a special agreement between Washington and its European allies, the U.S. military maintains complete control over those bombs in peacetime. In all those years, it never once entered the mind of a single Moscow official that those bombs violated the NPT.

If, on the other hand, Moscow could find some new factor at play, it might argue that the U.S. bombs violate the strategic balance in Europe. That was the thrust of Soviet-era diplomacy during the debate over intermediate- and shorter-range missiles.

The logic was simple: U.S. non-strategic missiles can reach Moscow and St. Petersburg whereas Russian missiles of the same class cannot reach the U.S. However, that ignores the fact that, according to most experts, Russia has significant superiority in tactical nuclear weapons.

Thus, any reckoning of the true balance of power must consider the fact that Russian weapons can strike any target on the territory of Washington's European allies. That is exactly what gives symbolic meaning to the deployment of U.S. bombs on the continent: They demonstrate Washington's willingness to prevent nuclear aggression against NATO's European members.

It is worth noting in this regard that Washington has been offering for years to begin talks with Moscow on non-strategic nuclear weapons. However, the Kremlin clearly did not want to hold such talks, insisting as a precondition that the U.S. pull its bombs out of Europe and reposition them at home — thereby stripping the negotiations of any meaning.

Russia's threats are no less illogical. Over the past eight or nine years, Moscow threatened to deploy Iskander missiles every time a conflict arose with Washington. As a result, the deployment of those missiles — simply a result of regular modernization — is inevitably seen as an act of confrontation. It is not even worth repeating here what nonsense some State Duma deputies gave vent to concerning the U.S. bombs. If the Kremlin dares to withdraw from the New START treaty or the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), it risks unleashing an arms race like the one that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

So, while the Kremlin has yet to find any really new "negative incentives," it is a matter of deep concern that Moscow is focusing exclusively on that approach.

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