

NMD: A Surprising Twist Proposed by 'Some' Russians

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The Bush administration's push for a wider National Missile Defense (NMD) system will without a doubt worsen U.S.-Russian relations. The question is whether this predictable deterioration will lead to serious international tensions a qualitatively new arms race and shifts in international alliances.

Thus far, Russia backed by China and, to some extent by several European countries and Canada strongly opposes NMD deployment in contravention of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, which it considers the cornerstone of strategic stability. The basic Moscow arguments run as follows: NMD development will undermine "comprehensive" strategic stability, sap the entire network of international arms control agreements, provoke a new arms race globally and on regional levels and extend an arms race to outer space.

Russian military leaders do not view the "rogue states threat" as actually menacing and consider the proposed U.S. NMD outline plans excessive for countering any emerging missile capabilities in the developing world. They vow that the proposed plan will have a vast extension potential and is in fact designed to negate Russian and Chinese retaliation capabilities. With Russian conventional forces seen to be in a desperate state as shown in the Chechen campaign, and its early warning potential seriously dwindled, Moscow's military greatly values the combat ability of its nuclear arsenal, which they fear U.S. NMD deployment might jeopardize.

To baffle these threatening American programs, Russia suggests cooperation on a jointly designed and deployed theater missile defense system — with a capacity set by the 1997 U.S.- Russian Helsinki demarcation protocols — initially deployed to protect missile-threatened areas adjacent to Europe. If these diplomatic efforts fail and the ABM treaty is overstepped by U.S. deployments, Russian military and political leaders threaten with "mighty asymmetrical responses." This would include deploying multiple warheads on SS-27 "Topol" ICBMs, currently the Russian Rocket Forces' workhorse, keeping heavy SS-18 ICBMs— all in contravention to the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START II) agreement, and upgrading and redeploying tactical nuclear weapons as well as re-starting anti-satellite weapons (laser and kinetic) research and development.

Moscow's military and political officials overtly predict a kind of new Cold War or across-the-board confrontation if the Bush Administration's NMD plans materialize. They adamantly refute U.S. intimations that Russia's stance on antimissile defense might soften, and they claim the Kremlin would be ready to join U.S. development programs as a junior partner.

Meanwhile, Washington for the time being remains adamantly addicted to its NMD programs. It pledges that NMD is not intended to neutralize Russian strategic capabilities, but to intercept so-called rogue state strikes and accidental launches, and it says it can be easily overcome by a massive Russian retaliation strike. Seemingly, U.S. planners fully rely on their technological superiority. Due to scarce Russian financial and industrial resources at the moment, most U.S. military planners do not consider Moscow's threats very compelling. It is well known that many in the Bush Administration consider the ABM treaty a Cold War "leftover," unfit to counter emerging security challenges and based on the outdated concept of mutually assured destruction. And some strive to enjoin Russia as a kind of junior partner on NMD bandwagon.

Three scenarios are conceivable for the future: 1. The status quo is essentially preserved; the United States does not rush to deploy NMD, and Russia agrees to continue further discussions about the system. Russia almost

ignores initial moves on the U.S. side to proceed with NMD research and development on the grounds that it won't change the strategic situation drastically. The war of words is continued, but it never turns into a kind of a new Cold War.

2. The United States speeds-up NMD deployment and abrogates the ABM treaty. Russia walks out of the major arms control agreements, declaring itself free of obligations under START-II, the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR); it deploys more tactical nuclear weapons along its borders with NATO-member countries; prepares for anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons; quickens the build-up of its military; and tries to orchestrate some kind of "Holy Alliance" with China, India, Iran, and its former clients in Arab world countries, primarily Iraq, Syria and Libya. A serious deterioration of international relations similar to the mid-80s Reagan-Adropov duel would most likely follow.

3. The United States and Russia manage to accommodate their divergences. For example, they agree to modify or completely abandon the ABM treaty; Washington, while playing up Russian weakness and its dependence on Western aid and know-how, simultaneously imposes a totally new concept of strategic stability— no deterrence, no offense-defense correlation, but joint deployment of NMD, starting with tactical systems to be upgraded to space-based interceptors.

Or will the future be a mixture of these possibilities? The **first** "business as usual" scenario might finally be the most plausible. In spite of heated rhetoric, Moscow is still not ready to undermine its ties with the United States and its Western allies; the latter could be reluctant to breach pan-Atlantic solidarity for the support of the ABM treaty. At the same time, the bureaucratic and foreign policy constraints could shatter US intransigence to proceed with NMD.

If the Kremlin chooses the **second** alternative or decides to go for an unmitigated standoff disregarding the consequences, it should be prepared to sustain political strains of isolation and economic hardship which Washington would impose.

There are, in fact, many political and economic "stoppers." In spite of the post-Versailles-style rise of nationalist and patriotic feelings, most Russians will hardly support the beginning of a new arms race with the West politically turning the country into a big North Korea with decaying nuclear weapons. This would certainly mean the end of established cooperative ties with Western countries and the serious deterioration of living standards, at least in the largest cities, where Russia now depends on foreign imports of consumer goods and staples.

Closely tied to the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and private Western banks` lending or investments, Moscow's economy would be negatively affected. A new total default would mean comprehensive sanctions and a gradual expulsion of Russia from OECD markets. The sound-minded political forces and business circles in Russia, once they regain ground after President Putin`s recent onslaught, will not allow the political leadership to forge military-diplomatic alliance with countries like China, India, Cuba, Iran or Iraq. This would mean protracted confrontation with the West and cessation of investments and managerial support from the leading industrial powers.

Russia just lacks the resources for "asymmetrical responses" to NMD or a general military buildup. Beyond enhanced oil or gas sales abroad, it has no way to accumulate revenues to cover an eventual arms race (up to \$100 billion worth, according to some Russian experts). Thus, notwithstanding oratorical threats to engineer a last-ditch resistance to new strategic missile defenses, Russian overtures can be viewed as somewhat hollow.

Not militarily nor technologically, nor economically could Moscow afford and sustain a new arms race. The major problem with U.S.-Russian strategic relations is that so many years after the demise of communism they are still based on the Cold War – type of strategic vision. By some peculiar inertia, the military on both sides still tend to regard each other as ultimate adversaries. US strategic planners point to the dangers of reversal in Moscow's policies bringing back neoimperialist expansionism and virulent anti-Americanism. Russian military officers, many of whom grew-up under Soviet rule, are convinced that Washington follows a policy to obliterate Russia geopolitically as a substantial military threat. They perceive NATO expansion, its operations in the former Yugoslavia, as telling examples of U.S. plans to dominate the entire world by military force.

To many, Russia still looms a most capable opponent to U.S. global expansionism; despite its lingering socio-economic crisis, the country still contains a huge nuclear arsenal capable of very real destruction. Many in the Russian elite continue to believe in the reinstatement of the country to its former Soviet "grandeur," not strangely in opposition to U.S. preponderance in the world.

Despite its technological or political shortcomings, the Bush Administration's plans for NMD can provide the Russian military and conservative politicians with a handy external "threat." Some will likely twist the scenario to create an image of "Mother Russia as a fortress besieged" and impose a radically authoritarian regime in a quest to extend their stay in power as the nation's saviors. The question is whether the Russian people will be enough duped to suffer such rulers. However alarming or naïve because of the lack of any economic substantiation such grand strategy may seem, it is enhanced by certain circles in the U.S. Congress and military. Thus a vicious circle is created.

Russia is still relevant for U.S. foreign and strategic policy due to its residual nuclear arsenal and for historical reasons. The two countries share a "tradition" of dialogue, both in arms control where there has been active interaction, and in the economic sphere following the Bush and Clinton Administrations' involvement in Russia's ill-devised reform process. The alienation of Russia, even if it is cornered into a re-edition of Cold War-type isolation, will also destabilize the global policy environment. Washington will enhance its worldwide military presence, track new channels of possible Russian transfers of nuclear, biological or missile technologies to countries the United States does not deem responsible, and will prepare to eliminate the nascent potential of holders of weapons of mass destruction capable of preemptive nuclear strikes.

Surprisingly to some, therefore, the **third** scenario might ultimately be the most stabilizing. Both states could negotiate the framework of a jointly developed antimissile systems program, starting with theater-based versions. Russian military facilities and design centers could obtain lucrative contracts thus being diverted from proliferation-prone deals with "rogue" states leaders. What is ultimately important is to enhance the climate of dialogue and trust as opposed to propagandistic escapades. Technologic solutions to allay mutual suspicions can be provided, prompted by imposing political will.

The United States and Russia, showing uncharacteristic strategic wisdom, should try to come to terms with the parameters of future cooperative deployments of a joint national missile defense system.

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