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REP Roundtable summary

American Ballistic Missile Defence, Russian Iskanders and a New Missile Crisis in Europe

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22 May 2009

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Russia has strongly opposed the deployment of American Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. The reasons for this opposition are not immediately clear. The Russian approach to the 'third site' comprises five principal points.

- They claim there is no threat from Iranian nuclear development. In the words of Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, 'we, as before, think that at present there are no indications that this [Iran's] programme is directed towards military goals'.
- Russia asserts that the location of the American BMD means it will pose a direct threat to Russia. Sergei Ivanov, Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister, declared in February 2009 that 'The potential US missile defence European site is not just a dozen of anti-ballistic missiles and radar. It is a part of the US strategic infrastructure aimed at deterring Russia's nuclear missile potential'.
- Russia rejects US proposals to 'rethink' the third site if Russia were to cooperate on Iran.
- Russia has said Iskander missiles will be deployed in Kaliningrad Oblast if the Americans go ahead with their plan.
- Finally, Russia has argued that any future Russian-American agreement on strategic nuclear disarmament should include a rejection by the US of BMD.

Russian officials have not been able to explain in an intelligible way why exactly missile defence threatens Russian security. They have argued that the radar may collect 'sensitive' information about Russian military activities. It has been claimed that the United States may equip interceptors with nuclear warheads and thus threaten important political and military targets. Moscow points to the fact that Washington refuses to guarantee that it will not deploy more BMD installations beyond the 10 interceptors and one radar.

A group of leading Russian and American missile experts, including General Vladimir Dvorkin, have concluded that 'even if the United States expands the system, say, by increasing the number of interceptors, it would not be able to neutralize the retaliatory capability of the Russian military force [...] overall, the European system in the configuration that is proposed by the United

States today cannot present a significant direct threat to the Russian strategic force'. The location of the radar in the Czech Republic would not allow the US to detect missiles launched from any of the Russian test sites used for launches of sea or land-based ballistic missiles. The curvature of the Earth prevents this. Thus the radar cannot be used to gather intelligence on Russian missiles. Technically it is possible to equip interceptors with nuclear warheads. Yet it is pointless from military and political points of view. Ten new missiles will add nothing to American nuclear potential. It is also impossible to convert interceptors into attack missiles secretly. The US will not deploy new missiles without lengthy testing and discussion in Congress.

What lies behind Russia's position? The Kremlin clearly does not actually believe in the existence of any real threat as a result of this deployment, otherwise it would be inconceivably stupid to reject American offers to minimise such a threat. By exerting hard pressure on the Europeans, Moscow believes it can stop American plans. If successful, it will use this method again in a number of other situations. Moreover, the Kremlin wishes to underline the fact that security-related matters in Central and Eastern Europe should be decided in consultation with Russia. Moscow has also sought to use the BMD issue to fuel tensions and disagreements between the US and Europe, and above all between European countries.

Moscow also wants to use BMD as a justification to deploy Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad area. The Russian media claims there are plans to deploy up to five missile brigades, totalling 60 launchers; this would have negative consequences for Europe by creating different zones of security.

The Iskander system consists of: a transporter-erector-launcher loaded with two missiles (Iskander-E or Iskander-M), or six cruise missiles (Iskander-K); the transporter loader; the mission preparation system (to process intelligence data into target data for the navigation system); command and staff vehicles; and maintenance and life support vehicles.

There are three variations of the Iskander missile:

- Iskander-E, also known as SS-26, is a ballistic missile with a range of about 280 km and payload of about 48kg designed mainly for export. Their deployment in Kaliningrad would be pointless as they can strike neither future interceptors in Poland, nor the radar in the Czech Republic.

- Iskander-M, is a ballistic missile with a range of up to 500km, possibly more. If deployed in the Kaliningard region, 120 of these missiles would be able to strike targets all over Poland but could reach almost no target within the Czech Republic. This would have very limited value from a military standpoint as interceptor launchers in Poland are 'hard targets' while the radar in the Czech Republic is a 'soft target', and it is the soft target's destruction that would disable the entire ABM site.
- Iskander-K is a cruise missile, also known as R-500. It has a range of about 400km, proven by tests held on 27 May 2007 by the Russian military. However, there are reports that it could have a range of up to 2000km, as it is an upgrade of the Soviet land-based cruise missile RK-55, also known as CSS-X-4 Slingshot, deployed in the beginning of the 1980's and destroyed in accordance with the INF treaty.

Deployment of the Iskander-K cruise missiles would threaten all the countries of Central Europe, Scandinavia, the Baltic states and Ukraine. Their testing and production, let alone deployment, is a violation of the INF treaty, which forbids the development, production and deployment of ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500km or more. Russia must also either prove that the range of Iskander-M cannot exceed 500km (very difficult from a technical standpoint), or withdraw from the INF Treaty.

Russian missiles in Kaliningrad would be a 'first strike weapon' so would not be appropriate for use in response against BMD components after interceptors are launched. In any case, the stationing of 100-120 Iskander-M missiles and 350-360 Iskander-K missiles would far exceed the number of weapons required for the destruction of ten interceptor launchers and one radar. This means, therefore, that their deployment has far more ambitious and dangerous aims.

The deployment of Iskander missiles will create a serious security risk for countries within their battle range. The only response that may offset this threat to European security by military means would be the reinforcement of US forces in Europe, including intermediate range missiles. So if Russia deploys its new missiles on its Western border it is likely to trigger a new crisis in Europe, similar to the missile crisis of the 1970-80s.

Fearing a new missile crisis, some European countries may demand that the US abandon its BMD plans. This situation presents President Obama with a

tough choice. If his administration withdraws from the project, it will engender serious doubts about the reliability of American security guarantees to Europe, so diminishing Europe's capacity to resist Russian blackmail.

This in turn would be a severe blow for NATO, and stoke differences between the US and Europe, as well as the countries of 'New' and 'Old' Europe. Russia will have achieved its strategic aims and the military would have proved that military pressure on Europe is a powerful instrument for achieving foreign policy goals.

If the US, Poland and the Czech Republic go ahead with BDM, Russia will deploy the Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad and Europe will become increasingly divided as to what the response to the Russian missiles should be.

Some European nations will accuse the US, Poland and the Czech Republic of being irresponsible and undermining European security. There is no guarantee that NATO will reach a unanimous decision on how to react. As a result, Russia will have new missiles in Kaliningrad while the possibility of deployment of intermediate-range US missiles will remain relatively low.

The Russian military is not interested in a compromise solution to the third site issue, but it is interested in the deployment of new missiles in Kaliningrad. They have no other weapon that can at least partially neutralise US long-range platforms, above all cruise missiles. The Russian General Staff is concerned about the efficiency of American operations at the first stages of conflict (as in Iraq and Afghanistan). They and the Kremlin also believe that there is a real possibility of conflict in the southern Baltic region. However, this is only conceivable in the event of Russian aggression.

Questions and Discussion

Q: Two days ago, Iran launched yet another missile. Is Iran the only excuse for the deployment of BMD in Central Europe?

A: Growing Iranian capability is of concern and no one knows what their weapons would be used for. Iran can now build missiles with a range of 200km. That is already a solid justification, although we don't know how efficient they would be. Russia cannot stop Iran by itself, but it could stop its policy of obstructing UN Security Council resolutions, and could stop supplying weapon systems.

Q: Security is all about perceptions. How will 'resetting' relations accommodate security in Europe, considering the good gestures from both sides?

A: Threat perceptions are very different across Europe; Russian missiles are not a threat to the whole continent. For the French elites, threats come from elsewhere. The real threats for those close to Russia, however, are different.

The Obama administration still has no coherent strategy for resetting the relationship. There was an idea that Russia could help on the Iran issue in exchange for a re-examination of US BMD deployment. This was a test for Russia and if it had said yes it would have proven that Russia is a country worth doing business with. Russia is seen as a country that can solve the problems of Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. But if it cannot, it will lose its attraction as a strategic partner for the US.

Q: The situation is very reminiscent of the 1980s crisis. Missile deployment in Kaliningrad is aimed at exerting hard pressure and causing disunity in Europe. However similar Soviet policy in the past only cemented alliances. As regards undermining security guarantees, Georgia did enough to make NATO worried.

A: There are big differences between the European missile crisis of the 1970s/80s and the situation today. Back then, all of Europe was under threat, whereas today it is only part of Europe. As regards Georgia, Russia's war aim was to test the West's resolve to resist.

Q: How important an issue is Missile Defence within Russia? Is it really a matter of great concern?

A: It is very hard to know what is going on in the Kremlin. Moscow's strategic policy goal is to restore the system of domination over the former USSR, ideally with former Soviet allies. To obtain this, they would like a new Yalta-type agreement with the West. The Kremlin also uses confrontation with the West as a means of justifying the authoritarian regime through claims that Russia is increasingly encircled.

Q: Can the US reassure its security guarantees without deploying BMD?

A: Article 5 guarantees are based on nuclear deterrents; however they would be more credible if enforced with material support. This rings particularly true for Central and Eastern Europe. A recent poll for the *Financial Times* of five Western European countries showed that a substantial number were unwilling to defend their allies in the East, regardless of their NATO membership. The ambiguous stance of some Western European allies must be taken into account in Central and Eastern Europe, which still feel the need for US security guarantees.