



Executive Summary

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EUROPEAN MISSILE DEFENSE AND RUSSIA

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with
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Despite considerable efforts by the United States over an extended period, no meaningful dialogue with the Russian Federation has been achieved over U.S. plans for ballistic missile defense (BMD) in Europe. But such dialogue is important, as the mutual frustration between the two nations risks exacerbating existing tensions in European security. This is especially the case in the context of Russia's demonstrated willingness to resort to military solutions for perceived security problems.

This monograph examines historical precedents for the current missile defense impasse in order to explain the Russian attitude and draw conclusions about both the most recent developments in the conversation between the United States and Russia and its likely further progress—and prospects, if any, for a resolution.

The current problem has a long history through various cycles of missile defense initiatives by both the United States and the Soviet Union over previous decades. Examining the history of missile defense systems—Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), National Missile Defense, the “Third Site,” and finally the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA)—shows that many arguments over their strategic implications are repeated decades apart, and there are precedents from Soviet times that reveal an entirely consistent Russian approach to the problem over time—as well as an inconsistent and unpredictable U.S. approach.

Reviewing the history of development of U.S. plans for missile defense from a Russian perspec-

tive leads to important conclusions that may not be evident from the U.S. side. First, U.S. plans are subject to radical, sudden, and unpredictable change; second, when it is announced that a program that is alarming to Russia is “cancelled,” this is not always good news; and third, U.S. missile defense capabilities in the future can have very different capabilities than what is currently claimed. The “adaptive” part of the EPAA program is a problem. What looks, from the U.S. side, like flexibility to develop in accordance with an evolving threat seems inconsistent, unpredictable, and therefore destabilizing to Russia.

In aggregate, these changes fuel Russian distrust in U.S. assurances. The object of this Russian distrust is not the U.S. alone. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) presented its Lisbon Summit in November 2010 as a breakthrough in strategic cooperation between Russia and NATO. In fact, however, this marked the beginning of even greater disappointments for Russia over the progress of BMD provision for Europe.

At present, Russia can have little confidence that this pattern will not continue. As put by one NATO official speaking in 2013, “U.S. plans have changed twice in 4 years, and there are still 5 years to go till 2018.” This perspective informs Russia's consistent demands for “legally binding guarantees” that U.S. BMD plans will not, and are not intended to, challenge Russia's deterrent potential.¹

But there are also lessons from history for positive management of the current relation-

ship. U.S. withdrawal from the anti-ballistic missile treaty drew a muted and measured response from Russia, in sharp contrast to the current confrontational rhetoric. The reasons for this difference are explored, and conclusions drawn for the management of Russian opposition and reducing the associated transactional costs in implementing BMD programs.

This monograph also examines other historical and geopolitical considerations affecting Russian decisionmaking on BMD that may not be intuitively obvious when the issue is viewed from a U.S. perspective. Specifically, this includes Russia's self-perception and geopolitical perspective; the Russian perception of nuclear weapons not only as a guarantee of sovereignty but also as a symbol of national status; the inalienable Russian perception that Russia matters in everything, and is constantly at the forefront of U.S. policymakers' minds; and the related Russian perception of the U.S. as an irresponsible actor that has not learned strategic lessons from intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and may be tempted to meddle in Russia in the future.

Russia not only perceives itself to be vulnerable to military attack from the United States due to a severe conventional capability gap, but it also proceeds from an assessment of this capability to include in its security planning the possibility of such an attack taking place. This comes against a background of reliance on nuclear missiles as effectively the only deterrent, at strategic or other levels, which was available to the newly emergent Russian Federation for the first 15 years of its existence. To the Russian leadership, these nuclear forces constituted the last-ditch guarantee of Russian sovereignty and protection of its fundamental interests.

In addition, expert opinion in Russia is alarmed at the prospect of repeating the historical mistake of inordinate spending in an attempt to counter SDI, which was a contributory factor to the demise of the Soviet Union. Russia thus finds itself presented with a choice of existential threats: the U.S. BMD plans have the theoretical potential either to devalue Russia's nuclear

deterrent, its last-ditch guarantee of statehood and protection of its interests, or to draw Russia into an arms race whose previous iteration contributed to the downfall of the state in which the current generation of Russian leaders were born and raised—with all the dire consequences they observed first-hand in the 1990s.

These are the considerations that inform the consistent and vehement Russian opposition to U.S. plans for BMD in Europe. The threatened responses by Russia are many and varied, but bear in mind that Russian perception of military action as a valid foreign policy tool has been reinforced by the results of the armed conflict in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This monograph explores the prospects for mitigating potential Russian reactions, based on an assessment of the missile defense problem from Moscow's perspective.

ENDNOTES

1. Anonymous interview by authors, July 2013.

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