

RUSSIAN BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE: RHETORIC AND REALITY

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While this monograph was being researched and written, Russian actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine brought U.S.-Russian relations to a new low in the post-Cold War era. Normal relations and conversations between the United States and Russia were apparently on hold during an unprecedented, and apparently intractable, crisis of European security. But the longer view of relations between the two former superpowers shows precedents that suggest relations stand a strong chance of early recovery, despite Russia's hard line and unpalatable actions. With or without this recovery, some persistent challenges to the relationship will remain; the state of relations will affect how these challenges are presented, rather than the underlying contradictions themselves.

One of these challenges is ballistic missile defense (BMD), and its implications for nuclear deterrence. For the past 7 years, plans for BMD capability in Europe have been a consistent sticking point in relations between the United States and Russia. In brief, Russia's strenuous opposition to these plans is based on claims, not all of them disingenuous, that this capability is intended to compromise Russia's nuclear deterrent capability. Yet all discussion of the subject highlights the U.S. current and proposed deployments and entirely ignores Russia's own missile interception systems, which are claimed to have comparable capability. While Moscow continues to strengthen its armed forces and seeks to reduce the capability gap with the United States, the perception of vulnerability leads Russia to invest heavily in strategic weapons and aerospace defense, including both defense against nuclear missiles and precision guided munitions. Russia protests that U.S. SM-3

missiles pose a potential threat to strategic stability, and has made belligerent threats of direct military action to prevent their deployment. But no mention at all is made of the strategic implications of Russia's own S-400 and S-500 systems, despite the fact that, if the performance and capabilities claimed for them by Russian sources are accurate, they pose at least as great a threat to deterrence as do SM-3s.

This monograph therefore aims to describe Russia's claims for its missile defense systems and, where possible, to assess the likelihood that these claims are true. This will form a basis for considering whether discussion of Russian capabilities should be an integral part of future conversations with Russia on the deployment of U.S. and allied BMD assets.

An assessment of this kind requires an essential caveat. Research for this monograph has been conducted from open sources in Russian and English, and unclassified discussion with knowledgeable individuals on both sides of the debate. As such, it has obvious limitations, especially in a field where the fine detail of capabilities and deployments is highly classified. In addition, the proliferation of designations used by Russia for systems still in development, and the confused and contradictory reporting of them in open source media, adds a further layer of obfuscation. In the words of one assessment – tellingly entitled, “Experts Baffled by Profusion of Russian Missile Projects” – the resulting linguistic labyrinth has been further confused, perhaps deliberately, by a proliferation of new names in Russian reports.

The descriptions in this monograph of specific Russian projects are therefore a synthesis of public declarations by Russia as carried in open sources,

rather than an authoritative and verified systems handbook. Nonetheless, they have value since responses to Russian claims for their missile defense systems must necessarily rely on public pronouncements.

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