

# US MISSILE DEFENSE SHIELD AND RUSSIA: SECOND COLD WAR AS A FARCE

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## Abstract

*Karl Marx used to say that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. In line with this, the entire recent idea of a missile defense shield that the US has been willing to install in Eastern Europe is reminiscent of that of the Cold War era, when two major superpowers were targeting their strategic missiles towards each other. And although in 1972 both global powers agreed on not using anti-ballistic missiles, after two decades US had reexamined its thinking on the issue. The United States has decided to deploy radars and interceptors in the Czech Republic and Poland as part of a missile defense shield against possible Iranian or North Korean attacks. From the very start, Russia has been seeing the shield as directed towards itself. However, it doesn't look like the installation of an American missile defense shield in Europe would lead to a major security crisis between the US and Russia since there is sufficient evidence of softening tensions as US-Russian high level negotiations go ahead. This is perhaps where the farce lies.*

**Keywords:** *missile defense shield, deterrence, Russia, Iran, Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty, Missile Technology Control Regime, interceptor, radar*

## Introduction

The relations between Russia and United States have undergone different stages of mistrust, frustration, and also rapprochement throughout the last two decades. Although there has been a significant leap forward in these relations in various fields, some attributes of Cold War thinking seems to be still persisting in the security field. The obvious thing is both sides still see each other as a threat in one way or another. Russians have always been preoccupied by American actions, which “engulf” Russia and constrain its foreign policy behavior. Americans are more worried about Russia’s cooperation with so-called “rogue” states, particularly in the field of arms sales. The US has also been expressing constantly its concern with insecurity at Russian nuclear facilities and the possibility of nuclear weapons leaking into hands of terrorist organizations as well as rogue states. This particular concern was not shared by Russian authorities and it has even become a matter of tension between two states after Soviet collapse, as Russians believed

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they have always had adequate security and safety at the nuclear, biological, and chemical facilities.

The recent events around the proposed US defense missile system in Eastern Europe are quite illustrative in the light of the issues mentioned above. Moreover, the timing of the negotiations around missile proliferation and the installation of missile defense systems coincides with US political, diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran, a country Russia enjoys good relations with. Everything happens amid alleged American preparations for possible military action against this country.

This paper will try to analyze recent US-Russian missile defense negotiations. The aim is to discover underlining factors of disagreements between the Russian and American position on the so-called “rogue states” threat of missile attack. The paper aims to analyze whether those different perceptions of Iranian nuclear and missile threat are bound by different political approaches and the different nature of the respective countries’ relations with Iran and North Korea.

We will start with tracing back US policies regarding missile defense and will try to understand the shift from the policy of deterrence to deploying a ballistic missile defense system.

## **US View On Missile Defense And Changing Threats After First Iraq War**

In order to understand US ambitions of installing a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe it is important to trace back the history of the ABM initiative and the reasons why later on the American Congress decided to alter the policy the United States had been pursuing for almost twenty years (from 1972 when the US signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty) and demanded the deployment of a limited ballistic missile defense system in November 1991. For a long time, the conventional wisdom dominated Washington, which favored deterrence over missile defense. Deterrence meant containing aggression at all levels with the threat of nuclear retaliation, or “massive retaliation” as American strategists termed it once. President Eisenhower’s famous intemperate quote explains candidly the essence of the deterrence through retaliation: “If they start anything we will blow the hell out of them in a hurry”<sup>1</sup>

This wisdom resulted in the US and USSR signing the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had prohibited the signatories from deploying anti-missile systems.

Although President Ronald Reagan returned to the issue of installing a missile defense system for the first time in 1983, it was the first US-Iraqi war which brought the system critically onto the security agenda. The first Gulf War made a shift in US foreign policy and security thinking, giving more credit to those who were claiming that America is, in fact, unprotected in the face of a large-scale missile attack. Besides invading Kuwait on August 2, 1990 and having been very well positioned to attack Saudi Arabia (a key US ally in the Middle East) any time, Saddam

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<sup>1</sup> K.Scott, McMahon. *Pursuit of the Shield. The US Quest for Limited Ballistic Missile Defense*, University Press of America, 1997 pp.13-24

Hussein did also possess a frightening missile arsenal. At the same time, as a result of limitations set by ABM treaty by 1990 the entire stockpile of US anti-tactical ballistic missile (ATBM) interceptors consisted of only three experimental Patriot rockets. Allegedly, Iraq had developed several systems with the range from 70 to 900 km with the possibility of some of them being armed with chemical weapons. Moreover, in 1989 Iraq had test-launched 48-ton, ICBM-class rocket and had also developed two types of missiles: the Al-Hussein (600 km range) and the Al-Abbas (900 km range), both of them being modified versions of Scud with increased propellant tank capacities and reduced payloads<sup>2</sup>.

Obviously, the lessons learned from Desert Storm for the US was that the missile danger should be met with “multiple and redundant countermeasures”. These countermeasures include: international non-proliferation regime, deterrence and diplomacy, intelligence gathering, counterforce operations and active and passive defenses. With regard to active defenses, they have not played a vigorous role in US international security policy after signing ABM Treaty, preference being given to deterrence measures.<sup>3</sup>

However, Saddam’s behavior challenged the concept and application of the deterrence outside superpower context. The lesson learned here was that the threat of being punished by force was not enough to discourage Saddam’s regime as Americans would have expected.<sup>4</sup>

In 2001 President Bush announced that United States would withdraw from AMB Treaty. On June 13, 2002 the withdrawal formally took effect. President Bush emphasized that he was “committed to deploy a missile defense system as soon as possible to protect the American people and our [US] deployed forces against the growing missile threat”. He also mentioned that AMB Treaty prohibited the very important task of defense against this threat. In addition, President Bush brought up the agreement between himself and President Putin of Russia about their intention to look for ways of cooperation on missile defenses<sup>5</sup>.

## **Missile Proliferation Regime**

The Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) was established in 1987 by G-7 governments as an international export control policy with arrangement to limit the proliferation of nuclear capable missiles. In 1993 missiles capable of delivering biological and chemical weapons were added to the regulations. The regime limits the transfer of missiles able to carry 500 kg to the distance of 300 km or more. The biggest disadvantage of the regime has been its design as a voluntary agreement and not a formal treaty. After it has been established, numerous proposals were made for transforming the regime from an export control regulation into a universal regime. This foresees a radical transformation of the agreement leading to a different arrangement

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<sup>2</sup> Pursuit of the Shield, pp 56-57

<sup>3</sup> Pursuit of the Shield, p.63

<sup>4</sup> Pursuit of the Shield, p.66

<sup>5</sup> Statement by the President Bush, June 13, 2002 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020613-9.html>

eliminating missiles from national military forces<sup>6</sup>. After two years of its announcement, having faced criticism about the failure to attract new governments to the regime, G-7 countries decided to expand massively<sup>7</sup>.

MTCR has been under criticism for the failure to halt missile proliferation. Despite the fact that it has had some important success, North Korea and China have made exports of missiles and missile technology in the past to India, China, Syria, Libya, and Pakistan.

The role of Russia in MTCR has been particularly contentious. Russia has joined MTCR as “a major missile power without the ability, and perhaps without the will, to limit its missile related exports”. Russia continued its exports after joining MTCR too. Oddly enough, Russian membership provided Russian companies with safeguard against US sanctions. Russian exports for Iran’s ballistic missiles program became a major issue between United States and Russia<sup>8</sup>.

## **Russian - Iranian Relations And Arms Sales**

One of the important aspects of Russian-Iranian relations is that Russian political and military elite, in contrast to those in United States, does not see Iran as a threat. Just an opposite – Iran along with several other “rogue states” like Libya and North Korea (the concept of “rogue state” being officially rejected by Russian Federation) used to be clients of Soviet Union. Particularly, in the issue of deployment of ballistic missiles by Iran, Russia does not perceive the same threat as US – neither on its territory nor for the troops stationed abroad. Therefore, it appears that Russian rhetoric of proliferation being an evil thing is nothing but a lip-service to politically correct western discourse of non-proliferation.<sup>9</sup>

The US has been trying to discourage Russia from arms sales to Iran by applying pressure through diplomatic channels as well as by using sanctions against particular Russian institutions and enterprises engaged in the arms trade. According to Stockholm Institute of Peace Research, between 1995 and 2005, 70 % of Iranian arms import was from Russia. Russian arms sales to Iran started before the Soviet collapse, between 1989 and 1991, when Soviet Union had agreed to sell MIG-29 and SU-24 fighter aircraft, aircraft missiles, S-200 air defense complexes, three diesel submarines and hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles. Sales and shipments continued from 1992 to 1996. During the period of 1995-2000 the Russian government, in order to get support from US in the elections, agreed to suspend its arms trade with Iran. However, it has been restored with Putin’s coming to power<sup>10</sup>. Notwithstanding the fact that the Russian elite considers Iran as a market for weapons and there is a significant amount of arms trade going on between these two countries, Russians are careful in not approaching Iran very much, especially

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<sup>6</sup> *Limiting Proliferation of Ballistic Missiles*, produced by CNS, Monterey Institute of International Studies, [http://www.nti.org/f\\_wmd411/f1a5\\_2.html](http://www.nti.org/f_wmd411/f1a5_2.html)

<sup>7</sup> Speier, Richard, *Can the Missile Technology Control Regime Be Repaired?* In: *Repairing the Regime*, ed. Joseph Cirincione, Routledge, 2000 pp. 205-216

<sup>8</sup> *Can the Missile Technology Control Regime Be Repaired?* p.209

<sup>9</sup> Mizin, Viktor, *Iran-Russia Missile Cooperation. Russian View* In: *Repairing the Regime*, ed. Joseph Cirincione, Routledge 2000, p.192

<sup>10</sup> Kasyanova, Alla, *Russian Arms Sales to Iran: Why They Are Unlikely to Stop*. PONARS Policy Memo No.427

right now when the international community and especially USA are asking the UN for more sanctions against Iran.

## US Missile Defense Shield In Eastern Europe

United States officials have recurrently mentioned Iran and North Korea as countries, which could threaten the US homeland and deployed troops abroad, with their missile potential. The Missile Defense Program Overview presented by Lt Gen Trey Obering, Chief of Missile Defense Agency in March, 2007, mentions only Iran as a source of ballistic missile threat<sup>11</sup>.

United States plans to locate its missile defense shield in Eastern Europe, which is going to consist of 10 interceptor missile systems in Poland and a radar in Czech Republic. The motivation behind choosing Czech Republic and Poland stems from the estimates by specialists that any possible Iranian missile targeting the US would be flying over Central Europe. Therefore, the deployment of interceptors and a radar in Czech Republic and Poland would be effective from the operational point of view<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, there seems to be also a political reason for that as, apparently, the majority of the “Old Europe” nations disagree with American threat perceptions about Iran. European and Russian specialists reject the view that there is a ballistic missile threat from “rogue states”<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, for the Bush administration it has been always easy to negotiate this with those countries dubbed by Donald Rumsfeld as the “New Europe”. These Eastern European countries are more aligned with US foreign policy objectives. Indeed, the President of Poland Lech Kaczynski loudly expressed his support for a US missile defense system, emphasizing that this would contribute to European security vis-à-vis “dangers, which result from the fact that not all the countries of the contemporary world are responsible”. It is worth mentioning that Kaczynski added that he did not mean Russia by this.<sup>14</sup>

## Russian Response To American Missile Defense Shield Initiative

Russian leaders have not concealed their fierce opposition to the US proposed shield. The Russian leadership clearly stated that the shield targeted Russia and in this case a Russian response would not be late. In June 2007, President Putin threatened to target Europe with nuclear ballistic or cruise missiles if the proposed defense system moved ahead. One of the arguments the Russian government holds against the shield is that defensive interceptors may be turned into offensive weapons. Theoretically as well as practically it seems possible<sup>15</sup>. However,

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<sup>11</sup> *Missile Defense Program Overview for The National Defense Industrial Association*, Lt Gen Trey Obering, Director, National Missile Defense Agency, March 5, 2007

<sup>12</sup> Eshelç David, *US Missile Shield in Europe: Logic or Mere Provocation?* In: *Defense Update*, June 6, 2007 <http://www.defense-update.com/newscast/0307/analysis/analysis-150307.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Mizin, Viktor, *Russia's Approach to the US Missile Defense Program*. In: NTI Issue Brief, February 2003 [http://nti.org/e\\_research/e3\\_26a.html#fn7#fn7](http://nti.org/e_research/e3_26a.html#fn7#fn7)

<sup>14</sup> Crawley, Vince, *Bush Thanks Poland for Missile Defense Support*. USINFO, 11 June 2007

<sup>15</sup> India converted space launched missile (SLV) to “Agni” short range ballistic missile (SRBM) and SA-2 became a basis for offensive missiles in China, India, Iran, Iraq and Serbia. see *Can the Missile Technology Control Regime Be Repaired*, p.211

experts agree that Russian leaders use the argument as a propaganda tool, whereas, in fact, they are more concerned with the possible increase of the American missile defense shield in the future<sup>16</sup>. Along with threatening to aim missiles at Europe, the Russian side came up with another proposal to the US. At the G-8 Summit in Germany in June 2007 President Putin has offered Russian-rented radar in Azerbaijan to be jointly used by Russia and the US. The radar station was a part of an early-warning system, designed to detect possible missile attack on the Soviet Union. The government of Azerbaijan has been leasing the radar to Russia after the dissolution of Soviet Union and in 2002 two governments have agreed on another 10-year period lease. Vladimir Putin has offered Gabala Radar Station to be jointly used by the US and Russia. At the same time, Russian government has also tried to assure the Iranian side that joint use would be of no harm to Iran. Later, the Iranian ambassador to Baku expressed his confidence that Russia and Azerbaijan would never use Gabala against his state. Reportedly, official Iran has had little doubt that the Americans would accept the Russian initiative.

The US responded to the offer by stating that Gabala RLS could be used in addition but not instead of a future defense shield in Europe. President Bush said the Polish and Czech deployments were "integral" to the system but he agreed to work with the Russians as well<sup>17</sup>. After recent talks between Russia and the US in Moscow Americans seemed to have agreed to halt the installation of a radar and interceptors in Eastern Europe. A senior US defense official stated that the US will continue negotiations with Czech Republic and Poland, but would leave the system switched off until US and Russia would agree that Iranian ballistic missiles pose a threat<sup>18</sup>. US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, has offered an option of not activating the system until the threat was obvious, meaning until Iran or any other Middle Eastern state had tested a missile capable of hitting Europe. According to Gates, Putin referred to the proposal as a constructive one.

Latest news concerning negotiations came from the NATO Summit in Bucharest and immediately afterwards from the Bush-Putin meeting in Sochi, Russia. Obviously, the US traded NATO's offering on long expected Membership Action Plans (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine for Russia's softening its posture on deployment of radars and interceptors in Eastern Europe. At the same time, Russia considered this a political and diplomatic victory due to the fact that it has managed to achieve discrepancy within NATO on Georgia's and Ukraine's further NATO aspirations. Admittedly, European addiction to Russian energy has played its role. However, neither did the US leave the summit with empty hands. The American achievement was Russia's noticeable compromise on a missile defense shield. Although Russia still does not buy US claims about missile defense directed against threats posed by the "rogue" states such as Iran, admittedly, there have been some positive movements recently. As Putin stated, he had "cautious optimism with regard to final agreement" and that he believed it was possible<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Nikolai Sokov, Senior Research Fellow, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies. November 21, 2007

<sup>17</sup> Q&A: US Missile Defense, BBC News, October, 12, 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6720153.stm>

<sup>18</sup> *US offers Putin deal over missile shield*. Financial Times, October 17, 2002

<sup>19</sup> Buckley, Neil and Dombey, Daniel, *US-Russia optimism on missile shield deal*. Financial Times, April 7, 2008 [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/19f41168-043b-11dd-b28b-000077b07658.html?nclink\\_check=1](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/19f41168-043b-11dd-b28b-000077b07658.html?nclink_check=1)

## Conclusion

Deeper investigation of the latest tensions between US and Russia exposes underlying fundamental reasons for this. The United States realized after the first Gulf War that the deterrence strategy it had relied upon during the Cold War was no longer effective. Saddam Hussein's personality proved that classical understanding of containing an enemy with the threat of retaliation was insufficient. The threat perception, thus, shifted from bigger subjects to the multiple small ones. The US has become more cautious about limited missile attacks from different "rogue" regimes, which have lately been developing their missiles. Russia is seen more as a proliferation threat rather than direct threat. Russian arms sales to Iran have increased this perception significantly.

Russia, in turn, has had different perceptions of security enjoying much better relations with all US adversaries, particularly Iran and North Korea. Supposedly, it was this disagreement in perceptions that resulted in recent tensions, since although the US and Russia have developed better relations after the end of Cold War, still both have dissimilar visions and views on international relations and security.

We can consider Russian opposition to a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe from several aspects. First, Russians are in agreement that American claims of Iranian threat are exaggerated or at least premature. Second, some Russians suspect that the number of interceptors and radars could grow with the time and ten interceptors in Eastern Europe is just a launch of something that could grow bigger increasingly.

However, notwithstanding harsh opposition from the Russian side and American assertiveness at the beginning, it appears that both sides are nearing compromise, as President Putin said that the last US proposals were constructive.

Indeed the recent NATO Summit in Bucharest brought up the missile defense shield issue again. Surprisingly enough, against the background of previous harsh opposition, Russian leadership has been more lenient and interested in even discussing joint operation of missile defense shield.

Although at the beginning the jargon reminded that of the Cold War, further negotiations proved that this prediction was exaggerated. Perhaps, some additional developments in the field might be expected after presidential elections in the United States this year given the fact that Democratic Party has a different stance on the missile defense issue.