

# WebMemo



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## Europe Anti-Missile Defense System: Standing Up to Russia's Threats

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The day after Barack Obama won the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced the first real test for the U.S. President-elect. In his State of the Federation speech, Medvedev threatened to station Iskander short-range nuclear-capable missiles in the Kaliningrad exclave if the U.S. proceeds with deploying anti-missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Medvedev softened his rhetoric following discussions with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, instead offering to hold off on the missile deployment in exchange for U.S. participation in a European security conference and if, as Sarkozy put it, there is “no more talk of anti-missile protection systems” until the conference.<sup>1</sup>

Sarkozy later revised his statement, admitting that Poland and the Czech Republic have a sovereign right to pursue missile defense. On November 17, however, NATO, of which France is a member, reiterated its support for a planned U.S. missile shield in Europe—after Sarkozy had said it would bring no extra security to the Continent. A NATO spokeswoman said the alliance’s position—formulated at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008—had not changed. It was at the Bucharest Summit that NATO leaders, including Sarkozy, endorsed U.S. plans to deploy the missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic.

The Obama Administration should not give in to Russian threats. If it does, it will signal that the new U.S. President-elect can be pressured on other

issues. Even if Obama were open to the idea of delaying or canceling the deployment, to do so following Russian missile threats would be an unmistakable sign of weakness.

**Georgia War Triggered Missile Defense Deployment.** Immediately after the Russian-Georgian war, Poland agreed to deploy a 10-interceptor missile defense battery on its territory to counter long-range ballistic missiles that might threaten Europe or North America. Warsaw also received enhanced American security guarantees, boosting its bilateral military ties with Washington. In addition, the U.S. also agreed to deploy a Patriot anti-aircraft missile (PAC-3) battery in Poland capable of neutralizing Russian missiles.

Moscow fiercely opposes the American missile defense system, claiming that the project compromises its national security. Yet Russia’s claims fail any objective test: The top Kremlin ballistic missile experts have written that the missile shield in Europe cannot neutralize Russia’s overwhelming nuclear arsenal—not even Moscow’s second-strike capability. The 10 interceptors that the U.S. is planning to deploy would not have an appreciable impact on the strategic balance of nuclear forces,

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which includes thousands of warheads deliverable by the Russian strategic triad: ballistic missiles, bombers, and submarines.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the U.S. has done much to reassure Moscow that the system is intended only to counter possible strikes from rogue states in the Middle East such as Iran. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has offered to deploy Russian liaison officers in Poland and suggested that the system would not become operational if Iran does not develop missiles with sufficient range to hit Europe.

**Why Iskanders?** The Kremlin and the Russian military are keeping the myth of a Western military menace alive for their own ends while using the threat of short-range missile deployment in Kaliningrad and the Baltic Fleet for two reasons.

First, the Russian military, despite its victories in Georgia, remains conventionally weaker than the NATO forces. According to U.S. military sources, Moscow may be seeking a pretext to integrate tactical nuclear systems, such as the dual-capacity conventional/nuclear Iskander, into frontline units that would otherwise be too weak to counter NATO. These integrated systems could also hit a broad range of targets in Europe, such as air bases, depots, and a concentration of NATO troops within the 280-kilometer range of the Iskander missile.<sup>3</sup>

Second, Medvedev's recent declaration of willingness to not deploy the missiles to Kaliningrad in exchange for a cancellation of the missile defense system reveals the political motive behind the initial declaration of intent to deploy the Iskanders: By using missile deployment as a bargaining chip, the Kremlin secures a means of further dividing Europe and United States over the missile system, a tactic reminiscent of the U.S.–Europe rift over the deployment of SS-20s in the 1980s.

Germany and France in particular are unhappy with the U.S. not initially asking their permission for the missile defense deployment. This rancor fur-

thers weakens the alliance and adds fodder to EU security and defense policy advocates' opposition to NATO. Moscow counts on bolstering missile defense skeptics among American allies in Europe if it places nuclear weapons on Poland's border. Such skepticism, the Kremlin believes, is strengthening its argument that the U.S. missile interceptors will lead to a dangerous arms escalation in the region.

Russia's threat is indeed a shrewd geopolitical move. By opposing Washington, Moscow is trying to drive new wedges between "old" and "new" Europe, and between Europe and the U.S. As a major source of Europe's energy supply, Russia has a tremendous amount of economic influence over U.S. allies in the region, enough to make its wedge-driving strategy a realistic threat.

The lack of a unified Western position allows Moscow, also through the means of its energy diplomacy, to apply the ancient Roman principle of *divide et impera* to its relations with the Europeans and Americans. Without a strong and unified response from the West, Russia will be able to maximize its advantages in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space while minimizing its weaknesses and thereby achieve gains at the expense of U.S. and its allies.

**Worries in Warsaw.** One hopes that these disagreements do not hurt America's relations with one of its closest European allies, Poland. However, many in Warsaw are worried, as Obama's foreign policy advisor, Denis McDonough, has contradicted President Lech Kaczynski's claims that Obama is unequivocally committed to stationing missile interceptors in Poland. Obama previously said that he supports deploying the system when the technology is proved to be workable and if the project is pragmatic and cost-effective.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, another Obama advisor, also voiced opposition for the anti-missile deployment. However, at this point, if the deployment is

1. Stephen Castle, "Russia Backs off on Europe Missile Threat," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2008, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/15/world/europe/15europe.html?scp=2&sq=russia+missile&st=nyt> (November 20, 2008).
2. Alexander Golts, "Medvedev's Missile Myths," *The Moscow Times*, November 11, 2008, at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/1016/42/372282.htm> (November 20, 2008).
3. *Ibid.*

postponed it would signal Washington's weakness and give Moscow a strategic win.

Unlike Russia's fantasies of Western "aggression," the threat posed by the Iranian missile program is real. Just last Wednesday, Iran tested an indigenous medium range missile that combines liquid and solid fuel technology and can fly 2,000 kilometers, with longer range missiles in the works. Therefore, the U.S. and its European allies cannot afford to back out of the missile defense deployment in Poland.

At a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Tallinn, Estonia, Gates argued that Iran poses a threat to Russia as well as to Europe, neutralizing the Russian argument against the missile system.<sup>4</sup>

**Reject Russian Threats.** The Obama Administration should not derail or postpone the missile shield in Europe, but it should continue efforts to convince the Kremlin that the system is not aimed against Russia. Giving in to the Kremlin's demands would be the second strategic victory Moscow

would achieve after recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are parts of Georgia.

The United States and Europe need to prevent Moscow from dictating Europe's security policy or interfering with U.S.-Polish strategic cooperation.

The Obama Administration should reject Medvedev's missile threats, exposing them as a throw-back to the Cold War. The great irony and blunder of Russia's actions is that had Moscow acted more responsibly, the Obama Administration might have delayed the European missile defense system altogether. Now the Obama Administration must resist Russian pressure, if only to avoid the appearance of weakness and to discourage Russia's strategic revisionism.

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4. Lolita C. Baldor, "Gates Rejects Russian Pressure on Missile Plans," Associated Press, November 13, 2008, at <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5jfS6y-A7WF82KotI6KMN41IA3M4QD94E3UKG0> (November 20, 2008).