

MOSCOW'S MISSILES

There is an old saying that history has a nasty habit of repeating itself. In the early 1960s, the US stationed missiles in Turkey; in retaliation, the Soviet Union deployed them into the Caribbean sparking the infamous Cuban Missile crisis. Over the past six months, news that US missiles are once again bound for Turkey as well as Eastern Europe has sparked another missile crisis.

Against the backdrop of ongoing tensions over Ukraine, alarmists have been claiming that Europe is slipping inexorably toward a nuclear confrontation the like of which has not been seen since the bad old days of the Cold War. Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk has fuelled this by saying Russia and Ukraine are on the verge of a nuclear war. Yatsenyuk may be deliberately scaremongering to encourage the West to help him fend off Russian interference in eastern Ukraine, but there is some substance to his dire warning.

Certainly Moscow is extremely alarmed by the steady expansion of Nato's Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) shield eastward into Poland, Romania and Turkey, as well as westward into Spain. Washington argues that this is to protect its Nato allies from potential ballistic missiles fired from rogue states such as Iran or North Korea. Not so, says Moscow, arguing that the deployment of the BMD is not only a threat to Russia's national security, as it upsets the military balance, but is also a clear threat to its strategic nuclear deterrent.

It was after 9/11 that Washington unilaterally abandoned the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which it signed with the Soviet Union in 1972. This rightly sought to curtail any nuclear warfighting capabilities by limiting missile defence to two fixed sites for each nation. It also banned mobile ABM systems and the deployment of missile defence at sea or in outer space. Since the 1970s, however, technology has moved on. Both sides now have highly sophisticated missile killers in the shape of Patriot and S-300 surface-to-air missiles – both of which are very mobile and capable of shooting down aircraft, rockets and ballistic missiles.

Washington assessed in the wake of 9/11 that US security was at risk from non-state players and rogue states, and therefore the ABM Treaty was too prescriptive. As a result, the US walked away from the ABM Treaty giving it a free hand to develop BMD systems.

US Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller has stressed to Moscow that US missile defence is not global in scope and is restricted to countering a limited number of ballistic missiles from Iran and North Korea. Gottemoeller contends the limited capability of the BMD in Europe would have little utility against Russia's massive nuclear weapons arsenal. Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral James Winnefeld, recently stated that effectively countering the threat of China and Russia's intercontinental ballistic



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missiles is just too difficult and too expensive.

Moscow's acceptance of its former Eastern European allies into Nato's ranks was on the grounds that Nato troops would not be permanently stationed on their soil; Moscow now sees the BMD expansion as part of a process of making Eastern Europe the frontline against Russia. Perhaps understandably it interprets this as a hostile move.

In addition, Moscow views the US BMD programme in Europe as part of an American global project to disrupt the balance of power. Moscow argues that this is borne out by the fact that, despite a framework deal with Iran regarding its nuclear programme, Washington has singularly failed to modify its missile defence plans. In

**Eyes on the ICBMs:
Nato insists Russian
missiles are not the
intended targets for its
expanded missile shield**

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essence, Moscow is accusing Washington of a clumsy and unconvincing sleight of hand.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu is firmly of the opinion that the US global missile defence system is a threat to strategic stability. "It is obvious that Tehran's missile threat, concocted by the US and other alliance members, have been a bluff", argued Shoigu. "Even after breakthrough decisions on the Iranian nuclear programme, nobody has illusions concerning the possibility of the review of the US-Nato missile defence plans."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov upping the ante in April 2015 by accusing the US of violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by placing tactical nuclear weapons in Nato countries. While such

deployments are highly classified, it has been estimated that the US has approximately 500 warheads stationed in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. US Under Secretary Gottemoeller's response was rather bemused, as this had never been raised as an issue under the provisions of the NPT until now. Russian strategists, however, can only see the Nato BMD as the shield and US tactical nukes as the sword.

In June 2013, the Obama Administration completed its review of the US Strategic Nuclear Forces (SNF), shaping its composition out to 2018 under the New START Treaty, which reduces the number of nuclear weapons and launchers the US and Russia can deploy. Russia has reduced its total number of nuclear warheads from 3,900 in 2010, to 1,582 today; the US currently has fewer than 2,000, and will reduce this number to 1,550 by 2018. But several reasons have been cited for Russia's on-going opposition to US proposals to reduce the total number of deployed nuclear warheads by a third. These include Washington's missile defence programme, the US military's Prompt Global Strike system, US refusal to renegotiate the ban on weaponising outer space and its refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

All this comes at a time when US SNF are at their lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War. At the close of 2014, US Defense Secretary Chick Hagel announced a \$9bn modernisation programme for the SNF, acknowledging that its infrastructure has been neglected, compromising safety, and that morale is at rock bottom. Added to this, the SNF have been rocked by a series of highly publicised staff misconduct scandals. In 2013 Vice Admiral Tim Giardina, deputy commander US Strategic Command, was sacked for his fraudulent gambling activities. Likewise, two days after Giardina's dismissal, US Air Force General Michael Carey was removed from his post in charge America's 450 land based Minutemen ICBMs, following a drunken trip to Russia.

US Strategic Command will be looking for a convincing rationale with Congress to justify the \$9bn overhaul, and tensions in Europe provide ample ammunition. But, Moscow will have looked on in a combination of amusement and alarm over reports of critical safety issues at Malstrom and Minot Air Force Bases.

In the meantime, the US is installing an Aegis Ashore BMD system in Romania and one is scheduled for Poland in 2018. Radars and interceptor missiles are also to be positioned in Turkey and Spain. US defence contractor Raytheon has also been awarded a massive \$600m contract by the US Missile Defense Agency for 44 anti-ballistic missiles which will be deployed in Romania as part of Nato's missile shield.

Likewise, Poland has agreed to purchase US Patriot surface-to-air missiles from Raytheon, in a deal reportedly worth a staggering \$7bn. Moscow watched

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Israel develop its Iron Dome BMD based on Patriot to intercept rockets fired by Hamas and Hezbollah, and fully appreciates the potential of the Nato BMD once in place.

Thanks to the worsening Ukrainian crisis, for which the West holds Russia responsible, the US and Nato have suspended dialogue with Moscow on the European missile shield since last spring. Tantalisingly, Washington has hinted at resurrecting the ABM Treaty or at least some sort of successor arrangement. Under Secretary of State Gottemoeller has said that Washington is open to reaching an agreement on missile defence co-operation in the future. This seems wishful thinking, however – even delusional. Moscow has no incentive to co-operate in light of the rollout of the Nato ballistic missile shield and the meddling of the European Union's Eastern Partnership. The Ukraine crisis erupted after the last Eastern Partnership summit in Lithuania in November 2013.

Gottemoeller is on record as saying "We don't think the Ukrainian conflict is a nuclear crisis." There is no reason not to believe her, but the conflict in Ukraine has significantly heightened security tensions in Europe. The

tiny Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania remain alarmed over Russia's aggressive annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. These states were under Soviet domination for decades and fear Moscow might want them back in the fold. But attempts by Nato to allay these concerns security assurances have in turn antagonised Russia brought Moscow into ever-greater confrontation with the alliance.

Moscow is fuming as the EU rides roughshod over its old spheres of interest; EU leaders continue to hold talks with Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova. While Russia is far from happy over the deployment of Nato's BMD across eastern Europe, US meddling in Ukraine is seen as another source of friction. Lavrov recently told US Secretary of State John Kerry that Kiev was violating its undertaking to remove all foreign equipment and mercenaries from its soil by allowing in US military instructors. Whatever the outcome of the Ukrainian conflict, Moscow's missile standoff is likely to run for some considerable time, especially if Nato does not back down.

Patriot games: Moscow is alarmed by the extension of Nato's missile shield into Poland, Romania and Turkey

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