

Missile Defense Is Not the Answer to Putin's Aggression

Written by Azriel Bermant

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AZRIEL BERMANT, APR 3 2014

The current crisis between Russia and the West over the fate of Ukraine is viewed by many as the most serious East-West rift we have faced since the end of the Cold War. Mitt Romney, John McCain, and other leading Republicans argue that Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula is a direct result of President Obama's naivety towards Moscow. They have a plan to stop Russia in its tracks: they want to see the reinstatement of the Bush-era antimissile shield in Eastern Europe as a response to Putin's aggression. It is claimed that Obama's decision to scrap the Bush Administration's antimissile shield in 2009 was a blatant attempt to appease Moscow. Unfortunately, their idea is irresponsible, fundamentally wrong-headed and counter-productive.

First, what do the Republicans want to achieve with the missile defense shield? If they want to defend Eastern Europe from Russian missiles, then they will surely be aware that Russia's strategic missile forces would be large enough to saturate any European defense system. In short, were Russia to launch nuclear warheads against population centers in Central or Eastern Europe, an antimissile shield would provide little protection.[i]

Second, the Bush Administration's plans in 2006 to deploy a missile defense system in Eastern Europe was never intended to address the threat from Russia. In the years following the end of the Cold War, successive US Administrations perceived missile defense as a means to address the dual threats of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles emerging from revisionist regimes such as Iran and North Korea. In the seven years since the Bush Administration unveiled its antimissile shield, US officials have gone out of their way to try and convince their Russian counterparts that US missile defense is directed at Teheran and not at Moscow.[ii] Putin has consistently dismissed such reassurances. McCain's intervention is a gift for the wily Russian autocrat who can now turn round and say, "I told you so!"

The Obama Administration took the decision to scrap the Bush-era antimissile shield partly because the ground-based interceptors in Poland were perceived to be ineffective.[iii] Obama's biggest mistake here was that there should have been closer consultation with his Eastern European allies. Still, the current Czech President, Miloz Zeman, has stated openly that the Bush-era system was ineffective, and that there would be no point in reviving it.[iv] It is certainly possible that Obama abandoned the system to pacify Moscow, but this misses the point: within months of entering office, the Obama Administration unveiled a new missile defense system of its own known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA). The EPAA is widely regarded as an improvement on the Bush-era antimissile shield, and a more mobile, flexible, and comprehensive response for NATO to the spread of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction outside the Euro-Atlantic area.

While Putin was fiercely opposed to the Bush Administration's antimissile shield, he also vehemently objects to the present NATO system, claiming that it threatens Russia's nuclear deterrent. Yet there is little substance to this claim. The capacities of the Bush-era antimissile shield were too limited to be able to pose a threat to Moscow, and the same applies to the present NATO EPAA defense arrangement in Europe. Leading Russian generals and rocket scientists have also published articles[v] in Russian journals expressing this view. While Putin's concerns may be genuine, they are also manipulated to promote a narrative depicting Russia as a victim threatened by NATO encirclement. The Kremlin has always disliked the NATO missile defense system because it is perceived as a means

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to strengthen western political control over Russia's backyard. However, the system is not directed at Russia and cannot threaten its strategic nuclear forces. Thus, the Republican calls to reinstate the Bush-era interceptors and radars will only play into the hands of Russian hardliners including Putin himself.

NATO members in Eastern Europe, such as Poland and the Baltic States, are enthusiastic supporters of the EPAA missile defense system not because they believe it will protect them from Russian warheads, but because of the associated political and military support provided by the United States in maintaining the radars and interceptors deployed in this region. Even if Washington does not necessarily view such security commitments in terms of defending its allies from a possible Russian attack, Alliance members in Eastern Europe view the deployment of missile defense assets on their soil as an enhanced form of extended deterrence against any potential Russian threats. They are quite happy with the system that the Obama Administration has put in place.

The Republicans are absolutely right to call for stepped-up action against Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula. There are many measures that can be taken to punish Russia, but NATO's missile defense system is not the answer to Moscow's aggression. Putin is doing well enough as it is, and doesn't need a helping hand from Republican leaders who should know better.

[i] Dean A. Wilkening, "Does Missile Defense in Europe Threaten Russia?", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 54:1, 2012, pp.31-52

[ii] "Obama Administration Defends Antimissile Plan", *NTI*, 15 September 2011

[iii] Viktor Litovkin, "The Latest Stage of Dialogue on Missile Defense Cooperation", in *Missile Defense: Confrontation and Cooperation*, eds. Alexei Arbatov and Vladimir Dvorkin; English version ed Natalia Bubnova (Carnegie Moscow Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), p.173

[iv] "GOP Lawmakers Call for Reviving Bush-Era Antimissile Plan", *NTI*, 12 March 2014 <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/gop-lawmakers-call-reviving-bush-era-antimissile-plan/>

[v] Alexei Arbatov, "Strategic Asymmetry and Diplomacy", in *Missile Defense: Confrontation and Cooperation*, eds. Alexei Arbatov and Vladimir Dvorkin; English version ed Natalia Bubnova (Carnegie Moscow Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), pp.346-348

Also: NATO Deputy Secretary General, Alexander Vershbow, "The Future of Missile Defense: A NATO Perspective", Presentation at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) Conference: *Missile Defense: Asset or Liability for Regional and International Stability*, 15 January, 2014 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_106142.htm?selectedLocale=en

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