

Russia “suspends” deployment of “Iskander” missiles in Kaliningrad: a sign of new dynamics in strategic relations between U.S. and Russia?

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Russia is expecting that B. Obama’s administration will reconsider U.S. policy towards strategic arms and will be more appeasable in regards of sustaining a strategic balance between two countries. However, Russia and its „offers“ or diplomatic maneuvers should be treated as just one of many and altogether not a decisive factor determining B. Obama’s decisions in the sphere of strategic arms control.

Two at first sight contradictory political messages from Russia coincided with the two most important events of newly inaugurated U.S. president’s Barack Obama’s career. In November, when various world leaders greeted B. Obama with the victory in U.S. presidential election, Russia’s president Dmitrij Medvedev instead of friendly welcome issued a statement about plans to deploy short-range ballistic missiles system “Iskander”* in Kaliningrad Oblast – as a response to U.S. plans to deploy elements of its national missile defense system (anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system) in Central European countries.**

However, soon after B. Obama’s administration took office on January 20 quite opposite news were heard from Russia. News agency “Interfax” quoting unidentified Russian defense official reported that the military will halt implementation of its plans to deploy missiles in Russia’s Baltic enclave in connection with U.S. administration’s inclination not to rush with the process of missile shield creation in Central Europe. Western media, experts and military officials (like U.S. envoy to NATO Kurt Volker, NATO spokesman James Appathurai) evaluated these reports very positively, with a stress that such a concession from Russia, if confirmed officially, would “represent a significant move towards de-escalating tensions between Russia and the United States” (BBC, “Russian move would reduce tensions

Welcome sign for B. Obama? Russia’s foreign ministry, reacting to these reports and the Western evaluation explained that Russia is not withdrawing the “Iskander” deployment option. However, it was clearly outlined (also by country’s highest officials, president and prime minister) that Russia would only deploy the missiles if the current U.S. government implements the plans of former George Bush administration for the ABM bases in Central Europe. Russia’s officials also reiterated earlier suggestions for the U.S.: Russia is ready to work with the U.S. and Europe in the form of multilateral cooperation while evaluating possible defense against missile threats.

Basically there are two ways to evaluate these developments. 1) Nothing substantial has changed: **firstly**, Russia is still holding deployment of “Iskander” as a last standing option of retaliation against practical implementation of U.S. ABM plans in Central

Issue 1 (17)

Analytical bulletin about political, economic and social processes in the CIS area.

Published by:

Centre for Eastern Geopolitical Studies



www.cegs.lt

* The Iskander has a range of up to 400 km (250 miles) and is usually equipped with a conventional warhead - but can also carry a tactical nuclear warhead. Theoretically deployment of such missiles (which would be pointed into the future ABM bases in Central Europe) could adequately neutralise strengthening of U.S. strategic power – in regards of likely increase of U.S. undeterrence when ABM system is deployed.

** US plans to deploy a base of 10 missile interceptors in Poland and a missile defense radar in the Czech Republic.

Europe and, **secondly**, is trying to engage the U.S. into broader cooperation formats which would give Russia more control of U.S. national missile defense programme "from within" (Eastern Pulse, No. 11). 2) Clear outline that Russia is not practically deploying the "Iskander" yet (suspension or halt are actually terms without substance because it is not possible to suspend plans that aren't in the implementation phase) should be treated as a welcome signal to Obama's administration of Moscow's goodwill and hopes for better relations. This could mean that Russia is mitigating its confrontational tone and expecting some substantial change of U.S. policy towards strategic arms in narrow sense and towards Russia as an international power in the broader sense. What are Russia's interests in this sphere of international politics (strategic arms control), what could be expected from new U.S. administration and what could Moscow offer for the U.S.?

Russia, G. Bush's administration and strategic arms. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's status as a great power in international politics was largely sustained by its vast nuclear arsenal, matched (and eventually overmatched) only by U.S. Strong positions in regards of strategic nuclear arms (and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), biological and chemical weapon) on one hand kept Russia as one of the crucial actors in international diplomacy of WMD non-proliferation and disarmament, and on the another, guaranteed a particular status in international politics (and special relation with US) even if Russia's economy couldn't match the ones of G-7 countries. That's why one of the Russia's most important interests and altogether objectives in regards of international politics is to sustain a Russian-American strategic balance.

Kremlin considers that this balance between the U.S. and Russia was disturbed by unilateral G. Bush administrations' policies in the spheres of WMD and strategic arms (in terms of ignoring the multilateral formats and efforts, established arms control regimes and in most cases Russia's position). These U.S. decisions were of major importance: withdrawal from the ABM treaty, pushing of 2002 arms control SORT treaty (which is considered as imprecise and of general nature, lacks verification and warhead counting rules), and finally the inclination for national missile defense system's development and deploying its elements not just in U.S. territory but also in Europe. Here it is important to stress that although the ABM issue has been on the U.S. policy agenda for more than 50 years, G. Bush's administration is special in this case because they treated ABM issue as highly possible technically and highly desirable politically.

Why Russia perceives ABM system as a threat to its national security? It is possible to discern two main reasons: 1) unilateral U.S. actions, oriented towards its strategic superiority and technological supremacy will leave Russia lagging far behind in strategic arms sphere. According to some Russian analysts, any U.S. missile-defense system which undermines Russia's nuclear deterrent will be viewed by the Kremlin as absolutely unacceptable. However, it is needed to stress that "undermining" is quite an exaggeration here: Russia's arsenal is still simply too big to be undermined by current midcourse ground based ABM system planned to be deployed in Central Europe, consisting of 10 interceptors. Firstly, many experts are very sceptical about its effectiveness and secondly,

it should be very vulnerable against countermeasures (such as decoys, oversaturation* , etc.) However, ABM deployment puts U.S. into position that gives it more maneuvering space: further possibilities for expanding and upgrading the system in the future; 2) what is extremely sensitive for Russia is the geopolitics of U.S. national missile defense system. ABM deployment in Poland and Czech Republic not only threatens Russia's deterrent power, but also blocks Russia's potential to spread into its former sphere of influence, and naturally strengthens integration of this region with the U.S. network of military security.

Possible further developments: Russia's interests and U.S. position.

Following this logic, Russia would like Obama's administration to halt or even withdraw its plans to deploy ABM system elements in Central Europe and limit the development of national missile defense system; or at least, give Russia substantial share and control in these processes. However, missile shield is just a part of strategic relations between the two countries. If Russia is interested in sustaining a strategic balance, one of the most important expectations for Obama from Kremlin should be the development of a new treaty to replace START 1 – which would lead to a further reduction of nuclear warheads, preservation (or maybe upgrading) of existing verification mechanisms and more thorough restrictions on the nuclear triad held by both states. START 1 is expiring in December 2009. Taking into account that no other treaty effectively regulating strategic arms between the two top nuclear powers will be in effect after that date (previously mentioned shortcomings of SORT should be taken into account), and also knowing Russia's struggle to equally modernize its nuclear triad and arsenal of warheads, the vacuum situation will automatically put Russia into a disadvantageous position.

Why should be the U.S. willing to restrain its ABM plans and negotiate a new treaty on strategic arms (and not try just to extend START-1 pointing to still existing SORT**, which basically serves U.S. interests)? It must be remembered that U.S. status and prestige in the world after two Republican administrations is quite damaged, and extensive work in the spheres of WMD non-proliferation and arms control could be a sensible tactic striving to regain status as a leading (not hegemonic) power. Obama's administration's main objective (to deal with economy in deep crisis) also gives some additional pressure on military spending – and the moderation of the development of the ABM systems as well as their deployment are some of the possible ways to cut it.

It looks like there are some grounds for Kremlin's hopes. One of B. Obama's objectives declared during the presidential election and confirmed after taking office is to stop proliferation of WMD on a global scale and to strive for deep cuts in global nuclear arsenals. Moreover, there are signs from the U.S. that official policy towards ABM could shift from „highly possible, highly desirable“ towards „fairly technically possible, fairly politically desirable“- it seems that Obama's administration tends to devote some time for reviewing the ABM policy and more thorough evaluation of the systems's technological workability.

However, U.S. present position and future prospects in regards of

* Simultaneous release of ICBM's armed with multiple warheads.

** Two most important features favoring U.S.: SORT restricts only number of "operationally deployed" warheads and unlike START-1, does not prohibit the deployment of strategic nuclear forces outside national territory.

bilateral strategic balance with Russia are clearly advantageous. On the ABM issue the U.S. has greater backing from its NATO partners, a situation different from the one several years ago. Strategic balance negotiations can also be really hard for Moscow without anything substantial to offer for Washington, because the U.S. can easily keep its existing nuclear arsenal (1,200 delivery vehicles and 5,900 warheads) in service for quarter of a decade. In contrast, Kremlin's strategic arms even without restrictive treaties are shrinking (850 delivery vehicles and 4,150 warheads now) and its modernization programme is being implemented very slowly (especially in regards of strategic bombers and ballistic missiles submarines).

Hence Obama's administration is unlikely to discuss ABM and strategic arms control issues on Moscow's terms. Moreover, according to experts, in this sphere Russia does not have much to offer for Washington (if such diplomatic maneuvers as the suspension of non-existing deployment are discarded as more of a propaganda) and altogether is not willing to give something that would really make a difference – for example, change its stance towards Iran. It is highly predictable that U.S. policy towards the ABM system and strategic arms will depend not so much on Russia's position and "offers", but on Obama's administration's inclination to restore US international prestige (especially in the spheres of WMD disarmament and non-proliferation), reconsideration of the need for security oriented geopolitics and practical forms of it (like ABM system's deployment in Central Europe) and also identification of its strategic partners (which is more likely to be India and China, not Russia). •