

G7 Play Thermonuclear Chess with Putin

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The most significant outcome of the recent G8 Summit at Heiligendamm was not Chancellor Merkel's "victory" on the contentious issue of greenhouse gas emissions. It was the shrewd chess play by Russia's President Vladimir Putin on the US Missile Defense strategy for Europe.

Putin outplayed his US counterpart Bush as he laid on the table a new proposal to deal with Washington's ostensible argument why it must build its ballistic missile defense system in Poland, the Czech Republic and perhaps also Ukraine and Bulgaria. The proposal was as simple as it was devastating for the US argument in favor of Czech and Polish ABM sites.

At a joint press conference following their private talks, Putin declared, "We have our own ideas. I outlined them in detail. The first proposal involves the joint use of the Gabala radar station that Russia leases from Azerbaijan. I spoke with the President of Azerbaijan about this just yesterday. Our present agreement with Azerbaijan would allow us to do this and the President of Azerbaijan stressed that he would be happy if his country could contribute to ensuring global security in this way.

"We can do this automatically," Putin added, "and in this case the system we established would include all of Europe without exception, rather than simply one part of the continent. This would completely eliminate the possibility of missiles falling on European countries because they would fall either into the sea or into the ocean. It would eliminate the need — or, more accurately — allow us to refrain from changing our position and retargeting our missiles..."

US replies

After this press conference Bush's spokesman announced that he had taken ill. More likely Mr Bush had to get briefed and fast how to respond to the unexpected Russian offer. Condi Rice even admitted they were caught off guard. The Russian President called their bluff before the world press.

The response didn't take long. On June 15 General Henry Obering, head of the US Missile Defense Agency declared the Russian proposal wouldn't help against the "Iran threat" and

installing a US radar system in the Czech Republic and a missile base (sic) in Poland was the “best possible decision given studies of possible flight trajectories of long-range ballistic missiles the Islamic Republic was working on...”

A day earlier at a NATO defense ministers’ meet, US Defense Secretary Gates stated the US would go ahead with its plans for a missile defense system in Eastern Europe whether or not any agreement is reached on an alternative Russian proposal.

In brief, Washington’s response has been a parody of Admiral Farragut’s famous cry: “Damn the missiles; full speed ahead!”

The US made a formal request in January to place a radar base in a military area near Prague, and interceptor missiles in neighbouring Poland as part of a US-controlled missile defense shield. In doing so, Washington, we should recall, claimed rogue missile attacks from Iran or North Korea as justification.

The world could well look back to Heiligendamm as the last chance the major powers had to avoid thermonuclear destruction. Sound overly dramatic? The day after he made his proposal to Mr Bush, Putin called an open press conference with all invited G8 media.

Why Putin is right

A western reader of mainline press would conclude that Russia has unilaterally reverted to its Cold War stance and threatens world peace. The reality is a little different. As Putin told the G8 press in comments almost completely blocked out in western media, “if this missile system is put in place, it will work automatically with the entire nuclear capability of the United States. It will be an integral part of the US nuclear capability.”

In other words, missile “defense” is not defensive at all. It is offensive. If one of two nuclear opponents has nuclear strike ability and even a modest shield against retaliation from the other, he has what NATO strategists have dreamed of since the mid-1950’s: Nuclear Primacy. You can simply dictate terms of surrender to the other. The first nation with a nuclear missile shield would de facto have ‘first strike ability.’ Quite correctly, Lt. Colonel Robert Bowman, Director of the US Air Force missile defense program, recently called missile defense, “the missing link to a First Strike.”

We can dismiss the argument about Iran missiles. The Azeri offer of Putin for US missile shield would stand on the Iran border. The current US plans for Europe call to mind the September 2000 report which in addition to calling for regime change in Iraq also demanded upgraded priority to missile defense as a tool to “project US power.” That report, *‘Rebuilding America’s Defenses,’* by the hawkish Project for the New American Century, where Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld were members, declared, ‘The United States must develop and deploy global missile defenses to defend the American homeland and American allies, and to **provide a secure basis for US power projection around the world.**’ (author’s emphasis).

In his remarks at Heiligendamm, Putin reminded the press it was not Russia but the USA which started the new confrontation, when it unilaterally abrogated the US-Russian Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty in December 2001. Then Washington has supported color revolutions and pro-NATO regime changes on Russia’s borders. It has brought into NATO Poland, Latvia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia,

formerly of Yugoslavia. NATO candidates include the Georgia, Croatia, Albania and Macedonia. Ukraine's President, Victor Yushchenko, has tried to bring Ukraine into NATO. This is a clear message to Moscow, not surprisingly, one they don't seem to welcome with open arms.

Putin noted with more than a little irony, "we have removed all of our heavy weapons from the European part of Russia and put them behind the Urals. We have reduced our Armed Forces by 300,000. We have taken several other steps required by the ACAF. But what have we seen in response? Eastern Europe is receiving new weapons, two new military bases are being set up in Romania and in Bulgaria, and there are two new missile launch areas — a radar in Czech republic and missile systems in Poland. And we are asking ourselves the question: what is going on? Russia is disarming unilaterally. But if we disarm unilaterally then we would like to see our partners be willing to do the same thing in Europe. On the contrary, Europe is being pumped full of new weapons systems."

Russia will now likely leave the 1990 treaty on conventional forces in Europe to reorganize its military posture. It will retarget its missiles at EU and US targets. On June 14 Moscow announced successful tests of a new type of ballistic missile that will reportedly penetrate any US missile defense. The new Cold War is underway. How that affects EU-Russian relations, including in oil and gas, will be the political theme of the rest of this decade.

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