

New Cold War on Hold? Is Obama Ready to Drop Missile Defense?

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US President Obama has sent a secret letter to Russia's president Medvedev, suggesting that he would back down from deploying the controversial US missile defense system in Eastern Europe if Moscow would help stop Iran from developing long-range weapons, according to White House spokesmen. The New York Times reports that the letter to Medvedev was hand-delivered in Moscow by Under Secretary of State William J. Burns three weeks ago. It reportedly said the United States would not need to proceed with its missile interceptor system, which has been vehemently opposed by Russia since it was proposed by the Bush administration, if Iran halted any efforts to build nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles.

The Obama offer reportedly was intended to give Moscow an incentive to join the United States in a common front against Iran. Russia's military, diplomatic and commercial ties to Tehran give it influence, but it has understandably resisted Washington's hard line against Iran. The question is what the ultimate US strategy is vis-à-vis Russia.

New Strategy or new tricks?

If as it seems, the secret offer to Medvedev is accurate the question is whether this represents a serious retreat under President Obama from the long-term Pentagon goal of nuclear primacy—in military terms the ability of the United States to deliver a fatal nuclear first strike against Russia without fear of significant Russian retaliation.

As Russian and even US military experts have stressed, deployment of an anti-missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic is a direct threat to Russia's nuclear potential. They argue that an 'anti-Iranian' missile defense system will be deployed in the next two to three years in an area clearly beyond the reach of Iran's existing and projected missiles, but very convenient for intercepting missiles launched from European Russia in a northern and a north-western direction. The immediate targets of this system are the Russian Strategic Missile divisions deployed west of the Urals. A simple look at the numbers shows that although there are several Topols and UR-100s for each American interceptor, this ratio would only stand until the first nuclear strike. The Russian concern is that it could be tempting for Washington at some point, to initiate a first strike when there is a system that protects against retaliation.

The 10 ground-based interceptor (GBI) missiles planned for Poland cannot, of course, hope to counter a full-scale strike by the Russian Strategic Missile Forces and missile-carrying submarines. But the strategic importance of these interceptor missiles would increase greatly were the US to deliver a nuclear first strike against Russia. In such a scenario, the

Polish-based interceptor missiles would only have to contend with the reduced number of missiles that survived the first strike. This would allow the US prospect for the first time since the 1950s, for 'victory' in a nuclear war.

As I describe in my book, [Apokalypse Jetzt!](#), the placement of US missiles in Poland and advanced radar in the Czech Republic are vital parts of the US post-Cold War strategy of NATO encirclement of Russia and eventual decapitation of the nation as a functioning entity. As Obama foreign policy adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski has repeatedly stressed, the gravest threat to US sole superpower dominance of the planet lies in Eurasia and the chance that Russia, China and other Eurasian powers combine forces to resist US domination. That is what the British father of modern geopolitics, Sir Halford Mackinder considered the worst nightmare. In this context, indications to date suggest that the Obama initiative is part of a clever chess game, intended as a poker chip in the geopolitics of the Grand Chessgame for US control over Russia in Eurasia.

'It's almost saying to them, put up or shut up,' one anonymous senior Obama official is quoted saying. 'It's not that the Russians get to say, 'We'll try and therefore you have to suspend.' It says the threat has to go away.' Initial reaction from Medvedev has been duly restrained. The press secretary for Medvedev told the Interfax news agency that the letter did not contain any 'specific proposals or mutually binding initiatives.'

By anonymously leaking to the *New York Times* an unverifiable version of the Obama offer, it is clearly intended to put Russia on the defensive as to why it is unwilling to join Washington in pressuring Iran. Russia's president denied the media report claiming that Washington had pledged to drop its Central European missile shield plans if Moscow helped resolve Iran's controversial nuclear program.

Obama meets Medvedev for the first time on April 2 in London. The plan to build a high-tech radar facility in the Czech Republic and deploy 10 interceptor missiles in Poland, both former Warsaw Pact members on Russia's doorstep, was a top priority for President George W. Bush. Washington had insisted, in a dubious argument, that the aim was not to counter Russia's nuclear arsenal but to deter Iran in case it developed a nuclear warhead to fit atop its long-range missiles. Bush never accepted a Moscow proposal to install part of the missile defense system on its territory and jointly operate it so it could not be used against Russia, giving strong credence to the Russian argument that it was aimed not at Teheran but at Moscow.

At a NATO meeting in Krakow, Poland, on Feb. 20, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said, 'I told the Russians a year ago that if there were no Iranian missile program, there would be no need for the missile sites.' Obama's inauguration, Gates added, offered the chance for a fresh start.

Moscow's response to Polish missiles

Medvedev has replied that Russia is open to discuss any proposal to end the US missile defense plans for Poland and the Czech Republic but that he would not accept any linkage with Iran talks.

Medvedev had warned last year that Moscow would deploy nuclear-capable Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave bordered by Lithuania and Poland, in response to the US plans. The Russian Defense Minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, now says that Moscow

would not place Iskander missiles on the EU's doorstep if Washington abandoned its plans to deploy missile defenses in Central Europe. "If the deployment [of U.S. missile defense elements] is suspended, we will not start the retaliatory measures we planned,' Serdyukov told Russian media, in Moscow after meeting his German counterpart, Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung, to discuss issues of bilateral military cooperation, including the rail and air transit of military cargo for German troops in Afghanistan through Russia. 'We are ready to continue discussions on this [missile defense] issue, including in the framework of the Russia-NATO Council,' he added.

The Iskander theater missile system is Russia's answer to the possible appearance of elements of a U.S. anti-missile system in Eastern Europe. The range of the Iskander in its basic form is 300 kilometers, and could easily be extended to 500 kilometers and more should Russia decide to abandon the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

Additionally, the Iskander can also launch long-range cruise missiles. R-500s have already been successfully test-fired from the Iskander. The range of a cruise-missile system can potentially exceed 2,000 kilometers, thus making it possible to hit targets across Western Europe.

Iskander mobile launchers deployed in Kaliningrad, and possibly in Belarus, even in their standard configuration, could deliver a sudden strike, including with nuclear warheads, at most of Poland. Rapid deployment, which takes a few minutes, combined with the characteristics of the missile itself, increase the probability of successfully engaging targets, especially in view of the fact that the main targets – the interceptor missile launchers – are fixed.

Gates admits Iran 'not close' to bomb

The curious part of Washington's latest cat-and-mouse games with Russia is the new admission by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, an open advocate of missile defense, that Iran is no where close to having a nuclear weapon.

Iran has recently begun testing its Bushehr civilian nuclear power plant, a construction project run by Russia, ironically to complete a nuclear plant first begun by German contractors under the regime of the Shah during the 1970's. Tehran said the plant, its first nuclear power station, could go on line within months. That is not the same as having enough fissionable material to make a bomb.

Iran's controversial nuclear program was cited by the Bush Administration as one of the reasons behind its plans to deploy a missile base in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic. The missile shield has been strongly opposed by Russia, which rightly views it as a threat to its national security. US missile defense officials have openly admitted that 'missile defense is the key to developing a nuclear first strike.' That means far from 'defensive' the Polish missiles and radar would be aggressive and offensive in the extreme, presenting the world the most dangerous risk of nuclear war by miscalculation since the 1962 Cuba missile crisis.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said on NBC television this week that Iran was not close to building a nuclear bomb, contrary to the argument Israeli politicians including the Prime Minister designate, Netanyahu make. 'They're not close to a stockpile, they're not close to a weapon at this point, and so there is some time,' Gates said.

The choice of a new Cold War or not clearly lies now in Washington, not Moscow.

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