The missile defense scheme and the sharpening of US-Russian geopolitical tensions

Vladimir Volkov
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The US and the Czech Republic signed an agreement July 8 in Prague for the deployment of radar and anti-missile systems on the territory of this Eastern European country. The pact has become one more step in sharpening geopolitical tensions between the United States and Russia. It evoked a stormy response from Moscow.

Signed by American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg, the agreement is opposed by about 70 percent of Czech citizens. Its defenders justify the agreement by pointing to the need to defend Europe from possible Iranian missile attacks. However, the Russian side insists that the true target of creating an infrastructure of anti-missile defense in Eastern Europe is not Iran, but Russia. If the plan is realized, then the military and political positions of Russia would be weakened.

A statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published on the next day said that “the Russian side in such a situation will take adequate measures to compensate for potential threats to its national security.” This statement referred not to “diplomatic, but military-technological methods.”

Speaking on July 15 in the Kremlin at a meeting with representatives of the diplomatic corps, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said: “Placing elements of a global anti-missile system by the US in Eastern Europe only deepens the situation, and we will be forced to react to this adequately.”

He declared that Russia’s national security could not be maintained simply by the good word of its partners, and he accused Washington of “gradually undermining... the strategic stability in relations between our countries.”

Besides radar in the Czech Republic, deploying elements of an American anti-missile system in Eastern Europe includes placing tens of anti-missile rockets on the territory of Poland. However, talks between the US and Warsaw were halted after the Polish government proposed a number of conditions, chief among them being a request for $20 billion in aid for modernizing the Polish army and air defense.

In the opinion of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the deployment of elements of an anti-missile system enhances the security of the US, but not that of Poland. “Key in the question of Polish negotiations with the United States has been and remains a real increase in Poland’s security through political guarantees, but also through definite military guarantees,” he stated.

After encountering opposition from the Polish leaders, the US began preliminary negotiations over deployment of anti-missile rockets with the government of Lithuania. However, this variant appears to be more of a way of pressuring Warsaw—among other reasons because it would provoke an even more furious reaction from Moscow.

The “adequate measures” Russia envisions include deployment of modern weapons in the Kaliningrad area and the re-targeting of its nuclear missiles toward territories where elements of the American missile defenses will be placed.

On April 14, the Times of London published an article by its Moscow correspondent Mark Franchetti, reporting on the impending placement of Russian ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads in the Kaliningrad area. Franchetti cited a source in the Russian defense establishment.

Such plans could be real, insofar as they fully correspond to the logic of statements recently made by representatives of the Russian regime.

Last year, first Vice-Premier Sergei Ivanov said that Russia is ready to develop a new base of missile forces in Kaliningrad in order to counteract military threats from the US. And the former head of the General Staff, Yuri Baluevsky, promised that in response to American anti-missile plans Russia would withdraw from the Agreement on Liquidation of Medium- and Short-Range Missiles.

As an immediate diplomatic reaction to the signing of the pact in Prague, on July 11 Russia joined with China in vetoing the draft of a resolution regarding the UN Security Council about sanctions against the leaders of Zimbabwe for using repression. The sanctions were intended to prevent President Robert Mugabe from running in the elections.

A few days before this veto, while he was in Tokyo at a meeting of world leaders, Dmitry Medvedev supported a proposal to adopt a resolution regarding Zimbabwe. The swift change in Russia’s position was seen by the West as evidence of its “unreliability” as a member of the “G-8.”

One more response by Russia was the decision to “punish” the Czech Republic economically. On July 8, the supply of oil to the Czech Republic through the “Friendship” pipeline was cut by half. Officially, the reduction was attributed to profound economic considerations, however the Russian mass media unequivocally pointed to a direct linkage between this decision and the issue of the radar system in the Czech Republic.

It is not the first time that the Russian regime has used an “economic weapon” to exert pressure on its neighbors and partners.

During the first days of 2005, gas supplies to Ukraine were halted for several days; similar threats were made against Belarus. In the spring of 2006, a ban was placed on the import into Russia of Moldavian and Georgian wine, which painfully affected the
Russia’s relations with neighbors in the “near abroad” have begun to be more aggressive. Sergei Karaganov, one of the influential architects of Russia’s foreign policy, explained the rebirth of this old imperial tradition of realpolitik in the government Russian Gazette on May 5, 2006: “We can and must demonstrate our right to a buffer of countries on our borders that are friendly to us and not to other nations.”

Although Russia’s current military doctrine proceeds from the position that the use of nuclear weapons is permissible only in response to an attack, leading representatives of the military command are raising the question of their possible use in preventative strikes.

General Baluevsky, former head of the General Staff of the Russian Federation (RF), said in Moscow in January of this year: “In order to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the RF and its allies, armed forces will be used, including preventatively, including the use of nuclear weapons in instances stipulated in documents of the RF’s doctrine.”

In the opinion of General Leonid Ivashov, who heads the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, national security is “Russia’s main national project.” Speaking as a hardliner with regard to the US and NATO, he wrote in the Independent Gazette on June 6, 2008:

“The world is militarizing, and hydrocarbons are the main object of global conflicts; in the struggle to possess them, the West is prepared to use all means on a broad scale, up to nuclear weapons. As a source of hydrocarbons and other resources, Russia is one of the first objectives of the new re-division of the world. A restraining element against attack on Russia is what remains of the nuclear potential of the USSR.”

“A new arms race in on the march, a cold war, and, it seems, humanity is seriously preparing for a ‘hot’ war,” he stressed, demonstrating with his words the determination of Russia’s ruling elite to resort to any measures, no matter how destructive and catastrophic they might be, to defend their interests.