Russia responds to American anti-ballistic missile systems in Europe

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In the leadup to the present clash between Russian and Georgian troops in South Ossetia, tensions have sharpened significantly between Russia and the US over the planned American deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems to Europe.

A month has passed since US State Secretary Condoleezza Rice signed a pact in Prague about the construction of military radar on the territory of the Czech Republic. Since then Russia has taken a number of steps designed to counteract the growing influence of NATO and the US in regions close to Russia.

While the US justifies its plans with references to the necessity of defending Europe from possible missile attacks from Iran, the Kremlin insists that the creation of anti-missile defenses in Eastern Europe is directed at weakening Russia's military and political position.

In response, the possibility has been raised of increasing Russian military forces in the region of Kaliningrad—a Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea between Poland and Lithuania. On 14 July, the Moscow correspondent of the London *Times*, Mark Franchetti, declared that a source in the Russian military had told him that ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads might be placed there.

At the same time, the Russian mass media has reported that Russian nuclear missiles may be retargeted at territories where the elements of the American anti-missile defenses are to be placed.

On 21 July, the newspaper *Izvestia*, which acts as one of the main mouthpieces for official Kremlin policy, published material suggesting that Russia's military command was reviewing the possibility of sending Russian strategic bombers to Cuba.

Such bombers might include the supersonic Tu-160 (called the "White Swan") and the strategic bomber Tu-95MS (called the "Bear" by NATO). An unnamed and highly placed source in the headquarters of long-range strategic aviation told *Izvestia*: "There are such talks, but they are only talks. But I will not say that nothing real stands behind them."

In the last two decades, strategic-military relations between Russia and Cuba have virtually collapsed, especially after October 2001, when then-President Vladimir Putin decided to close the Russian electronic listening station at Lourdes in Cuba. This gesture was designed to encourage good relations between Russia and the US after the terrorist attack of September 11. Russia also closed the former Soviet military base at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.

The Kremlin's efforts at that time culminated in declarations of the possible acceptance of Russia into NATO. But all these plans were abandoned after the pro-American "color revolutions" in Georgia (fall of 2003) and Ukraine (fall of 2004), prompting ever sharper rhetoric against US policies on Russia's part, especially in Putin's Munich speech in February 2007.

For several decades during the Cold War, Cuba served as a symbol of Moscow's influence in the Western hemisphere. The announcement of the possible return of Russian armed forces to the island, located 90 miles from American shores, is a sharp indication of the strained relations between Russia and the US.

In the words of one of the Russian "hawks," General Leonid Ivashov (former head of an international alliance against landmines, and now president of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems): "The Cubans have long awaited us. In my opinion, they are waiting for us now. They will probably not object if we once again set up electronic surveillance posts at the Lourdes base or do something else."

According to Ivashov, Russia crucially needs a foreign presence. "We need to have our own security strategy," he said. "To the extent that we do not, then we are drawn into the strategic games of others. For today's planet is divided into force fields where the interests of countries, blocs and coalitions are intertwined. We need a system of our own bases abroad. Such a presence provides a more effective and stable security system."

A possible return of Russian military forces to Cuba has provoked a sharp negative reaction in the US. The Russian mass media cited Norton Schwartz, who is slated to be the next chief of staff of the US Air Force as saying: "The [US] authorities must clearly let the Russians know that such a step means crossing a definite threshold, stepping across a red line."

On 24 July, the newspaper *Izvestia* cited sources from the Ministry of Defense who said that flight crews have already explored various localities in Cuba. That is, they have flown to and landed on the island's territory, and have examined

possible sites for new airbases.

The Russian Ministry of Defense also has said that, besides Cuba, Tu-160 and Tu95MS strategic bombers could be relocated to airbases in Latin America and Africa—a reference to Venezuela and Algeria.

Regular flights of Russian strategic bombers to distant regions of the world, including to airspace near the US, were resumed in August 2007. So-called "short-hop aerodromes" are needed at strategic locations to allow Russian planes to land and refuel or undergo repairs.

Earlier this month, a Russian governmental delegation headed by vice-premier Igor Sechin visited Cuba. Sechin is an influential member of Putin's closest circle, who headed the attack on M. Khodorkovsky's oil company Yukos. He was one of the main beneficiaries of its bankruptcy—the bulk of Yukos shares passed to the control of the state company Rosneft, where Sechin is the chairman of the board of directors.

While in Cuba, Sechin met with Raoul Castro, who took the reins of power from his brother Fidel in February. Sechin worked out agreements with the Cuban leaders over cooperation in the areas of energy, mining, agriculture, transport, healthcare and communications.

The trip was discussed at the weekly government session in Moscow on August 4. Sechin announced: "Comrade Raoul sends his warm greetings," whereupon Putin replied, "And how is Fidel feeling?" In the course of the meeting, Putin announced: "We must restore our positions not only in Cuba, but in other countries."

Among the "other countries," Venezuela has been named. Its president, Hugo Chavez, visited Moscow in the second half of July. While in Russia, Chavez said that Caracas would be glad to accept Russian military forces. Although he quickly insisted that he had something else in mind, Chavez's comment was taken seriously by the Russian media. On the eve of Chavez's trip to Moscow, rumors had circulated about the preparation of extensive military contracts, even though none were publicly announced.

Speculation that the recent election of Dmitry Medvedev would lead to more cordial relations between Russia and the United States have not been justified. In the middle of July, the new Russian president confirmed a modified variant of Russia's foreign policy which "develops and supplements" the policy endorsed eight years ago by Vladimir Putin.

The previous document condemned a "uni-polar world," and noted that "Russia will strive to achieve a multi-polar system of international relations." The new document boasted that this mission has been successfully carried out and that "the West has lost its monopoly on globalization processes."

In presenting this new foreign policy doctrine at a meeting of Russian diplomats at the Kremlin, Medvedev declared: "Russia has truly become stronger and is capable of accepting major responsibility for solving problems of a regional and global scale."

According to Medvedev, the rest of the world was no longer listening to Moscow, but expected "some kind of solutions" from it. Medvedev called upon the assembled diplomats to act more decisively—"to assess, and sometimes to simply repulse, any attempts to secure national or group interests at the expense of international law."

Moscow's current orientation combines harsh rhetoric backed by military or political threats, while continuing to try to achieve an accommodation with the United States and NATO.

Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's representative to NATO, declared that Russia's new foreign policy conception was "aimed at offering the West profound guarantees of mutual security."

"The threats [of the twenty-first century] are directed both against Russia and against the West," he said. "If there are people in the West who understand that, without Russia, they cannot defend themselves against these threats, then we will reach agreement."

He was referring, in particular, to the creation of a security structure to fight against "international terrorism" that would stretch from Canada, through Russia, and all the way to China, in which Russia should have an important and equal place in the club of leading world powers.

Meanwhile, given the active moves of the US to strengthen its influence in Eurasia, which cut across Russian interests, it is becoming obvious that the possibility of friendly maneuvering is quickly diminishing.

An article in *Izvestia* on 31 July revealed the logic of the Kremlin leaders. "The creation of elements of US missile defenses in Eastern Europe... is a long-term process," the newspaper wrote. "And if this is a highly debatable threat to Russia today, then tomorrow or the day after it might become real. Even now, therefore, we must seek asymmetrical measures to reduce the threat and to preserve the principle of a guaranteed nuclear response. There is no place to hide: it is precisely this hypothetical 'strike' that remains the cornerstone of Russian-American relations in the realm of strategic deterrence."

The article stated that Russia might abandon the Agreement on Missiles of Medium and Short Range, which bans the design, production and development of land-based missiles with a range of 500 to 5,000 kilometers. If that took place, Russia might equip its latest "Iskander" tactical weapon systems with new, longer-range rockets.

If this was done, wrote *Izvestia* in menacing tones, "then all Europe, with its American military bases in Rumania, Bulgaria and nuclear weapons in Germany, will end up in our sights."