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Medvedev Rattles Russian Sabers over Ballistic Missile Defense

Russia will deploy its own missiles and could withdraw from the New Start nuclear arms reduction treaty if the United States goes forward with plans for a missile defense system in Europe, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev warned -- a Russian flag nearby -- in a live television address on November 23. Medvedev said he had ordered the Russian military to develop counter measures for disabling missile defense data and control systems -- a euphemism for a cyber warfare capability -- and that new Russian strategic missiles would be equipped with "advanced missile defense penetration systems and new highly effective warheads." Medvedev also promised to deploy Iskander short-range missiles in Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, which borders Poland and Lithuania. On November 29, Medvedev travelled to Kaliningrad to personally order operational an anti-missile Russian radar system designed to counter attacks coming from Europe or the Atlantic.

At issue is an anti-ballistic missile system to be based in Europe that the U.S. says would defend against a missile attack from Iran. The U.S. has reached agreements to deploy interceptor missiles and radars in Eastern and southern Europe. Moscow says such a system would threaten its strategic missile force and has demanded written assurances this is not the case. Ironically, the disagreement comes only a year after the Lisbon NATO summit, at which Russia and the Western alliance stated that they were on a path toward strategic partnership.

For the moment, the dispute is weighted down with uncertainties. Some experts in the US defense establishment doubt a missile defense system will ever work (indeed, early test results of the SM-3 missile, backbone of the U.S. program, have been disappointing), the system is expensive and future political support in basing countries is uncertain.

There is also less to Medvedev's threat than first appears, since the measures he highlighted are either already planned or implemented. Some steps would also be short sighted. Iskander missiles could only be used in a preemptive strike against NATO targets, for example, and their deployment would unify NATO reinforce the perception in the region that Russia is a threat.

Withdrawal from the New Start treaty would hurt Russia more than the United States in the long run, since under the treaty the U.S. bears the disproportionate burden of arms reductions.

Some Russian officials admit that they do not really believe that U.S. missile defenses would be aimed against them. Their opposition is grounded, however, in deep political and domestic political concerns that make coming to agreement with the U.S. difficult. These officials are convinced that only by stopping the US missile defense program can the West be stopped from “meddling” in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space. Medvedev’s remarks were also given with an eye whipping up voters before this weekend’s parliamentary elections, where the ruling Unified Russia party has been slipping at the polls.

Already damaged by Medvedev’s comments has been the Obama Administration’s Reset with Russia. The Russian president has now shown that he is prepared to backtrack on one of his most trumpeted foreign policy achievements, improved relations with the United States, should it be politically expedient. Obama’s Republican critics can use Medvedev’s speech to argue that, far from making Moscow easier to deal with, the Reset has made Russia more assertive. Embarrassingly for the White House, in the current missile defense dispute Russia has also used negotiating linkage against the U.S. – the practice of making progress on one issue contingent on success on another. Through much of the Reset the Obama Administration has expressly indicated it would avoid this tactic in order to make greater progress with Moscow.

In the coming months the U.S. has made it clear it intends to continue work on missile defenses even as it seeks to stay the course on the Reset. Agreement cannot be ruled out. Russia can also use its current opposition to the U.S. antiballistic missile program as a bargaining chip later over issues such as talks on further reductions in nuclear arms – one of President Obama’s goals – or on conventional forces in Europe. With the return of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin next March, however, the atmosphere is likely to further cool. As John Vinocur wrote in the New York Times this week, problems with Russia are piling up and on the eve of a U.S. presidential election campaign in which the Obama Administration hoped to portray the Reset as a triumph.