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The Folly of Limiting U.S. Missile Defenses for Nuclear Arms Control

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Introduction

U.S. military leaders have for years called for a greater understanding of opponents' intentions, worldviews, and strategies – presuming, correctly, that more information about how an opponent makes decisions could improve U.S. chances of deterring attack.¹ However, “tailoring” U.S. strategy to account for the unique characteristics and capabilities of an opponent should not be narrowly confined to the military sphere. Instead, such an approach should be the default when U.S. officials formulate other important foreign policy positions, such as on nuclear arms control.

Regrettably, many of the recent unofficial nuclear arms control proposals from individuals and groups outside the government have only half taken this lesson to heart. Contemporary calls for further U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control negotiations often feature select quotes from Russian political and military leaders that appear to show a genuine fear of U.S. missile defenses. Proponents of further U.S. nuclear reductions employ these Russian warnings that U.S. continuance of its missile defense advances will imperil current and future nuclear arms



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control agreements to argue that the United States must save the nuclear arms control process by placing U.S. missile defenses on the negotiating table.

Russian officials including President Vladimir Putin have habitually claimed more capable U.S. regional and homeland defenses would cause all manner of troubles for the nuclear arms control process, but events have proven those to be empty threats - meaning they never likely reflected genuine Russian threat perceptions. Instead, they were likely meant to achieve diplomatic and military advantage. Moreover, there is further proof that Russian officials are purposely inflating their purported concerns. Numerous Russian officials breezily dismiss U.S. missile defenses as not threatening at all - comments proponents of limiting U.S. missile defenses have yet to address. Therefore, the United States should adopt a set of policies that exposes baseless Russian claims regarding U.S. missile defense, recognizes Russian intentions in proposing arms control solutions, and protects the U.S. ability to develop a new generation of missile defense technology in the face of growing threats.

Before examining why U.S. officials should reject the premise that limits on U.S. missile defenses are necessary to make progress on arms control, it is useful to summarize the arguments that proponents advance for such a linkage.

Purported Benefits of Limiting U.S. Missile Defense

Many of those proposing the United States limit its missile defenses as a way to improve the chances of success in nuclear arms control have previously criticized U.S. missile defense, particularly homeland missile defense, as a destabilizing initiator of arms racing. Trading away U.S. weapon systems they find destabilizing while achieving cuts to the Russian nuclear arsenal makes for an appealing prospect. Thus, some former senior U.S. defense officials, elected leaders, and non-government analysts support appeals to President Biden to propose limitations on U.S. missile defenses in bilateral "strategic stability" discussions with Russia.

Those who favor limits on U.S. missile defense generally offer two purported resulting benefits that they believe are mutually-reinforcing: a stopped or minimized arms race and improved prospects for nuclear arms control - whether bilaterally with Russia or trilaterally to include China. For example, a list of 65 U.S. "national security leaders" signed a joint letter to President Biden recently - including notable signatories like former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry and a number of former U.S. Senators - that calls for a halt to "the current arms race" caused by U.S. missile defenses. In addition, U.S. layered homeland missile defense purportedly threatens to "upend strategic stability." The signatories thus conclude, "After your successful extension of the New START treaty, Russia has explicitly linked its participation in future arms control discussions to U.S. willingness to discuss missile defense. Diplomatic engagement - an approach to the world you have championed - on missile defense is in the national self-interest.



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Again, we urge you demonstrate U.S. openness to including missile defenses in strategic stability talks with Russia and China.”²

A recent surge in articles making the same general points illustrates how apparently widespread these beliefs are. For example, in a report for the *Deep Cuts Project*, Greg Thielman writes, “Following U.S. withdrawal from the [Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM)] treaty in 2002, the absence of constraints on these systems [missile defense] has made it more difficult to achieve stabilizing reductions in strategic offensive forces.”³ Or, as Jeffrey Lewis has written in *Foreign Affairs*, “If Biden wants to slow this arms race, he will need to accept limits on the U.S. missile defense systems that drive it... Neither Beijing nor Moscow is likely to restrict its new weapons unless Washington places corresponding limits on the defenses that such weapons were meant to defeat. If the Biden administration is serious about reviving arms control agreements with Russia and bringing China into the fold, it will need to compromise.”⁴ Articles and papers from Naomi Egel and Jane Vaynman;⁵ Steven Pifer;⁶ John Tierney and Samuel Hickey;⁷ Michael Krepon;⁸ Tytti Erästö and Matt Korda;⁹ and Ankit Panda¹⁰ have all made similar points in recent months.

But these purported benefits rest heavily on questionable assumptions. First, that Russia is serious in its demands that the United States link missile defense limitations or risk current and future nuclear arms control agreements. Second, that Russia genuinely fears U.S. regional and homeland missile defense. Should these assumptions prove unfounded, as they appear to be, U.S. officials risk unnecessarily limiting U.S. missile defenses in a time of quantitative and qualitative advancements in adversary missile systems. In addition, unnecessarily limiting U.S. missile defenses could set a precedent for U.S. concessions being the starting point for nuclear arms control talks.

Russian Threats to Leave or Not Achieve Arms Control Treaties

Those who favor limiting U.S. missile defenses as an incentive to begin nuclear arms control negotiations, or as part of a broader agreement, would likely point to the following quotes from Russian officials as proof of the apparent seriousness of the Russian position. But, if one traces the chronology of these statements it becomes clear that Moscow’s threats have been pure bluster – meant for diplomatic leverage that could ultimately lead to its military advantage. Representative quotes from Russian officials below, including from Presidents Putin and Medvedev, demonstrate that their threats are as persistent as they are hollow.

Before the Moscow Treaty – Signed May 24, 2002

- “The review of the main provisions of the ABM Treaty will inevitably cause a return to the ‘Cold War’ period, jeopardize the entire range of international accords on the



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observance of nuclear arms control, and create serious grounds for fueling tension in the world.”¹¹

- “A collapse of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty would undermine the entire complex of disarmament accords.”¹²
- “We support the immediate beginning of START-III negotiations... In so doing, we proceed from the fact that conclusion of START-III Treaty is not possible unless the ABM Treaty preserves its integrity.”¹³

Despite Russian threats that the 2002 U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty would lead to the collapse of nuclear arms control negotiations, such cataclysmic predictions failed to appear. In fact, U.S. and Russian senior officials continued substantive dialogue *after* the United States announced its intention to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. This dialogue eventually led to both sides signing the Moscow Treaty about a month before the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty took effect.¹⁴ If Russian statements at the time were taken at face value, such an outcome would be considered impossible; and yet U.S. and Russian officials were able to reach an agreement relatively quickly – demonstrating the above statements were likely not wholly genuine threat assessments and more likely part of a Russian information operation to gain diplomatic leverage.

Before the New START Treaty – Signed April 8, 2010

- “Plans to expand certain elements of the anti-missile defense system to Europe cannot help but disturb us. Who needs the next step of what would be, in this case, an inevitable arms race? I deeply doubt that Europeans themselves do.”¹⁵
- “The two sides [Russia and China] believe that the establishment of a global anti-missile system, including the deployment of the system in some parts of the world and related cooperation, is not in the interest of maintaining strategic balance and stability. It is neither conducive to global arms control and non-proliferation efforts nor favorable to building mutual trust among states and regional stability.”¹⁶
- “This linkage [between strategic arms and missile defense] is objective. If we fail to preserve this linkage, we will not be able to reduce the number of warhead [sic] to a certain number. The logic of this linkage is strict and unconditional.”¹⁷
- “The development of uncontrollable and unverifiable missile defense will make impossible reductions in strategic offensive weapons. What is more, it will trigger a new arms race. That is the eternal contradiction between the sword and the shield.”¹⁸
- “The U.S. intention [to build missile defenses in Europe] is another proof to the Russian opinion of the impermissibility to view strategic offensive armaments and missile defense separately. There are Russian-American agreements to reduce nuclear warheads on one hand, and the continuing deployment of U.S. missile defense sites



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close to the Russian border on the other hand. It is impossible to discuss seriously the continual and drastic reduction of nuclear weapons.”¹⁹

- “The possibility and time of signing the new treaty will depend, in the first place, on the sides’ readiness to heed each other’s interests... Even though the missile shield is a defensive system, if further developed it could give a new impulse to the arms race.”²⁰

Just as in the years before the Moscow Treaty, senior Russian defense officials and diplomats warned before the New START Treaty was signed that the U.S. deployment of homeland and regional missile defenses would jeopardize the entire nuclear arms control process and lead to an arms race. But, again, the threats rang hollow as the United States and Russia were able to sign the New START Treaty on April 8, 2010 – which placed no limits on U.S. missile defense plans – while the United States continued to improve its homeland missile defenses and move forward with Aegis Ashore in Europe.

Before the New START Treaty Five Year Extension – February 3, 2021

- “The Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms signed in Prague on April 8, 2010, can operate and be viable only if the United States of America refrains from developing its missile defence capabilities quantitatively or qualitatively.”²¹
- “... given the intrinsic link between strategic offensive and defensive arms, conditions for our withdrawal from the New START Treaty could also arise, and this option is enshrined in the treaty.”²²
- “Without an accord in the sphere of missile defenses which allays our concerns, further steps in the sphere of nuclear disarmament are impossible. We say this openly.”²³
- “The ramping up of high-precision strategic non-nuclear systems by other countries, in combination with the build-up of missile defence capabilities, could negate all previous agreements on the limitation and reduction of strategic nuclear weapons, and disrupt the strategic balance of power.”²⁴
- “In general, [...] the international situation is extremely unfavorable for pondering options of further nuclear arms reductions due to a number of negative factors... [including] the ongoing unilateral deployment of the global missile defense network... This project has significantly spoilt the atmosphere in Europe. The same is now happening in Asia, especially due to the deployment of U.S. THAAD systems to South Korea and the planned deployment of U.S. Aegis Ashore systems to Japan...”²⁵

As before, official Russian statements during this period sound uncompromising – thus leading proponents for further nuclear arms control to conclude U.S. missile defenses must necessarily be limited to induce further arms control progress. Yet Russian rhetoric never matched its actions – again indicating that its official statements on the threatening nature of U.S. missile



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defenses were likely meant to gain U.S. concessions diplomatically that place Russia in a better position militarily.

Some may contend that Russian rhetoric about U.S. missile defenses represents sincerely-held threat assessments, thus making a broad-based Russian disinformation campaign unlikely. Even if that is true, however, it does not rule out Russian threat inflation of U.S. missile defenses as a tactic for diplomatic and military gains. At the very least, even if Russian officials truly believe U.S. missile defenses could upset strategic stability and begin an arms race, this belief is so weakly held that it has not caused Russian officials to withdraw, or refrain from signing, multiple nuclear arms control treaties. In short, despite their seemingly uncompromising rhetoric, Russian officials have proven unwilling to let their apparent concern for U.S. missile defenses impede nuclear arms control efforts; they likely find it useful diplomatically and militarily to inflate their threat perceptions of U.S. missile defense in an effort to gain U.S. concessions.

Russian Confidence in Defeating U.S. Missile Defenses

Another indicator that Russian officials are selectively exaggerating their apparent concerns over U.S. missile defense is the plethora of confident official Russian assessments that they can defeat any existing or future missile defense systems. Proponents of limiting U.S. missile defense have completely failed to account for why Russian officials continuously state that they can overcome U.S. missile defenses – a position that would appear to contradict Russian rhetoric about their worry that their nuclear forces could be negated. If proponents of limiting U.S. missile defenses are correct in their assertion that the United States should take Russian rhetoric at face value, the official Russian statements below should be rare or non-existent. However, these kinds of confident assessments are anything but rare in official Russian public discourse – indicating once again that Russian officials tailor their messages to their audience. In public comments directed to the United States and others internationally, Russian officials generally stress their apparent concerns about U.S. missile defenses as a way to gain diplomatic and military leverage. In public comments directed toward a domestic Russian audience, officials tend to emphasize the futility of U.S. missile defense in the face of Russian technology.

Nor is this a recent phenomenon as Russian officials including President Putin have claimed for nearly 20 years that they can defeat current and future U.S. missile defenses. Such confident Russian assertions contradict their repeated claims that they are worried about future U.S. missile defense advances that could negate their nuclear arsenal. Again, this apparent contradiction only strengthens the case for believing that Russian officials tailor their message to the primary audience to whom they are speaking – hyping their perception of danger or downplaying risks as needed to advance their national interests diplomatically and militarily. The quotes below highlight not only the range of Russian officials who have commented on the topic but also the consistency of messaging over two decades.



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- “In terms of Russia’s security a unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the ABM Treaty does not worry us in the least because of the [U.S.] tests so far conducted, only one has been successful, and in fact according to our information there have been no successful tests. Even if there are successful tests, both our and American experts say that they could knock down one, two, five, OK, twenty, OK, a hundred missiles, but when we are talking about thousands, it is simply unrealistic. Let me remind you that missiles fly towards each other at the speed of 15 kilometers a second. It’s like a bullet. So, I repeat, we are not scared of a unilateral withdrawal.”²⁶
- “The Russian new Topol-M missiles recently installed at a missile regiment in Tatishchevo can overcome ‘any missile defense system that exists or will be developed in the foreseeable future,’ Russia’s Strategic Missile Forces commander Col. Gen. Nikolai Solovtsov said...”²⁷
- “The Topol-M ... is a twenty-first century weapon. Its survivability and precision have been considerably enhanced. It has been equipped with specially designed systems that enable it to penetrate anti-missile defences and guarantee that it can carry out its missions even in the face of prospective missile defence systems. All of this will make our nuclear deterrent forces effective in the long term.”²⁸
- “New missile systems will be equipped with more advanced complexes able to defeat missile defense shields. There is no need for us to keep it a secret. What is noteworthy is that measures to parry negative factors such as the deployment of missile defense systems are comprehensive.”²⁹
- “Science and technology have made such a big progress that it is possible to disable a huge number of missile defense elements without physically destroying them. These weapons are being developed in the Russian Federation too.”³⁰
- “Today the strategic nuclear forces are able to reliably deliver an unsustainable blow to any aggressor, including one possessing missile-defense systems.”³¹
- “Today our nuclear forces reliably ensure strategic deterrence but we must develop them further. By the end of 2017 the share of modern weapons in Russia’s nuclear triad reached 79 percent and by 2021 they should be equipped with modern arms by up to 90 percent. I am referring to missile systems that are capable of confidently overcoming existing and even projected missile defence systems.”³²
- “As such, Russia has developed, and works continuously to perfect, highly effective but modestly priced systems to overcome missile defence. They are installed on all of our intercontinental ballistic missile complexes... Weighing over 200 tonnes, it [Sarmat] has a short boost phase, which makes it more difficult to intercept for missile defence systems... Sarmat will be equipped with a broad range of powerful nuclear warheads, including hypersonic, and the most modern means of evading missile defence... Sarmat is a formidable missile and, owing to its characteristics, is untroubled by even



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the most advanced missile defence systems. But we did not stop at that. We started to develop new types of strategic arms that do not use ballistic trajectories at all when moving toward a target and, therefore, missile defence systems are useless against them, absolutely pointless.”³³

- “It [the nuclear-powered missile called Skyfall in the West] is invincible against all existing and prospective missile defence and counter-air defence systems. I will repeat this several times today... The missile [Kinzhal] flying at a hypersonic speed, 10 times faster than the speed of sound, can also manoeuvre at all phases of its flight trajectory, which also allows it to overcome all existing and, I think, prospective anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence systems, delivering nuclear and conventional warheads in a range of over 2,000 kilometers... I hope that everything that was said today would make any potential aggressor think twice, since unfriendly steps against Russia such as deploying missile defences and bringing NATO infrastructure closer to the Russian border become ineffective in military terms and entail unjustified costs, making them useless for those promoting these initiatives.”³⁴
- “This was the case in Romania with missile defence. Poland will soon get it, too. It will be really close to our border. It is certainly a threat to us. We see it as an attempt to neutralise our strategic nuclear capabilities. However, it is clear their efforts are doomed to failure. I believe experts now see this as well. Now that we have the cutting-edge systems that I mentioned earlier, these moves are no longer a threat to us.”³⁵
- “The latest ballistic missiles with the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV) are being delivered to the Strategic Missile Forces. This weapon of the future can penetrate both the existing and any future missile defence systems.”³⁶

To reiterate, the apparently contradictory statements by Russian officials on both their fear of U.S. missile defenses and their confidence in defeating current *and future* U.S. missile defenses is best explained by a policy of tailoring their speeches to their primary audience for maximum diplomatic and, ultimately, military effect. The sheer number of official Russian statements expressing their confidence in defeating current and future U.S. missile defenses – statements made by some of the senior-most officials including President Putin over a 20 year period – underscores how misleading it is for proponents of U.S. missile defense limitations only to cite Russian statements expressing their supposed fears.

Policy Principles for Current Arms Control Discussions

What then should be U.S. policy regarding Russia’s stated concerns about U.S. missile defense, and their apparent incompatibility with further nuclear arms control?

First, expose baseless Russian talking points. U.S. officials should ask their Russian counterparts to reconcile the apparently contradictory positions senior Russian officials have expressed –



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both fear and dismissiveness concerning the same U.S. missile defense systems. Stated bluntly, why should the United States take apparent Russian concerns about current and future U.S. missile defense seriously when senior Russian officials, including President Putin, have expressed confidence that Russian forces can defeat current *and future* missile defenses?

Additionally, U.S. officials should ask their Russian counterparts why they continue to insist that missile defense is a prerequisite to further arms control progress, but for 20 years after the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty they have still agreed to arms control? Plainly, U.S. missile defenses unconstrained by international treaty have not prevented bilateral nuclear arms control treaties in the past two decades, and there is no reason to believe today is any different. Equally obvious, non-treaty limited U.S. missile defenses have not led to an arms race with Russia – another familiar Russian accusation.³⁷ Should U.S. officials fail to forcefully rebut these common Russian claims, that would only invite their repetition to the detriment of the U.S. relationship with allies and public support within the United States.

Second, U.S. officials should gain an understanding of Russian national interests – as Russian officials perceive them – before they evaluate Russian arms control proposals. Russian arms control policy cannot be separated from Russia's broader grand strategic goals. Seen in this light, Russian warnings and threats that arms control progress will be in peril if the United States continues to improve its missile defenses appear designed not as a good-faith exchange of views, but rather as a tactic to achieve the broader goal of limiting U.S. military and technological advances. In addition, as former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Soofer has pointed out, repeated Russian threats concerning U.S. regional missile defense appear designed to cause fractures among NATO allies and discourage multilateral cooperation with the United States.³⁸ Russian officials may see the simple act of repeatedly describing U.S. missile defenses as dangerous and destabilizing to be a cheap and easy way to cause divisions within Western democracies, a long-standing Russian goal. In short, U.S. officials should view all Russian arms control proposals, especially those concerning missile defense, through the lens of national interests – how does the act of making the proposal advance Russian national interests, and if accepted, how would the Russian proposal advance Russian national interests, directly and indirectly?

Third, recognize U.S. national interests in the context of advancing missile defense technologies. When the United States decided to deploy a national missile defense system after withdrawing from the ABM Treaty, scientists and engineers quickly developed and tested the system because of a perceived worsening threat, primarily from North Korea. Although the kinetic kill vehicles sitting atop the interceptors have been upgraded over the past 20 years, the system as a whole is something of a first generation set of technologies. The second generation of missile defense technologies, however, will be optimized for current and future threats, better integrated with multiple sensors, and thoroughly tested – qualities that could be imperiled by potential arms control restrictions. For instance, the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI), set for initial



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operational capability around 2028, will have multiple kill vehicles to reduce the U.S. shot doctrine (how many interceptors are fired against which threats).³⁹ Space-based hit- and kill-assessment capabilities are also improving which will provide additional time and situational awareness for operators and authorities to determine whether more interceptors are needed to stop an incoming attack.⁴⁰

The growing threat from North Korean intercontinental nuclear missiles is reason enough for U.S. officials to withhold American missile defense systems from arms control limitations, but when factoring in the development of a new generation of technological advances in missile defense, the idea of artificially restricting these capabilities in the face of baseless Russian threats becomes unthinkable. Missile defenses against intercontinental-range threats are technical marvels that require an advanced industrial base, a key U.S. advantage over Russia currently. U.S. officials should recognize, given Russia's broader national interests, that Russian officials will naturally seek to restrict U.S. areas of relative advantage – including through arms control. It is therefore incumbent on U.S. policymakers to protect ever-evolving U.S. missile defense capabilities from efforts to assuage purported Russian fears through arms control limitations.

Conclusion

Although U.S. missile defenses have been freed from the constraints of the ABM Treaty for about two decades, this does not mean they are completely unrestrained. As William Van Cleave, a member of the U.S. Strategic Arms Limitation Talks delegation, stated, “We should remind ourselves that in the democratic states of the West, there is *always* arms control, even without negotiated agreements. Arms are controlled and limited by the West's traditional values, by its political and budgeting process, and by the influence of the media and of public opinion.”⁴¹ This Western process is also transparent to Russia, a process which its officials and diplomats seek to exploit by targeted information operations and tactics meant to discourage allied cooperation with the United States and extract unnecessary concessions at the negotiating table.

Proponents of U.S. missile defense limitations have so far left out those Russian comments and actions that demonstrate Russian officials do not feel nearly as threatened by U.S. missile defenses as they are often described. Neglecting such a major theme of Russian discourse simply cannot continue as it necessarily will skew U.S. perceptions of its national interests and how to achieve them. U.S. national interests are best served by maintaining a robust U.S. missile defense technology development base free from arms control-imposed restrictions and funded to stay ahead of developing threats. Russian officials have a 20 plus year history of making threats and predicting disaster concerning U.S. missile defenses – none of which have come to pass.



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Within the context of the ongoing “strategic stability” talks with Russia and a potential *Missile Defense Review*, the Biden administration should uphold the two decade-long bipartisan policy of rejecting arms control-imposed limits on U.S. missile defense, both regionally and for the homeland. It is far past time to call the Russian bluff, avoid constraints on missile defense, and continue to improve both U.S. homeland and regional missile defenses.

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