

Putin's Boost-Phase Defense: The Offer That Wasn't

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November 2000
PONARS Policy Memo 180
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When President Vladimir Putin said that Russia is ready to work together with the United States on building a missile defense system, it was quite a surprise, to say the least. The proposal, made in Putin's interview to NBC, appeared a few days before the June 2000 US-Russian summit, the expectations for which were very low, primarily because of the US intent to proceed with its missile defense program. So, when Putin said that Russia would not object to this program as long as it were a joint effort, it was quite an unexpected turn of events.

As it later turned out, Putin had said something different from what he was supposed to say. His proposal was subsequently explained to mean an offer to build a European missile defense, and neither Putin nor other Russian officials have ever mentioned missile-defense cooperation with the United States after that interview. Still, the proposal and the circumstances in which it was made tell much about the Russian approach to missile defense issues, and might affect the US-Russian dialogue on important arms control issues.

This memo considers Putin's proposal in the context of Russia's position on missile defense, to see what the Russian president may have meant when he was suggesting this idea and what, if any, impact on arms control negotiations this episode might have.

Russia's Position on Missile Defenses

In a discussion of the Russian position on missile defense issues and Russia's disagreement with the United States about its National Missile Defense (NMD) program, it is important to keep in mind that in recent years Russia (at least at the official level) has developed a set of arguments that are almost invariably used against US missile defense plans. Taken together, these arguments--some of which are valid while some are not--create a framework for the Russian government to set its policy on missile defense and judge that of its opponent. The centerpiece of the Russian policy on missile defense is its insistence on preserving the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The definition of the ABM Treaty as a "cornerstone of strategic stability" has been part of virtually all US-Russian official statements, and Russia strongly opposes any modification of the treaty.

When it comes to a discussion of the specifics of the US missile defense programs and the NMD program in particular, Russia points out its disagreement with the threat assessment used to support the programs. Russia's official position has long been that it sees no significant intercontinental ballistic missile threat, and certainly nothing of a kind that would justify deployment of a system like NMD. From this assessment, Russia concludes that the real purpose of the US missile defense development is to counter Russia's strategic forces.

It should be noted that Russia has never seriously denied the existence of a threat from intermediate- and short-range missiles. Accordingly, Russia's reaction to theater missile defense programs has been much milder than its reaction to strategic defenses. This can be explained partly by the Russian belief that the country close to its border could be a source of missile threat, and Russia too might therefore need a defense against such threats one day. But the major part of the support for theater defenses comes from the military industry, which still seems to believe that the United States or other countries would be interested in buying its missile defense technology. This belief has proven quite important in the internal Russian debate, which seems to completely ignore the United States' apparent lack of interest in Russian technology.

Both these beliefs--in the destructive effects of strategic defenses and in the potential benefits of theater defenses--were reflected in Russia's attitude toward the so-called demarcation agreement. This agreement, which consists of several protocols signed in New York in September 1997, was supposed to clarify the distinction between theater and strategic defenses in order to exempt the former from ABM treaty limitations. The Russian government and the Duma embraced the 1997 agreement, which was promoted as securing a firm commitment from the United States to adhere to the ABM Treaty, while allowing both countries to work on supposedly much more important theater defenses.

Although an analysis of the agreement easily shows that it in fact fails to draw a distinction between theater and strategic defenses and therefore opens a major loophole for circumventing ABM Treaty limitations, the Russian Duma enthusiastically ratified these documents in April 2000, the same day it ratified the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II). Moreover, START II entry into force was made contingent on US Senate ratification of these documents.

After ratification of START II and the demarcation agreement, the Russian administration emphasized that since Russia agreed to sign the demarcation agreement, it would support the idea of theater missile defense development, if only because these defenses do not violate the ABM treaty (with the demarcation protocols). Russia also argued that theater defenses would deal with the allegedly real threat of short- and intermediate-range missiles, as opposed to NMD, which is supposed to counter an intercontinental-missile threat, which (as far as Russia is concerned) does not exist. Apparently Russia believed (though it is hard to tell why) that this emphasis on the differences between theater and strategic defenses would help support the ABM Treaty.

An issue that complicates Russia's calculation regarding missile defense is a concern about the possible Chinese reaction. First of all, China perceives even a limited strategic defense as posing a threat to its current force. As a result, Russia is afraid that China will respond to an NMD deployment by a buildup of its strategic forces, which could eventually make them par with (or even surpass) those of Russia. Although such a development seems remote, the disparity in economic potentials of the two countries and the continuing decline of Russian forces make this scenario more plausible. As a result, Russia cannot ignore extremely strong pressure from China, which opposes US missile defense plans. As a party outside of the ABM Treaty or other arms control agreements, however, China hopes to use Russia to fight for the missile defense status quo. To further complicate the situation, China adamantly opposes US theater defense plans, since it sees them as a threat to its position in the region. This certainly raises a question of whether Russia's recent emphasis on theater defenses is compatible with Russian concerns about China's reaction to missile defense development.

As we can see, the Russian policy on missile defense--although simple in the sense that it can be described as unqualified support for the ABM Treaty--is far from consistent. Moreover, as the episode with Putin's proposal showed, it is quite possible that the current policy may eventually be overturned, either by careful design or by accident.

Setting the Stage for Putin's Proposal

The first time the United States formally proposed beginning negotiations on modification of the ABM Treaty was in January 1999. Although the proposal was rejected, the United States did not withdraw it and in June 1999 succeeded in including a clause on "increasing viability of the ABM Treaty" into the Cologne summit statement. Eventually the United States adopted the tactic of linking the ABM Treaty issue to almost every other issue in the US-Russian dialogue. The US also tried to obtain concessions directly from President Yeltsin, circumventing experts in the Ministry of Defense and the Foreign Ministry. These tactics worked in the past, in particular with the demarcation agreements, so the Clinton administration saw no reason why they should not work this time.

The approach taken by the US administration proved ineffective. First, the administration apparently underestimated the opposition to ABM Treaty modifications within the Russian military. Very well aware of the possibility of a "political solution," the military stepped up their anti-missile defense rhetoric, raising the threshold that the president would have to cross to make concessions. Then, of course, the United States did not anticipate that President Boris Yeltsin would resign six months before the end of his term, taking with him any chances of a "political solution" to the ABM problem.

The new Kremlin administration continued supporting the ABM Treaty, reinforcing its role as the pillar of Russian defense policy. The Russian position was further reinforced by the Duma's ratification of the START II Treaty in April 2000. Although the attached conditions mean that this treaty will probably never enter into force, its ratification--as

well as ratification of the ABM Treaty protocols--allowed Russia to play the champion of disarmament, at almost every occasion pointing out that it is the US's turn to ratify the protocols to START II and the ABM Treaty. Russia also made a point (quite rightly) of ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which was rejected by the US Senate.

Although this new policy certainly put Russia in a favorable light, it could not eliminate the underlying weakness of the Russian position, which is its inability to muster an adequate response should the United States decide to withdraw from the ABM Treaty and build a strategic missile defense. To offset this weakness, the Russian leadership apparently decided to exploit European skepticism about US missile defense plans.

As part of that effort, in a series of statements made by high-ranking military and politicians (including President Putin's address to the Duma about START II ratification), Russia announced that it will be Europeans who pay the price of US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Among measures promised by Russia was its withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty and deployment of SS-20 intermediate-range missiles on the European part of Russian territory. Russia also mentioned the possibility of withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. As a result, Russia seemed to succeed in reinforcing the belief that the main danger of the US decision to deploy missile defenses is an unpredictable and potentially dangerous Russian reaction.

The European countries, which have always been skeptical about missile defenses, would probably prefer an agreement between Russia and the United States that would modify the ABM Treaty and therefore avert a possible conflict between the two countries. However, confronted with the impossibility of such an accord and the prospect of Russia doing something really dangerous, they have taken a cautious approach toward US plans. Russia interpreted European skepticism as a sign of almost unqualified support for its position, and began looking for ways to exploit it even further.

The "Boost-Phase" That Wasn't

Taken in the context of the Russian position on missile defense, which was in effect by the time of the US-Russian summit meeting in June 2000, the statements that Putin made during his NBC interview are indeed remarkable. First of all, Putin all but reversed Russia's long-time position on threat assessment, saying, "We are in agreement that there are new threats arising. And we think we must react to that." But in his most surprising statement, Putin suggested that "Russia and the United States could jointly develop an anti-missile shield to protect us from possible attacks." He went on, saying that Russia has a comprehensive proposal on the issue that it is ready to present at the coming summit meeting. It is interesting that in the same interview Putin said that preserving the ABM Treaty remains a number one priority for Russia--which was apparently contradictory, but in agreement with the official Russian line.

The proposal was so unexpected that it was difficult to understand what exactly Putin meant. The interpretation that influenced the subsequent debate on the issue appeared in

The New York Times the following day, and interpreted Putin's proposal as something that resembles "boost-phase" defense. It should be noted that Putin's words about an "umbrella" that could be put over areas of potential threat do invite such an explanation. However, as we will see later, the idea of boost-phase defense was probably not what Putin had in mind.

Reaction to Putin's proposal in Russia was mixed. Almost every politician--from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (LDPR) to Vladimir Lukin of Yabloko--greeted the "joint-missile-defense" proposal as a bold initiative that presents a viable alternative to US National Missile Defense plans. The reaction from the military was much colder: the Ministry of Defense almost immediately issued a statement in which it clarified that Putin's proposal was not about a joint US-Russian defense. Rather, the military explained, it was a proposal to build a joint Russian-European theater missile defense. No technical details of the proposed European defense were provided; neither was the "boost-phase" idea disavowed.

In retrospect it seems clear that in his NBC interview Putin said something completely different from what he was supposed to say. As we have seen earlier, the plan apparently devised by the Kremlin administration was to appeal to European interests in the dispute over the US missile defense. The idea was that a European missile defense, being non-strategic and therefore in agreement with the ABM Treaty, would present an attractive alternative to the US treaty-violating missile defense plans. It was exactly this proposal that Putin put forward a few days later, during his visit to Italy. Marketing the new Russian initiative, Putin said that he presented a comprehensive proposal to develop a joint Russian-European missile defense, which "on one hand...would avoid all the problems linked to the balance of forces. On the other, it would permit in an absolute manner a 100% guarantee of the security of every European country."

This proposal was met in Europe with skepticism--which was perfectly understandable since Putin's administration miscalculated the nature of European opposition to the US plans. However deep the disagreement between Europe and the United States, Europe was certainly not interested in Russian missile defenses. As for the idea of building a joint US-Russian defense, it was never mentioned during the summit meeting and did not appear in the summit documents. It is also possible that Putin indeed meant what he said in the NBC interview when he was proposing a joint strategic defense. If that was the case, he was promptly corrected by his own military and, not surprisingly, by China. Although China refrained from making any strong public statements about Putin's proposal, Chinese officials said that China does not fully understand it and reiterated their opposition to any modifications of the ABM Treaty. There is no doubt that China delivered its strong objections to the joint US-Russian defense via diplomatic channels.

As for the Russian military, they had a chance to register their opposition to Putin's proposals during a visit of an official Russian military delegation to Brussels in June 2000. During that visit, the Minister of Defense presented the Russian plan for a European defense, which amounted to a complete rejection of everything that Putin said. According to the plan, presented by Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, Russia and Europe

should begin consultations to decide whether a threat from ballistic missiles exists, and only if they find that there is a threat they should move on to decide what would be the appropriate way of dealing with it. Eventually, very late into the process, Russia and Europe would consider building a missile defense if appropriate. By the time the Russian delegation went to Brussels, it was clear that boost-phase defense is not technically compatible with the idea of defending Europe, so the Russian generals avoided mentioning it at all cost.

Conclusion

It would be fair to say that there never was a serious Russian proposal to build a joint US-Russian missile defense, boost-phase or otherwise. Even if Putin really wished to make a diversion from the main road of Russian policy on missile defense, he was confronted with very serious obstacles that he was unable and probably unwilling to overcome. The first was his own military's opposition to the plan, and the second was the strong negative reaction from China.

The episode with the "boost-phase" once again demonstrated the inconsistency of Russia's missile defense policy. Although Russia correctly points out that missile defenses could play a destabilizing role, for some reason it applies this principle only to its relationships with the United States. The emphasis on theater defenses that now seems to be Russia's official policy means that the main reason Russia opposes the NMD plan is that US defenses could be used to undermine Russia's deterrent capability. If it is someone else's capability that a missile defense is supposed to counter, China's for example, Russia does not seem to object. This is hardly the foundation of a sound anti-missile defense policy.

Another important conclusion from the "boost-phase" episode is that the Russian political leadership does not seem to be ready to sever its relationship with the United States over the missile defense issue. Although opposition to the idea of a joint US-Russian missile defense undertaking from the military was rather strong, responses from all parts of the political spectrum were fairly enthusiastic, since Putin's proposal was seen as a face-saving way of ending the dispute over the ABM Treaty, which has been plaguing US-Russian relations for quite a while now. The failure to achieve a breakthrough on the missile defense issue should be attributed to the poorly thought out nature of the proposal, rather than the lack of trying. The continuing anti-missile defense rhetoric and the inconsistencies of the Russian (and of the US) position on missile defense make finding an acceptable way out of the current stalemate difficult, but probably not impossible.