

America and Russia need a wider deal on missiles

By Stephen Rademaker

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The Bush administration's plan to deploy 10 missile defence interceptors in Poland has grown into an important point of contention between Moscow and Washington. President Vladimir Putin warned in a speech in Munich in February that implementing it would lead to "an inevitable arms race".

To underscore that forecast, Mr Putin recently announced a moratorium on Russian implementation of an important arms-control agreement, the 1990 treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). It was implicit in that announcement that Russia will now consider itself free to build up conventional forces on Nato's borders.

Russia's ire may not be fully exhausted by the CFE treaty. A few days after Mr Putin spoke in Munich, Yury Baluyevsky, Russia's top general, said if the US were to proceed with its missile defence plans Russia would withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. That 1987 treaty obliged the US and the Soviet Union to dismantle all their missiles with ranges between 50km and 5,500km, and forbade them to possess such missiles in the future.

Russia has chafed under the INF treaty for years. Mr Putin complained about its lack of "universal character", noting bitterly that many of Russia's neighbours, including Iran and North Korea, deploy missiles the US and Russia are forbidden to have and that other countries are developing.

Russia's complaints about the INF treaty and America's missile defence plans are two sides of the same coin; both are reactions to the problem of missile proliferation. America is responding to this intensifying threat by building defences against missile attack. By threatening to withdraw from the INF treaty, Russia signals its intention to respond by deploying new offensive missiles.

Russia, of course, insists it – rather than Iran – must be the target of US missile defences in Europe. But if Russia really is worried about the effect on its 2200-warhead strategic nuclear force of 10 additional interceptors, then it ought to applaud the decision to install them in Europe rather than Alaska, where most US interceptors are.

Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles launched from bases in eastern Europe and central Asia against targets in North America would not overfly Poland but the Arctic Ocean instead. Such ICBMs would be flying away from Poland, meaning interceptors launched from Poland would have to race to catch up with them from behind. By contrast, Alaska is downrange from Russian ICBM bases, so interceptors launched from there would have better odds of shooting down incoming Russian warheads.

While Russia's concerns about missile defence in central Europe are ill-founded, Mr Putin's complaints about the INF treaty are not. When the US and the Soviet Union signed that treaty they were effectively eliminating the threat they faced from missiles with ranges of 500km to 5,500km. That threat has re-emerged, however, as a consequence of missile proliferation.

Mr Putin was right to suggest that the INF treaty will not endure long in a world of missile proliferation. It is unrealistic to expect the US and the successor states to the Soviet Union

forever to remain the only countries in the world forbidden to possess these missiles if other countries continue to deploy them in greater numbers. If the INF treaty is to be preserved, missile proliferation must be stopped.

Until now, efforts to prevent missile proliferation have focused on export controls. These efforts have slowed proliferation but not prevented it. Before Russia and the US resign themselves to the inevitability of missile proliferation, they should explore whether the INF treaty can be transformed into a multilateral prohibition on intermediate range missiles.

An INF treaty that included most countries on Russia's periphery would give Moscow far greater security than matching the offensive missile deployments of its neighbours. Also, if countries such as Iran could be persuaded to adhere to an expanded INF treaty, the rationale for new missile defences in central Europe would disappear.

Russia's strategy to discourage missile defence in central Europe by threatening a build-up of conventional forces and raising the spectre of missile attack will almost certainly backfire. Russia would be far more likely to achieve its aims by joining the US in a diplomatic effort to reduce the international missile threat.

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