

America and Russia: Has the Cold War Really Ended?

US nuclear doctrine, missile defence in Europe and NATO expansion

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Global Research, November 25, 2009

The Caucus (University of Ottawa), Vol. 10,
No. 1 (Fall 2009): pp. 20-22. 12 November
2009

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)
[War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

This article was first published in The Caucus, a political science and international development journal published by the University of Ottawa. The article raises an important question in relation to the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9, 1989):

Has the Cold War really ended?

The article deals with Russian anxieties with the U.S., American nuclear doctrine, American missile defence in Europe, and NATO expansion.

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall is approaching, but has the Cold War really ended and is it really a historic relic of the not too distant past? The Soviet Union may no longer exist and the Warsaw Pact may have long been dissolved, but many of the remnants of the Cold War still exist, like the conflict in the divided Korean Peninsula, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and finally the issue of missile defense. In the last few years the relations between NATO and the Russian Federation have become tense and described in terms reminiscent of the Cold War. One of the main impetuses for this resumption of Cold tensions has been the U.S. missile shield project in the European continent. The Russians have consistently made no secret about maintaining that the missile defense shield, above all else, is a threat to them.

The idea of a missile shield project is not new. During the Cold War, the idea was inaugurated by Ronald Reagan as part of a grand strategy to deploy missiles, technical facilities, and military bases around the world and in space, which led to the project being called "Star Wars." Since its inauguration the Pentagon has spent billions of U.S. dollars in research and study for the project. While the U.S. government has claimed that the intended purpose of establishing a missile shield is to protect America and Europe from the threat of hypothetical North Korean or Iranian ballistic missile attacks, the Kremlin regards the missile shield project as a serious threat to the national security of Mother Russia. Moscow is adamant on calling the justifications for deploying the missile shield as mere pretext to get closer to Russia.

What is the foundation for these Russian views and anxieties? Russian hostility towards the U.S. program is based on long-standing U.S. strategic goals. These goals include the military doctrine of full spectrum dominance, a revamped nuclear first strike policy that now

includes the concept of nuclear primacy, and NATO expansion onto the borders of Russia – despite NATO’s guarantees that it would not expand beyond the borders of Germany.

U.S. nuclear policy has radically changed since the Cold War. In 2001, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of the United States acknowledged that Russia was a target for possible nuclear attacks by the U.S. military. The 2001 NPR can be recapitulated by the following summary:

During the Cold War, Russia [sic.; the Soviet Union] was the principal nuclear threat to the United States. The demise of the Soviet Union shifted U.S. nuclear weapons planning away from mainly targeting Russia. Nonetheless, Russia remains the only nation that can conceivably destroy the United States because of the size of its nuclear arsenal. Moreover, uncertainty over the future course of Russian foreign policy motivates the United States to keep a massive nuclear weapons reserve force. For these reasons, Russia still occupies a place on the list of potential targets for U.S. nuclear weapons. In addition, the new NPR explicitly lists six other countries as targets: North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and China. This nuclear targeting list reflects previous administrations’ planning. [1]

Russia is a nuclear target for the Pentagon because it is the primary nation capable of militarily challenging America, but this alone is not what has put Moscow on edge. In 2001, America announced that it would unilaterally withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which put legal limitations on the number of U.S. and Russian ballistic missile systems. This was also one of the recommendations of Dick Cheney and the neo-conservative think-tank named the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) in their manuscript “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategies, Forces, and Resources For a New Century.” In the PNAC document, published in September 2000, it is categorically stated that America must “DEVELOP AND DEPLOY GLOBAL MISSILE DEFENSES to defend the American homeland and American allies, and to provide a secure basis for U.S. power projection around the world.” [2] The unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. from the ABM Treaty was later followed by further announcements of changes in U.S. military doctrine, which was first accentuated by the NPR, and then by the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations (DJNO) and then CONPLAN 8022-02 that made offensive nuclear attacks available options for both pre-emptive and conventional warfare. [3]

In the eyes of Russia the missile shield project is about America establishing nuclear primacy. With the missile shield in place Russia would become unable to react to a nuclear first strike by the United States and the Kremlin’s nuclear arsenal would virtually be useless. In other words the U.S. would eliminate the threat of “mutually assured destruction” (MAD), which was present during the Cold War, by eliminating the threat of a nuclear response from Moscow. This would also disallow any Russian retaliation to an American nuclear “first strike.” During the Cold War the possibility of nuclear retaliation or a “second strike” and MAD were widely seen as the factors that had prevented a global nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviets. Nuclear primacy, however, changes all this and upsets the Russian ability to retaliate, which the Kremlin feels leaves Russia and its allies exposed to possible hostility from the U.S. and NATO.

NATO still exists even though the Cold War has ended. NATO’s eastward expansion and the organization’s shift from a formerly defensive pact to an interventionist organization have unnerved Russia. The strategic nature of American missile defense, which disturbs nuclear parity between Russia and the U.S., is further compounded by NATO. Moscow feels

threatened by the offensive military characteristics that NATO has adopted since the end of the Cold War, which has taken NATO from intervention in the former Yugoslavia to fighting in Afghanistan, and both security and training missions in the Middle East and Africa. In this regard, Vladimir Putin's caustic speech on global security should come as no shock. In it Putin accused the U.S. of pursuing the objective of establishing a uni-polar world through military might:

Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force - military force - in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts. As a result we do not have sufficient strength to find a comprehensive solution to any one of these conflicts. Finding a political settlement also becomes impossible.

We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. [4]

Putin also alluded to NATO expansion as being target against Russia:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of [NATO] itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: "the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee". Where are these guarantees? [5]

The apprehension of a looming war is very real amongst Russian planners. The Kremlin believes that the Russian Federation is simultaneously being encircled by NATO, a growing number of military bases, and finally American missiles.

Is the idea of a war between Russia and America and NATO even conceivable? The 2008 war between Georgia and Russia in the Caucasus presents such a possibility. The Russo-Georgian War has also been called a proxy war by Russian officials. The Kremlin has stated that Mikheil Saakashvili, the leader of Georgia, represents American interests in the former Soviet Union. Georgia in this sense is seen as an American proxy or client state by Moscow. [6] Russian suspicions were further corroborated when the U.S. declare that the Caucasus was a vital area to American strategic interests during the Russo-Georgian War. In it not coincidental that Georgia is one of the fastest militarizing states in the world and one of the largest recipients of American military aid. What is most important about the war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia is that Russia said it would have not changed its course of action even if Georgia were a member of NATO. This alone demonstrates that the threat of a broader war involving Russia and the U.S. is no mere illusion.

So has a reset button really been pushed in Russo-American relations by the Obama Administration with the 2009 announcement of a halt to American missile defense plans in Eastern Europe? President Barack Obama's celebrated September 17 announcement that the U.S. is scrapping the components of the missile shield stationed close to Russia's border

in the Czech Republic and Poland is misleading. Shortly after Obama's announcement the U.S. launched two experimental missile defense satellites into space from Cape Canaveral, Florida. [7] What Obama actually announced was not the scrapping of the missile shield, but a much more extensive and effective missile shield under revised plans that will include naval deployments onboard Aegis-equipped ships. [8] The deployment of the missile shield is actually being expanded in Europe and beyond, from Turkey and the Mediterranean to the Baltic Sea.

The response of a Polish official to Obama's revised plans only substantiates Russian fears. "We were never really threatened by a long-range missile attack from Iran," Slawomir Nowak who is a senior advisor to Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk informed TVP INFO Television shortly after Obama's announcement. [9] So was securing Poland, amongst others, from an Iranian missile threat a real motive for the missile shield? The Kremlin would argue no. To Moscow it became apparent that U.S. policy makers correlated the deployment of global missile defenses not with an Iranian or North Korean threat, but in the words of the PNAC as a means to "provide a secure basis for U.S. power projection around the world." [10] So has the Cold War really ended? Maybe the answer lies in joint military preparations by Russia and Belarus and the bilateral war games they held to prepare their armed forces for a NATO attack involving a land, sea, and air invasion. [11]

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The original source of this article is *The Caucus* (University of Ottawa), Vol. 10, No. 1 (Fall 2009): pp. 20-22.

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