

In the “New Arms Race”, Washington Can’t Get Its Story Straight

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As of August 18th, when the United States test-fired a cruise-missile from San Nicolas Island, California, it would not be an exaggeration to say that we have entered an exceptionally dangerous phase in Russia-US relations, perhaps more so than at any point in the past 5 years. Furthermore, the US Department of Defense has announced plans to test a land-based intermediate-range ballistic missile in November. According to the Pentagon statement, a completely new missile similar to the Pershing II will be tested. Pershing II was prohibited under the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear forces) Treaty, which was terminated on the initiative of the United States on August 2nd.

Many readers will already be aware that the reason which US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave in October last year for the United States’ intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty was an alleged Russian treaty-violation, namely, the test-firing of the 9M729 cruise-missile from the Kapustin Yar launch-site in Astrakhan. Washington alleged that this missile-test exceeded the 500-kilometre range allowed under the terms of the treaty, an allegation which Moscow has consistently denied.

However, even if neutral observers have to be agnostic concerning the respective claims made by the US and Russian governments on this question, as there is no way to corroborate either government’s claims unless you happen to work at a high level in the military sector, the point remains that this alleged violation of the INF Treaty by Russia, even if it had in fact occurred, would have been quite a marginal violation. The United States itself had already quite flagrantly violated the INF Treaty through the deployment of the Aegis Ashore missile defence system in Romania. The US also plans to deploy Aegis Ashore in Poland. For years, the Russian government’s position had been to avoid raising concerns about the United States’ compliance with the terms of the treaty, as it saw INF as a vital component in the architecture of the international security system.

Then last year, the US starts accusing Russia of treaty-violations.

Projection is the oldest game in town.

On February 1st, the United States formally announces the suspension of its obligations under the INF Treaty.

One day later, the State Department announces a \$2.15 billion sale of the Aegis Ashore system to Japan.

On August 2nd, the INF Treaty is officially terminated on the initiative of the United States.

Only 16 days later, the US conducts the cruise-missile test from San Nicolas Island.

Now, we have to make a distinction between declarations in principle and downright convenient timing. If you tell your girlfriend explicitly that, henceforth, you'd like to reserve the right to sleep with other women, then you're not "cheating" as such. You're explicitly withdrawing from the monogamy-agreement which you previously had with her. However, if you tell her that in future you reserve the right to sleep with other women, and then you actually do it only 24 hours later, then most people would regard that as downright shabby behaviour. No class.

In his statement to the Security Council of Russia on August 23rd, President Putin said:

"It is noteworthy that the tests of a missile with characteristics prohibited under the treaty were conducted just 16 days after the completion of the procedure of denouncing that treaty initiated by Washington," he said. "Apparently, that was not an improvisation but another link in a chain of pre-planned actions....It is now obvious to everyone that the main aim of this campaign was to cover up Washington's work, which was in violation of the Treaty and initially envisaged the withdrawal from this agreement."

He instructed the Security Council to prepare what he called "a symmetric response." This phrase turned out to underline his mastery of the art of understatement.

Starting on August 26th, drills involving 8,200 Russian personnel from the air force, army and Black Sea and Caspian Naval Fleets began throughout Russia's Southern Military District. These exercises included fighter-jets based in Crimea firing air-to-air missiles, the drilling of Iskander missile-squads, exercises in counter-guerilla tactics and in traversing contaminated terrain for ground-forces, etc. Elsewhere, there were anti-ballistic missile exercises in Russia's Far East, and nuclear submarines in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean test-fired intercontinental ballistic missiles at targets in Kamchatka and Arkhangelsk. Exercises involving the nuclear-capable, intermediate-range Iskander missile system have also been conducted in Kaliningrad.

In his August 23rd statement, President Putin also stated that

"We will not be drawn into a costly arms race that would be disastrous for our economy."

The question does arise - is the US strategy attempting to repeat the scenario of the late 1980's by combining economic pressure (in this case, sanctions) with an escalated and wildly costly arms-race so as to force the economic implosion of its geo-strategic adversary?

Strange contradictions have arisen in the American version of this story. Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Carver, a Pentagon spokesman, claimed that the Aegis Ashore system deployed in Romania is not capable of firing offensive weapons of any type, but can only fire the SM-3 interceptor. But this claim is straightforwardly, demonstrably false - we know that MK-41 launch-pads are deployed as components of the Aegis Ashore configuration in Romania, just as they will be in Poland and Japan, and the MK-41 can fire a wide range of missiles, including Tomahawk cruise missiles.

In any case, this is not a particularly crucial point, as even missile-defence systems in themselves, when deployed so close to Russia's borders, play a tactically aggressive role. Given Russia's geography and demographics, for the potency of Russia's nuclear deterrent to be compromised would automatically imply a long-term threat to Russia's territorial integrity. Sometimes advocates of the Russian position, including even President Putin himself, are too reticent to argue this point, probably out of concerns that the argument will be deliberately misrepresented or misconstrued in western media.

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