

U.S.-Russian Missile Defense Talks Have Reached a Turning Point

by William Jones and Marsha Freeman

The Oct. 12-13 2+2 ministerial meeting in Moscow on ballistic missile defense at first appeared to deadlock over U.S. plans to deploy ABM systems in the Czech Republic and Poland. Not only had the U.S. side made clear that it had no intention of jettisoning its deployment plans, but the Russians, from President Vladimir Putin on down, insisted that constructive dialogue depended upon the United States putting those plans on hold. One commentary in the Russian news agency Novosti, went so far as to compare the escalating confrontation over the ABM systems to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Yet, in the days subsequent to the talks, the U.S. side revealed that it had a new proposal on the table, and Russian spokesmen made statements indicating their hope that the dialogue could continue, with Putin himself saying Oct. 17, in an interview with Iranian reporters in Tehran, "I must say that our latest meetings with our American partners show that it is possible for their view on this matter to undergo a certain transformation, and we will continue the dialogue."

Crucial to the progress of such talks will be the extent of the influence of U.S. elder statesmen such as Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who have spoken out in recent weeks urging the Bush Administration to respond positively to President Putin's Kennebunkport proposal for U.S.-Russia collaboration on ballistic missile defense.

Putin's Proposal

When he met with President Bush in July at the Bush family estate in Kennebunkport, Maine, Putin proposed that the United States and Russia cooperate in a joint missile defense effort against possible threats, utilizing a radar in Azerbaijan that is leased by Russia. Putin's proposal countered a provocative plan by the United States, ostensibly to protect against missiles coming from Iran, to place ten interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic—which Russian officials, as well as U.S. experts such as MIT Prof. Theodore A. Postol, identify as a threat to Russia's strategic deterrent.

Putin's overture revived the efforts that had been made in the last decades, beginning with President Reagan's 1983 adoption of Lyndon LaRouche's proposal, by launching his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and also includ-

ed Russia's 1993 "Trust" proposal, to shift away from MAD brinkmanship, and create a broad cooperation between the two Cold War opponents in the area of missile defense.

In his meeting with the Russian President at Kennebunkport, President Bush expressed interest in the Putin proposal, and the two appointed their respective defense and foreign ministers to begin working on the problem, to come up with a solution. Since Kennebunkport, there have been a series of meetings between Russian and U.S. "expert groups," with representatives from the Defense and State Departments, working with their Russian colleagues, on the details of such a collaboration. They have visited the radar site in Azerbaijan to judge what effect this would have on the ability to deal with a possible threat from Iran. Later, President Putin indicated that Russia would also be willing to allow the use of another, more modern, radar site, under preparation in southern Russia, as a part of the package.

The major point of contention has been the plan to place U.S. missiles in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic. The United States has refused to abandon this proposal, and has insisted that the Russian radars be complementary to, rather than an alternative to, the Polish and Czech facilities. But it is precisely those facilities which are regarded by Russia—with good reason—as a potential threat.

U.S. Voices for Sanity

The leading supporter of Putin's Kennebunkport proposal in the United States has been Lyndon LaRouche, the intellectual author of the SDI. But there have been other high-profile individuals in the U.S. political establishment weighing in, urging the Administration not to lose this important opportunity.

In a speech to the Brookings Institution on Oct. 8, Senator Lugar, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated: "The Russian missile defense proposal provides an important strategic opening for further discussion and exploration. President Putin's proposal is not new. In fact, it is surprisingly similar to the strategic vision that President Ronald Reagan laid out more than two decades ago. I am pleased that the Administration is seriously studying Putin's offer on missile defense."



Russian Presidential Press and Information Office

At the Oct. 12-13 ministerial meeting on ballistic missile defense, Russia and the United States agreed to continue such meetings. Here, President Vladimir Putin (right) greets Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice looks on.

In an editorial in the *International Herald Tribune* on Aug. 9, Henry Kissinger also indicated the importance of such an agreement. “Putin’s initiative to link NATO and Russian warning systems could be—or could be made—an historic initiative in dealing jointly with issues that threaten all countries simultaneously,” Kissinger wrote. “It is one of those schemes easy to disparage on technical grounds but, perhaps like Reagan’s Star Wars vision, is a harbinger of a future posing entirely new creative opportunities. It permits one to imagine a genuinely global approach to the specter of nuclear proliferation, which has heretofore been treated largely through national policies. And such an approach could become a forerunner for other issues of comparable dimension.”

Kissinger reiterated his view that the Bush Administration should respond seriously to Putin’s proposal on Oct. 18, after a meeting of the U.S.-Russian Business Council in New York.

The Moscow Negotiations

Putin made his point clear, when he met with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and his own defense and foreign ministers in Moscow on Oct. 12, prior to their discussions on the issue. “The one point I would like to make,” Putin said, “is that we hope that you will not push ahead with your prior agreements with Eastern European countries while this complex negotiating process continues.” He added, “After all, we could decide some day to put missile defense systems on the Moon, but if we concentrate solely on carrying out our own

plans, we could end up losing the opportunity for reaching an agreement. But we see that our American partners are showing a constructive desire to continue the dialogue and we think this is a very positive signal.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was more blunt: No progress would be made unless the U.S. Eastern European plans were frozen. This should be acceptable, Lavrov stated, because it will be years before Iran has either nuclear weapons, or a long-range missile to deliver them. This was restated by Chief of Staff Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky on Oct. 17: “We continue to say this without equivocation, and it is our deep conviction, founded on real knowledge of the situation in Iran, concerning its capacity to create intercontinental ballistic missiles. We do not see that it would be possible to do this in the near future, or in the medium term, or that it is simply possible at all” for Iran.

Lavrov reiterated at a press conference at the conclusion of the ministerial-level meetings, that there is no hurry to plan a European ballistic missile defense system. “We believe for the joint work of Russian and American experts to be efficient, the plans to deploy the third positioning region in Europe [Poland and the Czech Republic] should be frozen. There is no agreement on this, but we encouraged our experts to discuss the existing divergences in a very concrete and specific way.”

In comments following the ministerial meetings, Gates addressed the Russian concerns. “We also addressed the possible concern on the Russian side that while the sites in the present design form pose no threat to Russia or its deterrent, the concern that in some future date, years from now, they might do so, and our willingness to work with the Russians to provide assurances and reassurances on that—in that respect,” Gates said.

What Gates offered was that the Russians could have observers at many, or perhaps all, of the anti-missile facilities. Without revealing the full contents of the U.S. proposal, Gates told reporters that, “There were several components to the suggestions that we made. I think the one that I’ll just mention is in furtherance of transparency. We put forward some thoughts about the presence of individuals from both sides at sites so that there was complete transparency both at—perhaps at third sites, but also in the U.S., and if there are radars and other facilities here in Russia, that there would be a presence there, too. So some of the proposals affected the transparency and sharing of information.”

To this, General Baluyevsky countered, that it is nothing new, and that it is completely unacceptable for the United States to consider the facilities being offered by the Russians as part of the U.S. ABM system.

New U.S. Proposals

After the Moscow meetings, the U.S. delegation left to brief NATO allies on the progress of the talks, and further aspects of U.S. “suggestions” made to the Russians at the 2+2 meeting were revealed. In comments at NATO headquarters in Brussels, where Russian Foreign Ministry disarmament director Anatoli Antonov and first deputy chief of staff of the Space Forces, Alexander Yakushin, were present, Daniel Fried, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, revealed an offer to step back from the Poland and Czech deployments.

“Our real concern is not Russia,” Fried told reporters. The defense system is “intended against the major problem we see developing, which is Iran, and if that problem went away, or attenuated, we would obviously draw conclusions,” he said. “This is a threat-based system, and we would be affected if Iran gave up its [uranium] enrichment and worked with the international community, and had a different approach to things.”

Apparently ignoring President Bush’s psychotic outburst at a press conference in Washington the same day, where he ranted that those who would not stop Iran are gunning for World War III, Fried said: “Our position is that our negotiations with the Poles and Czechs will continue, but we don’t feel the need to spend money at quite as fast a rate for a threat that is attenuated. You don’t stay on autopilot; you use your brain and judge things as they actually emerge.”

Speaking to reporters after the meetings in Moscow, a senior Administration official who was engaged in the talks, said, “. . . what is, I think, of great interest is that the ideas that were brought to the table, both in the experts’ talks and by the ministers in their discussion with President Putin, and in the 2+2, are of sufficient interest that the experts’ talks are going to continue and that we are going to continue to work on whether we can narrow the differences even further and ultimately bring these positions together.” Another 2+2 ministerial meeting is scheduled in six months’ time in Washington, and during the interim, the “experts” will again try to thrash out the details of a possible agreement.

That the U.S. Eastern European deployment plan could ever go ahead is not self-evident, as the populations in both Poland and the Czech Republic have been very hesitant to have any foreign soldiers operating on their soil, and would no doubt have reason to object to a Russian military presence. The U.S. Congress, so far, has also put a hold on the inclusion of any funding for a Polish/Czech deployment in the FY08 Defense Department budget.

A New Relationship?

The U.S. proposal on the East European missile deployment has also caused further complications in the U.S./Russian strategic relationship. In July, President Putin signed a decree suspending Russia’s participation in the 1990 treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), which had created a balance between NATO and Warsaw Pact conventional forces in Central Europe. Although the CFE Treaty had already become something of a sticking point for Russia after the demise of the Warsaw Pact, when the “balance of forces” in that treaty were totally thrown out of whack, the possibility of missiles in Poland only hardened Russia’s determination to jettison the treaty.

Putin has also mooted opting out of the 1987 Treaty on Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF Treaty), which eliminated U.S. and Russian medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe. Both Putin and Russian military leaders have indicated that Russia might be forced to target East European missile sites if the United States followed through on its original proposal.

But on Oct. 17, General Baluyevsky moderated the Russian position on the INF Treaty, stating that “breaking this Treaty could lead to irreversible consequences, when a large number of countries will equip missiles with high-precision warheads and more exotic types of WMD.” In a similar vein, Brig. Gen. Kevin Ryan (ret.), former chief of staff of the Army Space and Missile Defense Command, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* on Oct. 16, that the INF Treaty should not be scrapped by the United States and Russia, but rather should be expanded at least to place an upper limit on—if not eliminate—medium- and short-range missiles from Europe. Similarly, earlier this month, Putin called for the INF Treaty to be made “universal in nature.”

In addition, Russia is concerned by the apparent U.S. unwillingness to sign a follow-on treaty to START, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which limits intercontinental nuclear missiles, when it expires in 2009. A senior Administration official indicated, however, that the two sides would be working to put together a “strategic framework” agreement for the next meeting of the 2+2, in Washington.

The fact that the two sides are determined to continue the 2+2 format, perhaps even making this a permanent feature of the U.S.-Russia relationship, must be taken as a sign of progress. In his Kennebunkport comments, Putin stated his hope that an agreement on missile defense could take the entire U.S.-Russia relationship to a new level. This is possible, only if Cheney and company do not succeed in sabotaging a missile-defense deal. But if they do succeed, Russia will become convinced that the goal of U.S. policy is simply to isolate, and ultimately destroy it as a great power. And Russia would be right.