The Pentagon would be wrong to assume it can selectively counter Russian missile threats in Europe.

The United States is signaling a willingness to compete with its near-peer rivals in the realm of missile defense.Leaks about the forthcoming Missile Defense Review indicate the Pentagon is looking to counter burgeoning threats from Russia and China “in regional theaters such as Europe and Asia,” but not strategic threats to the U.S. homeland. There is consensus in Washington that it would be impossible to defend against the entire arsenal of Russian strategic weapons, because Russia can field warheads and decoys “at dramatically less cost than the United States can add missile defense interceptors.”

So instead, the Pentagon is aiming to defend NATO forces in Eastern Europe that are vulnerable to Russian ballistic and cruise missile attacks without further fueling a competition for nuclear supremacy. To accomplish this, the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) may expand the role of Aegis Ashore to include homeland missile defense against intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deliver THAAD missile batteries to Germany, or deploy PAC-3 interceptors in Lithuania and Estonia.

But any decision to explicitly counter Russian and Chinese missiles would be a substantial break from past policy. Even after withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, Washington’s ambitions to establish missile defenses were tempered by concerns over strategic stability. MDA’s most challenging mission has been to prove the merit of U.S. systems to patrons in Congress while also downplaying their capabilities to foreign ministries in Russia and China. The contortions reached a climax in 2007 when MDA was tasked with proving to Russian defense agencies that proposed Aegis Ashore systems could not intercept Russian ICBMs flying over the polar ice cap. In 2013, MDA even scrapped the fourth phase of its European missile defense plan, which would have developed an interceptor capable of chasing Russian ICBMs. But all signs indicate that the forthcoming Missile Defense Review will direct the Pentagon to abandon its policy of assuaging Russia and China.

Russia has long protested U.S. missile defenses for two reasons: First, Russians argue that missile defense is destabilizing because it undermines mutual vulnerability afforded by nuclear weapons. Although Russians agree that their full arsenal would overcome most missile defense deployments, they worry that a U.S. first strike could eliminate enough of their capabilities that missile defenses would be sufficient to deal with what is left—thus obviating Russia’s ability to retaliate. Second, some Russians are convinced that the launchers in U.S. theater
missile defense (TMD) systems can be repurposed to launch offensive weapons capable of threatening Russian troops or even Moscow itself.\textsuperscript{11} But many in the West have come to see Russian concerns as disingenuous. Despite U.S. assurances that theater defenses cannot neutralize the Russian strategic deterrent nor launch offensive missiles, Moscow asserts otherwise and uses this as justification to build advanced strategic weapons.\textsuperscript{12} Because of Russia’s apparent willful ignorance, many in the Trump administration have come to believe that crying foul is part of a broader Russian strategy to abandon the Eurasian arms control framework.\textsuperscript{13}

Ultimately the authenticity of Russian concerns over missile defense is neither clear nor relevant to U.S. strategy. The larger problem is that Russians, willfully or accidentally, have cultivated a disproportionate and deep-seated fear that conflates all forms of U.S. air and missile defense. In March 2018, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin accused the United States of “encircling Russia with 400 anti-ballistic missile systems,” which “significantly diminish the potential of Russia’s nuclear deterrent.”\textsuperscript{14} Claims like this erroneously transform the myriad of U.S. missile defenses into a highly-capable monolith. Russians’ mental homogenization of U.S. missile defenses is important because it neuters any strategy predicated on the idea of escalation control.

But the forthcoming Missile Defense Review fails to account for this theater-strategic nexus in missile defense. In its new mission to counter Russian missile systems in Europe, the Pentagon assumes that it can selectively battle and win an arms race at the theater level. But history has repeatedly shown—from the development of the strategic cruise missile\textsuperscript{15} to the breakdown of the SALT II agreement—that the politics governing theater missile defenses and nuclear-capable ICBMs are inextricably bound.\textsuperscript{16} Defending against one kind of weapon necessarily alters the significance of and strategy surrounding the other. Conversely, if an adversary fails to distinguish between theater and strategic weapon posturing, as Russia does, conflict can easily breach the nuclear threshold.\textsuperscript{17}

The regional-strategic nexus is made possible mainly because Russian media rarely distinguishes between the capabilities of different U.S. missile defenses. Although the ranges and roles of U.S. missile defense systems vary drastically, from 20-km point defenses to 2,500-km regional shields, most news articles and statements from the Russian government do not discriminate between the two. Russian media almost always refer to a “US global missile defense system,” which the Russian Foreign Ministry calls “a dangerous global project aimed at establishing omnipresent and overwhelming US military superiority.”\textsuperscript{18}

The White House has in turn lambasted Russia for building “destabilizing weapons systems . . . in direct violation of its treaty obligations,” but there is no reason to believe that Russia will cease weapons development in response to expanding U.S. TMD.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, expanding and repurposing TMD only vindicates Russian concerns about U.S. missile defense, which threatens U.S. national security in two ways.

First, doubling down on TMD makes it much easier for the Russian defense industry to justify building even more strategic weapons. Russian and U.S. sources have assessed that many of Russia’s new strategic weapons unveiled on March 1 are “nowhere near” ready for deployment, and that the threat of their development
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may be used as a bargaining chip to negotiate with the United States.20 Expanding TMD declines the gambit, ensuring Russia funnels more resources into threatening strategic capabilities—exactly what the Pentagon had hoped to avoid.

Second, expanding TMD would contradict U.S. efforts to bring Russia back into compliance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, a cornerstone arms control agreement. The Trump administration’s INF strategy is based on coercing Moscow to the negotiating table through economic, diplomatic, and military measures. However, expanding TMD imperils negotiations in two ways. For one, the entire point of a strategy based on coercive diplomacy is to change the behavior of an adversary. In this case, the prerequisite for behavior change is to rekindle dialogue. Vindicating Russian concerns over missile defense only strengthens anti-American resolve and eliminates any incentive to negotiate by convincing Russian defense hawks that they are right not to trust the United States. Second, expanding TMD removes the most valuable chit from the negotiating table. Next to sanctions, U.S. missile defenses in Europe are probably the top foreign policy concern of the Russian Federation. Refusing to negotiate their deployment outright removes the incentive to negotiate on other important national security issues like the INF Treaty, Syria, or chemical weapons.

Rather than expand TMD in Europe at the expense of homeland security, the Pentagon ought to invest more in left-of-launch capabilities like cyber and electronic warfare, which are just as credible but less escalatory. Alternative defenses for NATO could include incorporating more U.S. troops in the tripwire force, threatening additional force deployments, or improving civilian resilience in the Baltics.21 All of these actions would successfully contest Russian forces in Eastern Europe without forcing a strategic arms race. But as it stands, the planned strategy of forsaking arms control in the name of coercive diplomacy is bound to backfire. The Pentagon should tread carefully, lest it invites Russia to develop strategic weapons it has no method or intention of countering.

Ryan Fedasiuk was a research intern with the Aerospace Security Project at CSIS.


