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US-Russian Relations: Some Historical Parallels

LSE Ideas

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Much has been made of the recent Russian decision to place short-range Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad. Artemy Kalinovsky rightly [pointed out](#) in his latest post that the western media has been implying that the Russians are somehow acting in an aggressive or militarist way. However, if the situation is turned on its head and one ponders what the US response would be if the Russians were to (and we need to suspend reality here for a moment for the sake of the argument) place a radar system in Canada; it becomes clear that the Russian response is not out of order. It should be expected.

Indeed, history has provided us with a parallel to the situation in the form of the Cuban Missile Crisis. While the US reasoning in the current situation makes it clear that the radar and interceptors are not meant for Russian missiles, the two events share striking similarities insofar as they threaten to upset the nuclear status quo. What Washington and the US media fails to acknowledge, and Moscow knows too well, is that the missile interceptors would be useful in stopping Russian launched missiles as well. This is not often heard in the media. Washington has made it clear that it is not their intended purpose, but it does not change the reality to the Russians.

The issue of US radar and missile interceptors based in Poland and the Czech Republic speaks to the broader issue of the failure of the Bush Administration to respect Russian regional security concerns. No doubt this has been influenced by the legacy of the Cold War. Key players in the Administration: Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Perle, were all advocates of hard-line approaches to US-Soviet relations under Nixon, Ford and Reagan. They seem to have failed to grasp that their policy of acting tough towards the Soviet Union was not key in hastening the end of the Cold War. They still feel that such an aggressive act is the correct path to increase US security and power. However, there are dozens of instances in the past 50 years that contradict such a sentiment. Every instance of belligerent behaviour towards the Russians has ended up with heightened tensions and a concurrent decrease in US security. According to the supporters of the Bush Administration, the installation of missiles is not aggressive. It is meant only to increase US security. Indeed, the Administration would contend that they have offered to share the radar with the Russians. Clearly someone needs to brief the Bush cabal on the concept of a 'security dilemma.' (Somewhat comically, one can only be reminded of Reagan's assertion to Gorbachev that the US would share SDI technology, only to have an exasperated Gorbachev point out that the US would not even share milking machines.)

The recent Russian military resurgence is claimed to be a result of increased oil and gas revenues. But this is true only insofar as the Russians have someone to flex their rediscovered muscles towards and the US and West have provided that in the form of NATO expansion. If the expansion was intended to provoke a Russian response in order to justify the continued existence of NATO, then it has worked. However, past that, one has to wonder what the US hopes to get out of it. No less a Cold Warrior than George Kennan has stated that the eastward expansion of NATO is the biggest geo-strategic mistake since the end of the Cold War (he was speaking prior to 2003.)

Indeed, there are several parallels with prior pact expansions hurting US security. Eisenhower's "Pactomania" ended up constraining more than it freed US resources or improved security. Both CENTO and SEATO are examples of this. In fact the pact expansion of the 1950's and early 1960's primarily increased the Soviet feeling of encirclement. It was such actions that in part motivated Khrushchev to expand the Cold War to the Third World. It must be asked, therefore, how the expansion of NATO to former Eastern Bloc countries will increase US security? It is highly unlikely the world could expect a full military response to Russian aggression towards Romania or Bulgaria. NATO expansion has simply aggravated long standing Russian security concerns. It is not a complicated concept, which is what makes the US failure to pay heed to it all the more incredible.

This does not mean that the US should cosy up to the Russians or acquiesce to their demands. The US should most definitely protect what it sees as its interests on the Russian periphery. However, protection of interests and dialogue are

not mutually exclusive. US-Russian relations through the Cold War have shown that the *both* sides have come out ahead when dialogue has been at its highest.

Perhaps what is most amazing is that the Bush Administration has still yet to learn the diplomatic lessons of the Cold War (this is all the more dumbfounding since all of the key policymakers were active participants.) President Medvedev's recent speech was not nearly as hostile as it has been [made to seem](#). Gregori Zhdanov spoke of the "outstretched hand under the clenched fist" regarding the creation of the Cominform. This same idea permeated relations between the two powers through the Cold War, and it remains today. President-Elect Obama has demonstrated that he understands subtleties better than Bush. Hopefully he will see what Bush failed to: the outstretched hand.

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