

Superheroes Without a Superpower

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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It is very easy to predict the Kremlin's reactions. Amid the general euphoria over the rapprochement between Russian and U.S. leaders at the November NATO-Russia Council summit in Lisbon, I predicted in a previous column that any cooperation between Moscow and Brussels was doomed to be limited in scope. This was based on the fact that the Russian leadership has always expressed its irritation with the West — and tried to cover up its inferiority complex — by using the bluster of military threats against the West.

Only two weeks after the initial Lisbon euphoria, both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have returned to their old habit of provoking NATO and the United States. In his state-of-the-nation address last week, Medvedev threatened a “new arms race” if the West remained deaf to Russia's proposal for a “sectoral” missile defense system.

Apart from the fact that Medvedev's threat amounted to an ultimatum, NATO leaders are skeptical about his sectoral proposal for several reasons — not least of all because the Kremlin itself doesn't understand what it is proposing. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's envoy to NATO, tried to explain the proposal: “If there is a missile flying over our territory that is heading toward the United States, we will shoot it down. If there is a missile coming toward

Russia over the U.S. zone of responsibility, then the Americans will shoot it down. But in either case, Russia retains control over its own missile defense system, and NATO over its own.”

If you take Rogozin’s explanation at face value, NATO would have no need for its own missile defense system in Europe since every possible medium-range or long-range missile trajectory from Iran toward Europe or the United States would pass over Russian territory.

The problem with Rogozin’s overly confident assurance of protecting Europe is that Russia doesn’t have a unified system of missile defense that is capable of shielding all of the country’s territory. The only protection it has is a limited, outdated missile defense system that covers Moscow — one that was built 40 years ago and is based on a Cold War-era strategy of intercepting oncoming missiles in outer space using nuclear weapons. This system is clearly unable to respond to modern-day missile threats against Russia, much less Europe.

In addition, Russia has a S-400 missile defense system along with the yet-to-be-produced S-500 system. But the manufacturer of these weapons, Almaz-Antei, has been unable to start production. The total number of S-400 missiles has remained unchanged for several years and is limited to just two air defense battalions. Most likely, production of those interceptors will begin only after a new manufacturing facility is built, which is a long shot under the best of circumstances.

Moscow is also demanding that any U.S. or NATO radar installations cannot include Russian territory within its range. Thus, Russia is once again playing the spoiler role because a quick look at the map shows that any missile defense system placed in Eastern Europe to defend against an Iranian missile would automatically capture parts of Russia. This is very convenient for the Kremlin, which will always be able to claim that any NATO or U.S. missile defense system deployed in Europe is designed to weaken Russia.

Putin expanded on this theme during his recent interview on “Larry King Live.” When King asked whether Russia had repositioned tactical nuclear weapons on its western border in the spring, Putin said Moscow was forced to respond to the threat from the West.

The real reason for this latest round of saber rattling has little to do with U.S. missile defense, which Russia’s leaders know doesn’t threaten the country at all but can’t admit this publicly, and a lot to do with WikiLeaks — in particular, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates’ comment that “democracy in Russia has disappeared” and that governors pay bribes to Kremlin officials, according to one U.S. Embassy cable. Most important, no matter what Putin or Medvedev might say or do in the future, they know that they are perceived by the West as being little more than the comical Batman and Robin. Offended by these comments, Putin used the only political weapon in his arsenal: the empty threat of deploying new nuclear weapons and sparking an arms race.

The irony is that both sides know that Moscow does not have the resources to develop new nuclear weapons that could compete with the United States in terms of quantity. Even if Russia were foolish enough to try to compete with the United States militarily, the only thing it would ruin is its own economy, just like what happened to the Soviet Union.

When Medvedev and Putin don’t know how to respond to a crisis that reveals Russia’s

weaknesses — whether it be WikiLeaks cables, NATO expansion or incriminating evidence of the country's military backwardness — the only thing they know how to do is to issue empty threats about a new arms race, new nuclear weapons and “retaliatory measures.”

If there is another round of WikiLeaks cables, we might see reports in which U.S. diplomats explain the Kremlin's strategy of relying on meaningless military bravado and grandstanding for internal political reasons. If these cables surface, Putin and Medvedev will be terribly offended again, and we can expect yet another round of militaristic bluster and hot air aimed at the West.

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