

Obama's Flexibility Not Enough to Please Putin

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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It turns out that President Vladimir Putin was right after all not to trust U.S. President Barack Obama. After passing the Magnitsky Act, the U.S. has now hit Russia in its most vulnerable spot by abandoning a key phase of the planned missile defense system in Europe.

Initially, newly appointed U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel was vague about U.S. intentions, saying that he wanted to push back the deployment of the fourth phase of the European missile defense program to 2022. It seems that Hagel's explanation was only an attempt to buy time to delay being attacked by Republicans for whom missile defense, including the fourth phase, is sacred.

Yet Under Secretary of Defense James Miller quickly gave away Hagel's secret. Shortly after Hagel's statement, Miller said: "In the fourth phase, in the previous plan, we would have added some additional type of interceptors: the so-called SM-3 IIB would have been added to the mix in Poland. We no longer intend to add them to the mix." According to the Kremlin, those interceptors in Poland would have been capable of destroying Russia's intercontinental

ballistic missiles, although most Western military analysts and independent analysts in Russia asserted that this would have been impossible to accomplish from a technical point of view.

The Kremlin's fear was that fourth-phase U.S. interceptors stationed in Europe would allow the U.S. to take out Russian missiles in the boost phase of their trajectory. According to this argument, that is why Washington wanted to station its missile defense facilities as close as possible to Russia's nuclear missile installations. Putin's advisers conveniently overlooked two crucial facts: first, missile defense installations in Poland were located too far away to intercept Russian missiles during their boost phase, which only lasts several hundred kilometers; and second, the U.S. in 2009 already concluded that it makes no sense whatsoever to try to intercept missiles during their boost phase and rejected this option outright as part of its missile defense strategy.

It would seem that Obama kept promise that he made in early 2012 to then-President Dmitry Medvedev when he said that, if re-elected, he would be "more flexible" on missile defense. It is no surprise, however, that the Kremlin is not celebrating this diplomatic victory.

The Kremlin and Foreign Ministry will surely respond by saying that the U.S. rejection of the fourth phase is not enough and that the first three phases still disrupt the "strategic parity" between Russia and the U.S. The same thing happened four years ago when Obama rejected the missile defense architecture proposed by former U.S. President George W. Bush. Moscow insisted that the interceptors shouldn't be stationed in Poland and the radar in the Czech Republic if they were designed to intercept Iranian missiles. Obama responded by placing a radar facility in Turkey, yet the next day Russian officials began complaining that the new radar installation will allow Washington to surveil large swath of Russia's territory.

Now, Hagel has himself given fuel to the Russian critics by announcing that the money saved from canceling the fourth phase in Europe will enable the U.S. to deploy an additional 14 interceptor missiles in Alaska and California. That would give the U.S. a total of 44 interceptor missiles that can shoot down long-range missiles. Moscow responded by claiming that Washington's missile defense capabilities are only gaining in strength. But most military specialists maintain that five or as much as 10 interceptors are required to guarantee the destruction of a single nuclear warhead, meaning that the U.S. would be able to take out no more than from four to nine incoming warheads. That would be woefully inadequate to defend against a nuclear attack from a major power like Russia, which has an arsenal of more than 1,500 deployed warheads. At the same time, 44 U.S. interceptors would be more than enough to deal with the potential threat of several North Korean missiles. In addition to its fervent anti-U.S. rhetoric, Pyongyang is actively developing a missile program and has already conducted its third successful nuclear test. But it will take many years before North Korea can produce more than a few long-range missiles.

At the end of the day, the Kremlin desperately needs U.S. missile defense for propaganda purposes. The very existence of the U.S. missile defense program — even a scaled-down version — offers a perfect pretext for Putin to voice his frustration with the U.S. Just like NATO expansion, the European-based U.S. missile defense program is an ideal bogeyman for Moscow to claim that its national security is being undermined by U.S. warmongers in Congress and the White House. What's more, Putin sincerely believes that the U.S. wants

to topple him using the technology of a "color revolution." To contain what he sees as Washington's global geopolitical and military ambitions, Putin needs something he can use to artificially return to the Cold War-era concept of mutually assured destruction, however absurd that might appear today. This is precisely why the Kremlin will never give up the opportunity to quibble over missile defense, even while the U.S. eliminates phases and otherwise reduces the scope of its missile defense program.

Mark my words: In the coming days, weeks and possibly months, we will hear Kremlin-friendly analysts with stern facial expressions warn that Obama's refusal to implement the fourth phase of the European missile defense program is just a clever, cynical trick intended to mask its true intention: to secure and maintain a strategic advantage over Russia.

Alexander Golts is deputy editor of the online newspaper Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

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