

Policy Watch: America, Russia and Iran

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Vladimir Putin's offer to contribute the Soviet-era radar installation in Azerbaijan to a ballistic missile defense system aimed at rogue states was not only a surprise to the United States, but also to Iran.

Russian-U.S. relations had been growing extremely acrimonious over the Bush administration's plan to defend against a possible Iranian missile attack by deploying 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and a tracking station in the Czech Republic. The Kremlin argued that this could become the basis of a larger missile defense system in Eastern Europe aimed at Russia. The Bush administration, though, was not willing to back down from this plan for the sake of preventing the further deterioration of Russian-American relations. Putin's offer of the Russian radar installation in Azerbaijan as part of a joint Russian-American ballistic system, by contrast, is an attempt at just this -- as well as an effort to prevent the United States from creating such a system that Moscow finds objectionable in Poland and the Czech Republic.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has already stated that the United States will not accept Putin's offer if it means giving up the planned deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic. But was this wise? For Putin's offer represents a clear statement by Moscow that it too considers Iran to be a threat, and wants protection against an attack from it. Washington has long been annoyed at how close Russia's relations with Tehran have been. By making this offer, however, Putin is clearly signaling that he is now willing to downplay Russia's ties to Iran in exchange for improved relations with the United States.

This is certainly how many Iranians see Putin's offer. The Iranian Majlis (parliament) has already criticized Putin's offer. Several Iranian commentators see Moscow attempting to improve its relations with the West at Iran's expense. The Iranian Foreign Ministry has attempted to put a brave face on the matter by downplaying its importance. Even then, its spokesman noted that "we will follow up the case in our next talks with Moscow."

Should the United States at least consider Putin's offer? Many have put forth reasons for not doing so. Some have argued that the Russian radar in Azerbaijan is too old to be useful, that it is located too close to Iran to provide the full coverage of the country that one further away in the Czech Republic would allow, and that the United States neither can nor should rely on Russia when it comes to safeguarding both Europe and America.

There are, however, strong counter-arguments to each of these. While the Russian radar in Azerbaijan may be old and too close to Iran to be useful, even more modern American ballistic missile defense systems -- as numerous tests have shown -- are extremely unreliable. This being the case, there can be little assurance that the proposed system that the Bush administration wants to install in Poland and the Czech Republic would work anyway.

In addition, public opinion in Poland and the Czech Republic is opposed to Bush's plan. Attempting to implement it, then, would not necessarily solidify the U.S. alliance with these countries and Europe generally, but damage it.

Finally, it is not clear that Iran actually has the capacity to launch a missile attack on the West or that Tehran would do so if it did. As wild as many of Iranian President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad's statements have been, it is highly likely he understands that such an attack would lead to a swift, devastating retaliation.

This puts in perspective the question of relying on Russia to protect U.S. and European security. Both because ballistic missile defense systems are not particularly reliable and because Iran is not likely to launch an attack for fear of overwhelming retaliation anyway, Russian reliability is not so crucial. On the other hand, the deterioration in Russian-Iranian relations likely to result from Russian-U.S. cooperation on a ballistic missile defense system that is essentially directed against Iran would make such cooperation worthwhile.

For while the Russian-American ballistic missile system may not be all that reliable, Tehran will be less concerned about this than the fact that Russia and America are cooperating against it. For this reason alone, the United States should not say "no" to Putin's offer.

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