

Policy Watch: Putin's BMD game

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MARK N. KATZ

In order to prevent the United States from establishing a ballistic missile defense system aimed at Iran in Poland and the Czech Republic -- which Moscow sees as actually directed against Russia -- Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed at the recent Group of Eight summit that the United States and Russia set up such a system together in Azerbaijan.

How will this gambit play out?

To try to find out, I ran a role playing game on June 13 that began with this scenario in the Russian politics course I'm teaching this summer at George Mason University. The class was divided into several teams: the United States, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Poland, the Czech Republic, Britain, France and Germany. More countries should have been represented, but there were only enough students participating so that each country had at least a two-person team.

The game began with the student playing Putin announcing the offer that Putin himself actually made. Two things occurred right away: 1) Poland and the Czech Republic immediately informed the United States that they opposed Putin's offer and that they wanted the U.S. ballistic missile defense system to be deployed in their countries; and 2) Iran informed Russia that it regarded Putin's offer as extremely unfriendly and tried to get Russia to rescind it. Russia, though, would not do so.

Intensive negotiations then began among several countries: between Russia and the Europeans, between Iran and the Europeans, between the United States and everybody, and among the Europeans themselves. Everyone seemed to want to consult with everyone else -- except with Azerbaijan, whose opinions were largely ignored.

After much consultation, the U.S. team finally announced that it would reject Putin's offer and go ahead with deploying the ballistic missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic (a day in advance of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates actually doing so). All the European governments represented supported this.

The Russian team then had to decide what to do. It really had only three options: persuade America to drop this plan, threaten the Europeans into rejecting it, or back down. The Russian team -- vigorously played by three young women -- did not want to back down. But they also recognized both that they could not persuade the United States to drop its plan, and that threatening the Europeans would probably only result in their clinging all the more strongly to the United States. The game ended at this point without any real resolution.

And this, it seems to me, is what may well actually occur. As Gates' statements demonstrate, Washington is not going to drop the plan it worked out with Poland and the Czech Republic just to please Russia. While improving Russo-U.S. relations is desirable, Washington is not likely to pursue this at the cost of upsetting any of its new NATO allies in Eastern Europe -- which want the U.S. ballistic missile defense system not because they fear an attack from Iran, but because a greater American presence makes them feel more secure vis-a-vis Russia.

There is, in fact, little that Moscow can do to reverse the U.S. decision. Cutting off oil and gas

supplies is likely to increase European fears about Russia. (When the Russian team threatened this, the Iranian team seized upon the opportunity to increase Tehran's oil and gas sales to Europe.) Doing so will also hurt Russia because it won't get paid for what it doesn't sell.

Once again aiming Russian missiles at Europe, as Putin threatened, will only result in U.S. missiles being re-aimed at Russia. Indeed, this may have already occurred. Those who believe Putin is not crazy enough to fire Russian missiles aren't particularly concerned about where he aims them. Those who think he might be see this as a good reason to start deploying a U.S. ballistic missile defense system in Eastern Europe.

Especially frustrating for Russia is that while there are important differences between the United States and Europe, these differences are never great enough to allow Russia to ally with any European states against the United States. No matter how annoyed they may be with Washington, Europeans consider Moscow not as a friend but as a problem that is too big for them to deal with on their own.

If Russia, then, cannot get the United States to drop its ballistic missile defense plan, either through threat or through persuasion, its best course of action would be to quietly drop the matter. Complaining about something that is going to happen anyway merely advertises the fact that Moscow is powerless to stop it. Moscow, though, is not likely to accept such logic. Instead, it will continue attempting to stop the deployment of the U.S. ballistic missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic both before and long after it has occurred.

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(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)

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