



I Know Why The Caged Bear Screams

By Mark Stout

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About sixty days have passed since the administration decided to cancel the European ground-based missile defense program. The cancelled program had been planned as ten ground-based missile interceptors to be based in Poland. The interceptors would work cooperatively with other missile-warning sensors and a prominent missile defense radar system sited in the Czech Republic. The arrangement had been established by the George W. Bush administration and was designed to mitigate the risk of a rogue missile launch (read Iran) against U.S. and European targets.

The cancellation was rolled-out as a change in strategy based on revised intelligence assessments. Under the new strategy, the missile defense effort would instead focus on better meeting near-term threats from Iran, which included a greater emphasis on addressing Iranian short and intermediate range missile systems versus the longer-range missile defense associated with the Bush administration's approach. Additionally, many viewed the cancellation as throwing a major "reset" bone towards Russia, who had vigorously complained about the program for a number of years.

If so, it seemed the change of course reflected in the new missile defense strategy *might* benefit U.S. relations with Russia in general, as well as influencing their cooperation on Iran's renegade nuclear program in particular. In deciding to move away from the previous plan, the Obama administration may have removed the sharp stick of missile defense from the Bear's eye, but why were the Russians snarling so much in the first place? The proposed Bush Administration plan could never have stopped a full-scale Russian nuclear attack.

Three themes come to mind. The first is that Russia might be fearful of being 'fenced in,' NATO commitments notwithstanding. Having strategic U.S. equipment and presence in both Poland and the Czech Republic would provide a clear and bright "red line" sign to the Russians in a part of the world where they feel they hold historical squatter's rights. Also consider that as Russia looks to their east, they may well anticipate future tensions with China. A Chinese push for resources and "breathing room" may someday lead to conflict, so perhaps a bit of posturing regarding territorial encroachment was in play.

This theme may require a paradigm shift from our traditional *strategic* Russian focus towards more *regional* Russian concerns. For example, as the Cold War's two most significant players, U.S. and USSR nuclear systems were major elements of the era's calculus. Today however, it's easy to project the lessons of a generation ago into the present, even if they aren't true. The Air Force Research Institute's Adam Lowther goes full-monty on this topic when he suggests "The United States must come to grips with the fact that it is no longer the center of Russian security concerns." In effect, Lowther says, they're just not that into us.

Lowther's proposal warrants we examine the evidence and the findings should affect our view of Russia, including topical events that relate to their cumulative national power. Included on such a list would be the issue of tactical nuclear weapons (which Russia will be disinclined to give up in the on-going START talks as they have significant regional deterrence effects), the aforementioned missile defense, territorial worries, and anything else Russia might be inclined to pursue to increase its regional power and standing. Included in this last category would be Russian efforts to become the arbiter of Iran's future.

A second theme is centered on a national Russian cognitive dissonance of sorts. This can be seen in the vain-glorious desire to turn back the hands of time, typified by a statement made in 2005 by then-President Vladimir Putin. At that time, Putin nostalgically described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," a perhaps indicative, if gruesomely inaccurate manifestation of Russian thinking. The lost love for empire, when combined with today's trend line towards Russian third-world status (driven by the graying/brain-drain affect of demographics and a massive dependence on selling its natural resources) have to be internally disconcerting to many Russian's, including its leaders.

A third theme is driven by elements of the second, that is, demographics and economics. As nuclear weapons and delivery systems are difficult and expensive to develop, manufacture, and sustain, Russia will move towards fewer strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems (and they will want the same of the U.S.). This, when combined with an ever-maturing U.S. missile defense capability of close proximity, could diminish the asymmetry of a smaller Russian strategic nuclear capability, greatly impacting the efficacy of Russian long-range missiles. Over a period of years this could have a large deleterious effect on Russian power.

Russia has a complex set of security challenges it will struggle to manage, but they can certainly be expected to deal with these issues in ways which are most beneficial to their own needs and desires. As Russia has come to realize it currently has little to fear from the U.S. security-wise, these three themes all have explanatory power regarding the Bear's snarling. While Russia may not yet be fully backed into the metaphorical cage, it seems they understand they are well on their way.

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