



COMMENTARY

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The Specter of the Cold War Continues to Haunt Europe

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When I was in Santa Barbara last month for a conference on the Cold War, I was told that there is a memorial plaque in the mountains not far from the Reagan ranch that celebrates the role of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in bringing about the conclusion of the Cold War. The supposed role of SDI and the military buildup in the 1980s is part of the mythology for those who attribute the lion's share of the glory for ending the Cold War to President Ronald Reagan. Of course, Reagan played an important role in helping resolve the Cold War, but principally because he recognized early on that Mikhail Gorbachev was prepared to take Soviet domestic and foreign policies in very different directions from his predecessors, not because he encouraged spending billions of dollars to pursue a shield to make the United States invulnerable to a Soviet nuclear strike.

The current histrionics over the potential deployment of missile interceptor systems in Poland and the Czech Republic are reminiscent of the Soviet response to Reagan's cherished SDI in 1983. After the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, reaching nuclear parity and thus virtual coequal status with the United States in the late 1960s stood as one of the most heroic achievements of Soviet security policy in the twentieth century and cemented the USSR as a superpower. SDI threatened to destroy that status by deploying space-age technologies. Despite the technological infeasibility of SDI nearly a quarter of a century ago, the threat of its deployment struck a raw nerve of vulnerability in Soviet security circles. Recall that at Reykjavik in 1986 Gorbachev was ready to join the United States in eliminating Soviet nuclear arsenals if Reagan would give up his dream of missile defense. But Reagan was not prepared to give that up, and much to the relief of the U.S. military establishment, Reagan and Gorbachev, two romantic dreamers, did not disarm themselves, and the Cold War dragged on for a few more years.

U.S. plans to deploy missile radars and interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic combine two longstanding Russian security bogeymen: ballistic missile defense and NATO expansion. President Vladimir Putin's chilly condemnation in Munich of U.S. missile defense plans in Europe rekindled talk of a "new Cold War." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov added fuel to the fire when he told the Duma, in televised remarks, that "this is an old approach.... This is how they [United States] acted in past times, during the Cold War, when they scared everyone with the Soviet threat and persuaded everybody to group together in a disciplined block." Others in Moscow, including Chief of the General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky, have warned that Russia may respond by withdrawing from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and targeting the proposed interceptor sites. In late February, Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski unhelpfully argued that the deployment of the missile interceptors in Poland would help ensure that Poland did not fall under Russia's influence for the next several decades. (Doesn't NATO membership ensure that?)

In comparison with the U.S.-Soviet debate in the 1980s over missile defense, current fulminations seem almost surreal. At least SDI, as improbable as it was, was mainly designed to neutralize the Soviet nuclear threat. Deployments of radars and interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic, if they in fact are deployed, as debate continues over the advisability of such a step in both countries, present no threat to Russian nuclear forces, and even leading Russian military figures have acknowledged this. It should be obvious to all that the location of these deployments indicates that they are designed to counter missile threats from the Middle East (read Iran) to the East Coast of the United States.

Given that Russian military and political leaders will most likely not feel compelled to defend Tehran's right to threaten the United States with missile strikes, it is difficult to fathom the reasons for the current Russian angst. If missile defense deployments are utilized to justify withdrawing from the 1987 INF Treaty, the first U.S.-Soviet bilateral agreement between Reagan and Gorbachev to eliminate an entire class of weapons, then the Bush and Putin administrations should discuss this directly. There are some voices in U.S. military circles that would also like to see the demise of the INF Treaty in order to give U.S. military forces another tool for combating terrorist groups. It has been reported that the NATO-Russia Council will discuss these issues when it convenes in April. President Bush's recent personal phone call to Vladimir Putin to discuss the missile defense deployments was a step in the right direction. Dialogue is the wise course of action; we need to talk to each other rather than yell at each other.

Even a generation after its conclusion, the Cold War specter continues to haunt Europe, with every contretemps involving Russia and the West – be it over energy supplies, NATO expansion, regional elections, Kosovo, etc. – evoking a hurricane of comments about “a new Cold War.” If I had a dollar for every time in the last 15 years or so that I have been asked about the imminence of a “new Cold War,” I would have retired long ago! The Cold War was a very specific and unique period in modern history in which the Soviet Union and the West were structurally locked in a vise-like conflict that defined the international system as one of bipolarity. Not only is the structure of international power very different today, but it seems inconceivable that the Russian leadership would again choose to oppose the Americans and Europeans as Moscow did for several generations. Perhaps it will take the departure from the scene of my fellow baby boomers, who were raised in the psychologically dysfunctional Cold War environment, before we stop reaching for the intellectually lazy conclusion that a new Cold War is upon us. In the meantime, call the Ghostbusters, or better yet, take a drive in the gorgeous Santa Barbara mountains to celebrate the fact that not only do we not live in a Cold War era, but also, one is not likely to occur anytime soon.

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