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# Open Letter on NATO Missile Defense Plans and Increased Risk of Nuclear War

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December 13, 2011

To President Barack Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev:

Recent U.S. decisions to deploy an integrated missile defense system in Western, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, coupled with the continued expansion of NATO and its military activities, have created increasingly sharp divisions and distrust between the Russian Federation and the United States.[i] This process now threatens to destroy the New START agreement and reverse previous progress toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. Further deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations could result in a return to the perilous nuclear postures of the Cold War.

Although the "Phased Adaptive Approach" missile defense system is being installed under the auspices of NATO, it is perceived by Russia to be "a U.S. system on European soil." [ii] This system is regarded with apprehension by Russia, particularly since later phases include plans to deploy very advanced-stage Standard Missile-3 land-based interceptors, which have the potential to effectively target Russian strategic nuclear missiles. Russia consequently regards the proposed and ongoing deployments as no more than "an interim step toward building a full-scale missile defense system to provide guaranteed protection of U.S. territory against any missile attack." [iii]

The official U.S. political rationale for these deployments is that they are necessary to defend against yet-to-be-developed Iranian long-range ballistic missiles. Yet American scientists have stated that forward-based European radar systems give the U.S. the ability to track Russian ICBMs very early after a launch and to guide interceptors against them.[iv] Russian leaders have expressed specific concerns that the U.S./NATO missile defense system could be used for such a purpose and continue to question at whom the system is directed.

Fundamental mutual distrust stems from the fact that both the U.S. and Russia still maintain strategic war plans that include large nuclear strike options, with hundreds of preplanned targets that clearly include cities in each other's nation.[v] Both nations keep a total of at least 1,700 strategic nuclear weapons mounted on launch-ready ballistic missiles, which can carry out these strike options with only a few minutes' warning.

Thus, many in Russia believe the final stages of deployment of the U.S./NATO missile defense system are designed to have the capability of greatly reducing or eliminating Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent. Continued technological advances in hypersonic missiles,[vi] which would greatly enhance interceptor missile capabilities, combined with the possibility that nuclear warheads could be installed in missile interceptors, will only serve to exacerbate Russian fears about U.S./NATO European missile defense.[vii]

Mutual suspicion has prevented true cooperation in joint missile defense, just as it has with the still defunct U.S.-Russian Joint Data Exchange Center, which was supposed to share information about U.S. and Russian missile launches.[viii] The failure to include Russia in a joint missile defense also reflects the fact that NATO has not made Russia a full partner in the alliance, despite the end of the Cold War.

It is only natural that Russia should consider NATO a potential threat, particularly since NATO has greatly expanded eastward, has actively recruited and included former members of the Warsaw Pact and has engaged in extensive military campaigns in Europe, Africa and South Asia. The combination of NATO expansion with the deployment of a massive missile defense system that surrounds Russia has triggered a strong political reaction in Russia. From a Russian perspective, a U.S./NATO missile defense system in Europe undermines their perceived nuclear deterrent, decreases U.S. vulnerability and increases Russian vulnerability to a U.S. nuclear first-strike attack.

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In November, President Medvedev made his most forceful political statement against the U.S. and NATO to date.[ix] Included in the speech was a specific warning that Russia would withdraw from the New START agreement should the U.S./NATO missile defense system continue to move forward. This is not new information-the Russian Federation issued an unambiguous statement in April 2010 when New START was signed, making clear that both quantitative and qualitative limitations on the U.S. missile defense program were so essential that Russia would be prepared to withdraw from the treaty if these limitations were not honored.[x]

A Russian withdrawal from New START would likely precipitate a fully-renewed nuclear arms race and thus completely reverse movement toward a world without nuclear weapons. Many of the signatories of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) would also regard the collapse of the New START process as an explicit violation of the NPT; this could lead to the collapse of the NPT and extensive nuclear proliferation.

In his November speech, President Medvedev also issued a number of explicit instructions to his military forces that essentially amounted to military threats against the U.S. and NATO. He stated, "I have instructed the Armed Forces to draw up measures for disabling missile defense system data and guidance systems, if need be .... [I]f the above measures prove insufficient, the Russian Federation System will employ modern, offensive weapon systems in the west and south of the country, ensuring our ability to take out any part of the missile defense system in Europe." [xi]

Although many political analysts in the West have discounted this warning as merely a way to put pressure on the U.S. and NATO to change course, this statement by President Medvedev must be taken seriously. Russia will certainly carry out the directives of its President.

The leaders of the U.S., NATO and Russia must seriously consider the possibility that the current course of political events is pushing them towards an eventual military confrontation and conflict. Further expansion of NATO, its "nuclear umbrella" and missile defense system to the very borders of Russia increase the odds that any conventional military confrontation would quickly escalate into nuclear war.

If Russia decided "to take out any part of the missile defense system in Europe," as threatened by President Medvedev, would not such an action be likely to lead to nuclear conflict between the U.S. and Russia? According to recent peer-reviewed studies, the detonation of the launch-ready U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals could leave the Earth virtually uninhabitable for more than a decade.[xii] Such a war would lead to global famine and starvation of most of the human race.[xiii]

We suggest the following steps, both as a way out of the immediate crisis and to advance the goal of a nuclear-weapons-free-world. These are not the only steps that could be helpful, but we are hopeful that leaders on both sides might be willing to act upon them:

1. There should be a freeze on U.S./NATO deployment of missile defenses in Europe pending an open, joint U.S.-Russian quantitative assessment of the threats that missile defense is supposed to counter, and of the threats posed by U.S. and Russian tactical and strategic nuclear forces.[xiv] The threats posed by missile defense and its effectiveness should be studied and integrated into the previously-mentioned assessment. It is essential that this analysis include a thorough scientific evaluation of the long-term effects of nuclear conflict upon the global environment, climate and human agriculture.[xv]
2. It is essential, not only for the creation of a peaceful and secure Europe but for the continuation of civilization and the human species itself, that launch-ready nuclear arsenals be immediately stood-down, that nuclear war be avoided, and that nuclear arsenals be eliminated. This is a priority that must trump all other priorities, including what are seen as the most pressing security priorities of major world powers.

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We reiterate strongly that differences of opinion over missile defense must not be allowed to de-rail progress to zero nuclear weapons, or worse, to put that progress into reverse and instead reinstate Cold War security postures, as would be precipitated by the collapse of New START.

In pursuing a solution, it is vital that both sides feel their concerns are being respected and that their security interests have been properly taken into account. An outcome that advantages one side only, or that is perceived as doing so, is no solution at all.

The elimination of nuclear weapons must take place not in some far-off utopian future, but at an early date, as demanded by the vast majority of the world's governments in resolution after resolution at the United Nations. It is quite clear that the ordinary citizens of every nation no longer wish to live under the shadow of imminent nuclear destruction and see no reason why massive nuclear arsenals should continue to exist when they clearly represent a self-destruct mechanism for the human race.

**Signed:**

### Organizations

- [-] Action des Citoyens pour le Désarmement Nucléaire (France)
- [-] Australian Anti-Bases Campaign Coalition (Australia)
- [-] Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (UK)
- [-] Daisy Alliance (USA)
- [-] Footprints for Peace (Australia)
- [-] Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space (USA)
- [-] International Association of Peace Messenger Cities
- [-] International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility
- [-] International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War
- [-] International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War - Kenya (Kenya)
- [-] Just Peace Queensland (Australia)
- [-] Los Alamos Study Group (USA)
- [-] Medact (UK)
- [-] Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia)
- [-] Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (USA)
- [-] Pax Christi Metro New York (USA)
- [-] Pax Christi Montreal (Canada)
- [-] People for Nuclear Disarmament NSW (Australia)
- [-] People for Nuclear Disarmament WA (Australia)
- [-] Physicians for Global Survival (Canada)
- [-] Physicians for Social Responsibility (USA)
- [-] Project Ploughshares (Canada)
- [-] Réseau Sortir du Nucléaire (France)
- [-] Scientists for Global Responsibility (UK)
- [-] Swedish Peace Council (Sweden)
- [-] Tri-Valley CAREs (USA)
- [-] US Peace Council (USA)
- [-] Veterans Against Nuclear Arms (Canada)
- [-] West Midlands Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (UK)
- [-] Women's International League for Peace and Freedom - U.S. Section (USA)
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- [-] Roberto Della Seta (Member, Senate of the Republic, Italy)
- [-] Dale Dewar (Executive Director, Physicians for Global Survival, Canada)
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- [-] Dennis Doherty (Australian Anti-Bases Campaign Coalition, Australia)
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- [-] Bob Gould (President, Physicians for Social Responsibility - San Francisco, USA)
- [-] Commander Robert Green (Royal Navy, ret., New Zealand)
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- [-] Natalia Mironova (President, Movement for Nuclear Safety, Russia)
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[ - ] Col. Valery Yarynich (Soviet Missile Forces - ret., Russia)  
[ - ] Uta Zapf (Member of the Bundestag, Germany)

PS:

### Endnotes:

[i] To date, Spain, Romania, the Netherlands, Poland and the Czech Republic have agreed to participate in this deployment. Patriot missiles have been deployed in Poland on the border of the Russian enclave in Kaliningrad and X-band radar is also likely to be deployed in Turkey. Medium- and intermediate-range interceptor missiles are scheduled to be deployed on U.S. warships in the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas.

[ii] Tom Collina, "NATO Set to Back Expanded Missile Defense," Arms Control Today, retrieved from

[http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010\\_11/NATOMissileDefense](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_11/NATOMissileDefense).

[iii] Ruslan Pukhov, "Medvedev's Missile Threats are only his Plan B," The Moscow Times, December 1, 2011, retrieved from

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/medvedevs-missile-threats-are-his-plan-b/448992.html>.

[iv] Yousaf Butt and Theodore Postol, "Upsetting the Reset: The Technical Basis of Russian Concern over NATO Missile Defense" (2011), FAS Special Report No. 1, Federation of American Scientists, September 2011, retrieved from

<http://www.fas.org/pubs/docs/2011%20Missile%20Defense%20Report.pdf>.

[v] U.S. strategic targets include Russian military forces, war supporting and WMD infrastructure, and both military and national leadership. Hans Kristensen, "Obama and the Nuclear War Plan," Federation of the American Scientists Brief, February 2010, retrieved from

<http://www.fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/publications1/WarPlanIssueBrief2010.pdf>.

[vi] The U.S. has successfully tested non-ballistic missiles which have traveled at speeds up to mach-20 (16,700 mph or 27,000 km per hour). See

<http://www.examiner.com/military-technology-in-washington-dc/the-usaf-x51-a-and-the-u-s-army-ahw-both-test-november-2011>.

[vii] "Hypersonic missile: who is the target?" Voice of Russia, November 28, 2011, retrieved from <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/11/28/61168605.html>.

[viii] JDEC was agreed on and ratified by both the U.S. and Russia, with the purpose of preventing accidental nuclear war between them as a result of a false warning of attack. See <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/idec/text/000604-warn-wh3.htm>. However, neither side appeared willing to

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share the "raw" or unfiltered data from their early warning systems because of concerns it would reveal too much to the other side about its warning system capabilities. Thus, the facility was never opened; an empty building in Moscow where the center was supposed to be stands as a testament to the continued failure to cooperate.

[ix] Text of Medvedev's November 23, 2011 speech translated from the Russian version, retrieved from <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/3115>:

First, I am instructing the Defence Ministry to immediately put the missile attack early warning station in Kaliningrad on combat alert.

Second, protective cover of Russia's strategic nuclear weapons will be reinforced as a priority measure under the programme to develop our air and space defences.

Third, the new strategic missiles commissioned by the Strategic Missile Forces and the Navy will be equipped with advance missile penetration systems and new highly-effective warheads.

Fourth, I have instructed the Armed Forces to draw up measures for disabling missile defence system data and guidance systems, if need be. These measures will be adequate, effective, and low-cost.

Fifth, if the above measures prove insufficient, the Russian Federation System will employ modern, offensive weapon systems in the west and south of the country, ensuring our ability to take out any part of the missile defence system in Europe.

One step in this process will be to deploy Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad region.

Other measures to counter the European missile defence system will be drawn up and implemented as necessary.

Furthermore, if the situation continues to develop not to Russia's favor, we reserve the right to discontinue further disarmament and arms control measures.

Besides, given the intrinsic link between strategic offensive and defensive arms, conditions for the withdrawal from the New START Treaty could also arise, and this option is enshrined in the treaty.

But let me stress this point, we are not closing the door on continued dialogue with the USA and NATO on missile defence, and on practical cooperation in this area. We are ready for that. However, this can only be achieved by establishing a clear, legal basis for cooperation that would guarantee our legitimate interests and concerns are taken into account. We are open to dialogue and hope for a reasonable and constructive approach from our Western partners.

[x] Missile defense is explicitly discussed in the preamble and in Article 5 of New START. The preamble recognizes the "relationship between strategic offensive arms and strategic defensive arms" and stipulates that "current strategic defensive arms do not undermine the viability and effectiveness of strategic offensive arms of the Parties." Thus, the ongoing deployment of U.S./NATO missile defense systems is, in the eyes of Russia, at least a violation of the spirit of New START.

[xi] Ibid.

[xii] Steven Starr, "Catastrophic Climatic Consequences of Nuclear Conflict," The International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, December 2009, retrieved from [http://www.icnnd.org/Documents/Starr\\_Nuclear\\_Winter\\_Oct\\_09.pdf](http://www.icnnd.org/Documents/Starr_Nuclear_Winter_Oct_09.pdf).

[xiii] Steven Starr, "U.S. and Russian Launch-Ready Nuclear Weapons: A Threat to All Peoples and Nations," Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, October 2011, retrieved from [http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/pdfs/2011\\_06\\_24\\_starr.pdf](http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/pdfs/2011_06_24_starr.pdf).

[xiv] Specific proposals for such assessments have already been published by Foreign Affairs and the Federation of American Scientists. See B. Blair, V. Esin, M. McKinzie, V. Yarynich and P. Zolotarev, "Smaller and Safer: A New Plan for Nuclear Postures," Foreign Affairs, Sept/Oct 2010, Vol. 89, No. 5, p. 10, retrieved from [http://carnegieendowment.org/static/npp/pdf/Smaller\\_and\\_Safer.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/static/npp/pdf/Smaller_and_Safer.pdf) and Hans Kristensen, R. Norris, and I. Oelrich, "From Counterforce to Minimal Deterrence: A New Nuclear Policy on the Path Toward Eliminating Nuclear Weapons," Federation of American Scientists & The Natural Resources Defense Council, Occasional Paper, April 2009, p. 15, retrieved from <http://www.fas.org/pubs/docs/OccasionalPaper7.pdf>.

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[xv] O. B. Toon and A. Robock, "Local nuclear war, global suffering." *Scientific American*, 302, 74-81 (2010), retrieved from <http://climate.envsci.rutgers.edu/pdf/RobockToonSciAmJan2010.pdf>.