



The Iskander Missile Threat to European Security

Tuesday, March 21, 2017

3:30 P.M.–5:30 P.M.

Cannon House Office Building

Room 121

27 Independence Avenue S.E.

Washington, D.C. 20003

Write Up of Event

On March 21, The Jamestown Foundation held a panel discussion on "The Iskander Missile Threat to European Security," which took place at the Cannon House Office Building, on Capitol Hill. The event brought together four U.S. and European experts on the Russian military, including Stephen Blank, a Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council; Pavel Baev, a Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO); Jörgen Elfving, from the Swedish National Defense University; and Pawel Durys, the Chief Expert in the International Security Policy Department in Poland's Ministry of National Defense. The speakers each delivered prepared remarks and then took questions from the audience, which was made up of policymakers from the U.S. government, Hill staffers, members of the think tank and academic communities, as well as foreign embassies in Washington, DC.

“The Operational Threat of the Iskanders to European Security”

Jörgen Elfving

Swedish National Defense University

Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Elfving noted that, since its introduction in 2006, the Iskander missile system (NATO Designation: SS-26 Stone) presents a unique, long-distance threat to Europe. When placed in Kaliningrad, the Iskander missile system can hit as far west as Berlin and Copenhagen, as far south as the Polish-Czech border, and as far north as the Latvian-Estonian border. Then–Russian President Dmitry Medvedev first mentioned the idea of placing Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad Oblast in 2008; since then, many Western scholars have focused on the missile system’s transfer to this exclave. However, few have focused on their periodic transfer out of the province. Historically, Iskander missiles fielded in Kaliningrad were sourced from the 26th Missile Brigade in Luga, Leningrad Oblast. The indigenous 152nd Missile Brigade in Kaliningrad will be reequipped with Iskanders later in 2017. When discussing the Iskander threat, the speaker noted it is important to remember that they are not a singular entity: the Iskander System is a complex system and a growing threat.

The Iskander system is composed of a command and staff vehicle, life support vehicle, transporter loader vehicle (TLV), mobile data processing center, maintenance vehicle and Transporter Erector Launcher (TEL). Two types of missiles utilize this system: The 9M723, a ballistic missile, and the R-500/9M728, a cruise missile.

The ballistic missile has a range of 400–480 kilometers, a circular error probability (CEP, a measure of precision) of 10-30-70 m. (5–7 m with terminal phase optoelectronic homing system), and multiple known warheads: a 480–700 kg (1060–1540 lb) HE fragmentation, submunition, penetration, fuel-air explosive, and EMP warheads. The 9M723 is best used against large, dispersed target areas.

The cruise missile has a range of 500 km and a CEP of a few meters. Some Russian sources suggest that the range is as high as 900–2000km. It is not known what types of warheads can be used with the cruise missile. The R-500/9M728 is best used against hard targets.

Two complete systems can be delivered each year, meaning that two missile brigades can be reequipped annually. Some uncertainty exists as to how many brigades need to be reequipped. Some sources believe that only one brigade needs to be equipped, citing the number of pre-existing missile brigades in Russia. However, given that the new army under the Southern Military

District command likely will need two missile brigades, the total will be brought to three. In either situation, the Iskander system will completely replace legacy systems by 2020.

The Russian Ministry of Defense recently declared that infrastructure for the missiles (storage, etc.) be built and put in place before the missiles are delivered in most cases. However, several brigades have had to store their missiles out in the open. Training and transfer of the missiles occurs at Kapustin Yar, a Russian missile development site in Astrakhan Oblast.

Technical information regarding the Iskander system and its component parts, alongside consideration of supporting elements behind the “frontline” of Kaliningrad, is a crucial consideration when discussing the operational threat posed by the Iskander system in today’s contentious environment. The Iskander is a “mixed threat” that can be adapted for different purposes.

At a basic level, the Iskander system is a psychological weapon that is capable of sending strong signals to civilian “hearts and minds” about Russian capabilities. Implicit in the deployment of Iskander missiles is the public threat of Russia’s ability to destroy even the most valuable and well-defended targets in the West. This makes the deployment of the system an excellent bargaining chip for Russia.

The deployment of the Iskander missile system is a legitimate threat to Western militaries even if it is not actually used. Beyond reinforced targets already deployed to the Baltics, the Iskander system—alongside other long range Russian systems—potentially threatens the ability of NATO to reinforce the Baltics. The deployment of Iskander missile systems to Kaliningrad is an expensive form of military redundancy for Russia. The Russian leadership views the Iskander system and other nuclear-capable systems as tools to “escalate to deescalate” in the region, creating a tense situation that could prompt Western concessions while costing Russia little in terms of compromises.

The Iskander System is a legitimate nuclear and conventional threat to Western militaries and Western civilians. However, the power of the Iskander system to force concessions from the West and ensure military victory in any crisis is not unlimited. The Iskander system is constrained by two basic realities. First, there are only a finite number of missiles that can be produced and used; Russian Missile Brigades are limited by practical storage constraints. Second, Kaliningrad is as vulnerable (if not more so) as the Baltic NATO members. While Russia might gain the ability to contest the regional air and sea space, it will not be able to easily conquer it; it might be impossible

for Russia to resupply Kaliningrad in times of crisis. While the Iskander missile threat is a complex, “mixed” threat, the Iskander missile system is not an insurmountable threat to the West.

“Putin’s Missile Card: What it Means for European Security”

Dr. Pavel Baev

Research Professor, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Dr. Baev noted that since its introduction, the Iskander missile system has prompted general confusion. To this day, there is much debate as to what is the most pressing aspect of the system. Some believe that the debate should be centered around the difference in ballistic and cruise missile ranges. Others argue for the importance of the geographical context of the Iskander; there is uncertainty whether Iskanders are an issue for Northeast Europe, Ukraine, or the Middle East. Some focus on whether the Iskander deployment is a military balance or arms control issue. Some even dwell over technical concerns, debating the ranges of both the ballistic and cruise missile variants. Each of the above points is equally important, only adding to the general confusion over the Iskander missile system.

Putin and the Russian leadership are fond of the Iskander missile system precisely because of the ambiguity presented by it. The Russian Federation has historically thrived in confusing international environments; uncertainty slows the response of the deliberative West. Moreover, in the lack of a response, Putin wins a psychological battle as the West is seen as indecisive.

Navigating Ambiguity

Dr. Baev believes that several hypotheses can be used to navigate this uncertainty. While all flawed in their own right, each offers some perspective for how to address the Iskander situation.

The Iskander Missile System should be discussed within the context of the INF Treaty.

In principle, the deployment of any type of missile system is the same. Dr. Baev noted that Russian strategic aviation is unreliable and lacks the drone capacity of the West; therefore, Russia has to rely on the Iskander and similar missile systems.

Russia will not comply, but will not completely withdraw from the INF Treaty because it likes to churn the ambiguity.

The United States needs to react, he argued. But overreacting by withdrawing from the INF Treaty first would cause collateral damage, harming the United States' international reputation. This would end up serving Moscow's strategic interests instead of Washington's or the West's.

NATO and The United States will not be able to force Russia into compliance.

Dr. Baev noted that "all push and pull relations are bilateral"; because of the ambiguity of the current situation, it will be very difficult to negotiate an agreement.

The EU is concerned, but not informed. The US needs to share more valuable information with Poland and other allies.

Dr. Baev stated that The United States needs to mobilize NATO's full strength to overcome the inherent ambiguities of Russia's INF violations and to internationalize the problem. Information sharing between NATO partners will help coordinate responses.

There is no need for NATO to respond in kind.

Dr. Baev recognized pointedly that Russia escalated the situation by deploying Iskanders and thus bears the responsibility for the current environment. However, it is important to avoid a return to the hyper-tense environment of the 1980s. There is no need to reproduce old crises—recreating the late-Cold War crisis in the Alliance over Pershing IIs would be counterproductive today. Dr. Baev pointed out that there are other weapons and ways to address the threat posed. In the current environment, asymmetrical responses that do not violate the old international order are the best responses. For example, investments in air and missile defense systems could be very wise.

It is possible to separate the nuclear from the ballistic missile issue.

Dr. Baev believes that mixing up the two issues will put unnecessary strain on NATO. The Nuclear and Ballistic issues are connected, but only to a degree. In Russia, all nuclear weapons are in a so-called "black box" that is not used operationally or tactically; despite rhetoric, there is no training and no suggestion that Russia is mobilizing and preparing for an actual nuclear war.

China cannot be constructively brought into the Iskander conversation.

Dr. Baev believes that there are no signs of interest from China in intervening in this matter. Moreover, China's views on missiles could be counter-productive in settling the current situation.

There is a possibility that Russian action in Kaliningrad can be separated, as the Nuclear-Ballistic Issue can be separated.

Dr. Baev noted that Russia is anxious about the threat posed to Kaliningrad by surrounding NATO members—in the same way that it is capable of “isolating” the Baltic States in the event of conflict, Kaliningrad could also relatively easily be bottled up. While Russia has significant assets in Kaliningrad, the exclave is very vulnerable to blockade, surprise attacks, and other isolating measures.

No one within Putin's closest circles has a strategic mind or any advanced understanding of deterrence theory and similar concepts. The same is true for the Russian Ministry of Defense and General Staff.

Dr. Baev notes that members of Putin's inner circle and of the military are preoccupied with political conversations about securing funds for military modernization. They lack extensive education and their actions should not be presumed to be driven primarily by actual strategic considerations.

“The Iskander's Threat to European Security: The View from Poland”

Dr. Pawel Durys

*Chief Expert in the International Security Policy Department,
Poland's Ministry of National Defense*

Dr. Durys began his talk by laying out a general framework for comparing Russia and NATO. Especially noticeable since 2014, there is a large degree of asymmetry in how Russia and NATO utilize conventional and nuclear threats. Russia maintains superior strategic nuclear options, while NATO has vastly superior high-precision weaponry such as long-range UAVs. Russian strategic thought and nuclear thought is based upon deterrence theory.

While the current environment is incredibly tense, it is not realistic to expect either party to give up the INF treaty. However, Dr. Durys noted that does not mean current tensions will easily be resolved. Russia will not discuss strategic nuclear limits unless high-precision weapons are included in talks, in order to maintain a relative level of parity while deescalating.

Dr. Durys notes that the Iskander missile system receives a significant amount of attention from Western analysts; the Iskander has been used in previous high-profile missile exercises, particularly Zapad 2009 and Zapad 2013.

This attention is not undeserved. Dr. Durys argued that the Iskander presents a genuine, growing threat to the West. Russia's neighbors in the Baltics and Eastern Europe view the missile as a distinct destabilizer. Given the array of Iskander sites across Syria, Crimea, and Armenia, Dr. Durys noted that the Iskander threat is multidirectional.

Dr. Durys declared that the Iskander is a remarkably well-balanced and uniquely cost-effective platform. The system can be transported in and out of Kaliningrad quickly, by air or sea. The Iskander gives an enhanced capacity to Russia for hitting hard targets; moreover, it gives Russia the capacity to create no-fly zones and implement A2-AD zones over most of NATO's member countries in Eastern Europe.

In light of this active threat, Dr. Durys presented several options for NATO in order to effectively react to the threat posed by the Iskander system. Active defense measures such as jamming could be particularly useful. Deploying more anti-ballistic missiles to Eastern Europe would also be beneficial. Beyond purely reactive measures, counter missile strikes could also be used to destroy launchers before further damage is potentially inflicted by Iskander sites. Additionally, the United States and NATO should take more basic hardening measures to improve the survivability of bases and airfields in the event of a missile exchange.

Dr. Durys noted that it is important to avoid a purely symmetrical response, as the INF treaty is the cornerstone of stability in Europe. By limiting weapon systems, the treaty seriously limited the risk of "out-of-the-blue" crises and strikes. NATO and the west cannot descend to Russia's level on this matter. The Iskander puts this treaty and old framework at risk; its technical parameters suggest it can hit further away than before. Moreover, the new SSA-8 cruise missile, which Russia has been developing, breaches the INF and uses essentially the same launcher as the Iskander. While the Iskander-M (ballistic) range is supposed to be less than 500 km, many believe it is higher and in violation of the INF Treaty. Russia is recklessly intimidating its neighbors and only raising the potential for nuclear war.

Dr. Durys stated that abiding by the INF Treaty greatly enhances U.S. credibility in the region, whereas Russia's violation of the INF Treaty further isolates Moscow. Dr. Durys remarked that for Poland, the Iskander only proves the importance of NATO's nuclear deterrent and the physical presence of Allied forces in the region.

Dr. Durys closed his talk by reiterating the importance of renewed dialogue between Russia and the West, alongside a thoughtful asymmetrical response. There is a need for not just a new dialogue between parties, but a thoughtful asymmetrical response. While it is difficult to do such things, both are essential tasks in the effort of restoring predictability in the region.

“The Threat and Instability of the Iskanders Along Europe’s Flanks: From the Baltic to the South Caucasus”

Dr. Stephen Blank

Senior Fellow, American Foreign Policy Council

Dr. Blank argued that Iskander deployments in Northeastern Europe have created unique challenges for NATO and the Baltic States. However, the Iskander threat is not isolated to any one place on Russia's periphery. The Iskander threat is a pan-regional threat that runs from the Middle East to Northeast Europe.

Dr. Blank noted that, whether intentional or not, Russia has created a strategy with Iskander deployment. With deployments in Armenia, Crimea and elsewhere, an A2-AD zone has been created from the Middle East to Finland. Iskanders, S-300s, S-400s, and other anti-ship missiles threaten to bar the West's access to the Caucasus and the Black Sea littoral.

Not all of these missiles explicitly point toward the West, however. The Armenian government claims it has complete control over Russian Iskander missiles in Armenia (though, in all likelihood, it does not). Dr. Blank believes that if Russia has actually conducted this wildly irresponsible move of transferring ownership, the Iskander missile threat extends to Azerbaijan and Georgia. This is an important side-note to the Iskander missile issue. Nonetheless, the most important aspect of the Iskander threat is its implication in attempting to establish a new *fait accompli*. By “escalating to deescalate” through deploying missiles and conducting cyber campaigns, Russia is attempting

to create a new fait accompli across the whole of its periphery. The Russian leadership hopes it can pressure the West into accepting a new security order in Eastern Europe.

Alongside its expansion of missile networks, Dr. Blank pointed out that Russia has placed great emphasis on building up its sealift capabilities. Sealift operations have been a core part of Russia's mission in the Eastern Mediterranean; moreover, Russia has greatly expanded its naval presence in Cyprus and Syria.

Russian ground forces are also expanding or being positioned for emergent conflict. The 8th Army, which currently threatens Ukraine, could easily be rotated to target Georgia and the South Caucasus as well. Russia has focused on creating a larger division and army sized elements rather than a smaller, more 'nimble' brigade. Such expansion is possibly a sign that the Russian leadership does not believe the missile or nuclear threat will be sufficient to protect Russian interests on its periphery with a quick fait accompli. Dr. Blank proposed that Russia is preparing for the possibility of a long, drawn-out war.

Such existential preparation supports the theory presented by Fiona Hill that the West and Russia are in a hot war—though not a kinetic one (except possibly in Ukraine). The Iskander threat, alongside other expansionary measures for the Russian military, only raise the temperature of this hot war threat. However, with that concept in mind, Dr. Blank was careful to remind attendees that the Iskander situation is much broader: the Iskander situation is crisis management rather than an intra-conflict event.

These Russian advances demand a reaction from NATO, according to Dr. Blank. The Alliance needs a coherent inter-regional response to the Iskander threat and an expanding Russian military. Otherwise, Russia will only be emboldened to further push its interests in Europe and the Middle East. Dr. Blank believes that Putin still believes that Russia is advancing, if the bold Russian-backed coup attempt in Montenegro last year is any proof.