

Missile Defence

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Last Century, at the end of the Seventies, when Europe was under military pressure from the Soviet Union, a small group of European Heads of State and Government, led by the German Chancellor of the time, Helmut Schmidt, did conceive a bold plan to restore the credibility of deterrence and buttress the Western challenge to the Communist system. The European idea to build and deploy new American intermediate range nuclear forces on the European continent was sold successfully to the US President and embodied the new spirit of the Eighties, which led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Today, our triumphant political and economic system, instead of challenging the World, is increasingly plagued by inward looking political leaderships, and by a suffocating urgency to preserve itself and to defend against a plethora of not very well defined enemies, generally pictured as much more powerful and threatening than they actually are. The need to build new defences against ballistic missiles is part and parcel of this perception of increased vulnerability.

The US can hope to set up an effective anti-missile defence of their territory also because the threats come from very far: the other side of the Antarctic, the Pacific Ocean, the Middle East or Southern Asia, giving them enough time to detect the attack and ample space to attempt the interception. Even so, the original plan of establishing a multi-layered complete defence against massive missile attacks has been indefinitely postponed in favour of a much more modest system aimed at defending the US against a single missile fired by mistake or very few, inaccurate and low technology weapons fired by unspecified « rogue states ». The fact that many serious doubts remain also about the effectiveness and reliability of this kind of reduced anti-missile shield is further proof of the complexity and ambiguity of the entire matter.

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Those ambiguities are reinforced when dealing with the perspective of a European anti-missile defence. Certainly Europe, like the US, cannot defend itself effectively against a massive attack by Russian or Chinese nuclear forces. As lesser threats are concerned, they may come from enemies that are much nearer to the European than to the American territory. Unless the entire complex of land and space assets is redrawn to allow for a much earlier detection and interception of the attack, it is very unlikely that the European countries could hope to counter these threats by successfully intercepting the incoming missiles. A country which has similar problems is Israel, that has in fact developed its own autonomous anti-missile systems. Yet, the Israeli confidence on their ability to withstand a massive missile attack (especially one armed with WMD) seems to be very limited indeed.

In the past, when Europe was under the threat of Soviet Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces¹, it didn't consider building impossible defences, but it did deploy the so called Euro-missiles², successfully re-establishing deterrence. This move proved winning because it led to a very significant disarmament treaty with the USSR and contributed to pave the way for the final crisis of the Soviet bloc. Today's situation is unfortunately more complex because of the apparent inability (or unwillingness?) of NATO (or the US?) to adapt the Allied deterrence to the new threats. The credibility of American nuclear gravity bombs remaining in Europe is low³ and their role as deterrent of third parties nuclear threats is doubtful, to say the least.

Thus, the deployment of anti-missile defences appears as a kind of second best, given the absence of more effective and credible alternatives. This is far from being satisfactory.

Criticisms of this choice include important strategic arguments. One of them is that, given the present scenario of highly asymmetrical wars and terrorist threats, an excessive concentration of attention and resources to counter only a specific technology (the ballistic missile) could in fact re-direct our defence choices in the wrong direction, increasing our overall vulnerability. Completely different, of course, is the case of more limited field defences against attacking missiles, which could and should be developed to increase the security of our forces (and their projection capacity) and to protect some high value targets. The relevant technologies exist already, have been tested, and are capable of effectively reducing the likely threats.

¹ The SS-20 mobile missile systems.

² The American built Cruise and Pershing missile systems.

³ They appear to be vulnerable to a first strike, their readiness could be discussed, their ability to penetrate enemy defences and to attain the objective is far from certain, their range of action could be insufficient, and so on.

The Europeans should take into account the larger strategic picture as well, first of all the Russian reactions to the announced deployment of elements of the American anti-missile system in countries formerly members of the Warsaw Pact. The possible withdrawal of Russia from the IRNF Treaty would be a major blow to European security, both militarily and politically and would require a complete and painful reassessment of NATO's strategic posture and capabilities. Should it be deployed in Europe, the present American anti-missile system would be completely unable to cope with a renewed IRNF threat from Russia. The restoration of an acceptable military balance would require a European nuclear rearmament and could lead to a militarily risky and politically absurd escalation.

On a side, it should be noted that the deployment in Europe of this American system would immensely complicate and possibly wipe out the perspective of a Russian-European cooperation to counter the proliferation of missile and WMD capabilities in Asia. The idea of deploying other anti-missile systems in the Caucasus, outside Russian control and without Russian cooperation is more expensive, less credible and would increase the likelihood of a Russian escalation.

Alternatively, to counter the new threats without a new NATO nuclear doctrine or rearmament, the Europeans could try to develop their own brand of extended deterrence doctrine, basing it on the existing French and British nuclear forces. A possibility would be to start from some doctrinal hints suggested by the French President Jacques Chirac in recent speeches⁴. Particularly relevant is the fact that President Chirac seems to consider the possibility of eventually targeting high value political objectives (such as the leaderships of « rogue states »), thus attempting to adapt nuclear deterrence to asymmetrical circumstances. Such an innovative European development, however, would be quite difficult to concretise and spell out and could prove highly divisive among Europeans and with the Americans.

Meanwhile NATO is developing its own brand of anti-missile systems. The Final Communiqué of the last NATO Summit, in Riga, tells us that the development of the Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence system should require five more years: not so far in the future to justify other dramatic moves such as the divisive deployment of parts of the American anti-missile system in Europe, especially given the fact that the missile threat it should counter still is quite limited (almost non existent, if we exclude the Russian and Chinese forces) and will remain so for many years to come.

⁴ 19-1-2006: Mr Chirac said leaders of states who would "use terrorist means against us, just like anyone who would envisage using, in one way or another, arms of mass destruction, must understand that they would expose themselves to a firm and adapted response from us".

It is difficult to ascertain if the NATO system would be more credible than the American one. On the technical side, one can doubt it. Yet, it would have the obvious advantage of having been developed for the defence of the European, and not of the North American continent, thus, at least in principle, being more in line with European specific problems and priorities. Moreover, its deployment could be politically designed to reduce Russian fears and to possibly favour NATO-Russian cooperation.

Two other problems stand up. The first is money: it is very unlikely that the Europeans will mobilize important additional resources to pay for the deployment of such systems. Should they decide to deploy them anyway, it is very likely that they will do so at a loss of other military priorities, possibly more urgent and important. Second, it seems that these projects are not fully integrated with other European capability developments (such as military observation satellites, Galileo, GMES etc.), simply because these occur nationally or in the EU instead of NATO.

NATO's Secretary General has observed that the American system, if its deployment in Europe will proceed as planned, could not protect in the same way all the member countries, and has proposed the employment of additional means to complete the « shield ». This might be true but is certainly far from being the only question that NATO should try to confront and solve. Many other problems should be discussed by the Alliance or, should that prove impossible, by the EU. A first inventory of questions has been published on the IHT by two analysts of the RAND Corporation⁵: they list arguments about the timing, the technology, the utility of this anti-missile system as well as other less evident points such as the perspective of double-key arrangements. Russian reactions should be taken into account as well. Finally, a careful technical assessment and some simulations should be made to verify the possible negative impact of a successful missile interception on the fringe of Eastern Europe: where would fall the wreckage of the ballistic missiles (including their warheads)? Some initial calculations have pointed to Northern Europe. The negative experience made during the first Gulf War, when many incoming Iraqi Scud missiles had been intercepted by Patriots over Israel and Saudi Arabia with disastrous consequences, is a sobering thought.

The technical and operational relationship between the proposed American and NATO systems should also be considered. One question should be answered as soon as possible: is it not excessive to finance two separate projects, to counter such a limited and far away threat? Aren't there other more urgent priorities? Wouldn't be sensible to re-discuss the entire matter at least to have a look for possible economies of scale?

More in general, we Europeans should start asking some questions regarding the future of deterrence and the quality and role of the American

⁵ E. Stephen Larrabee and David E. Mosher, « Avoiding a crisis in Europe », *IHT* March 30 2007, page 7

nuclear weapons still deployed in Europe. We may need them in the future or we may not, but in any case we should consider different technologies and different capabilities. We should try to defend us as effectively as possible, but we should think first of all about the ways and means to restore deterrence in our changed strategic environment.

It is high time to revive at least some of the spirit of the Seventies and the Eighties, when Europe was under real existential threats but was capable of challenging them successfully, instead of gutlessly attempting to build new (illusory) Maginot Lines.

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