

## **Going Ballistic: Causes and Consequences of a US deployment of the Missile Defense Component in Europe**

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Since the US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) announced at the beginning of the year that it wanted to begin talks with the Czech and Polish governments over the possible deployment of radar and interceptors for their missile defense system, the old continent and particularly Russia seems to have gone ballistic. The Russian militaries, and foremost the Chief of Staff, had declared that any such deployment would trigger a possible Russian withdrawal from the 1987's INF treaty<sup>1</sup>. While apparently trying to steam down its military, the Kremlin has repeatedly stated its doubt that such a system was aimed at a possible Iranian missile threat, that in fact such a threat did not exist and that a European extension of the US missile defense was indeed targeting Russia's nuclear assets while it had no defensive value for Europe.

Most of the European capitals took notice of the growing Moscow-Washington tensions over the possible deployment, especially after President Putin's speech at the February Munich's Conference on Security Policy. The reaction was of surprise and concern especially in Berlin where the Foreign minister asked for consultations between the US and Russia to be held. In the two foremost interested countries, the Czech Republic and Poland, polls showed the absence of popular support for such a deployment even though both governments demonstrated their interest in the project<sup>2</sup>.

But a lot of questions need to be asked to try to understand why the US have undertaken such a project and what consequences it will have on

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Sieff, « Russian threat to Withdraw from INF not Bluff », UPI, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> « Le bouclier antimissile américain : un débat délicat en Pologne », *Les Echos*, 7 mars 2007.

Europe and international relations in general. Obviously, most points in the Russian rhetoric are indeed worth discussing if one is to understand the causes and consequences of the American plan. But other issues deserve to be debated. One of them is to determine how such a system will co-exist with a future possible NATO missile defense system, which could by the way include Russian assets. Others pertain to the level of integration of the Polish and Czech militaries into a US-led system and its meaning for the European defense project.

### **Is the MD really about defending against a ballistic missile threat?**

First and foremost, it is worth going back to where this started that is the US policy on missile defense as articulated by the president elected in 2000. The then candidate and most of his national security team were fierce advocates of the acceleration of the program which Bill Clinton had succeeded in not making decision on. Today, a broader bipartisan consensus has emerged on the Hill to continue missile defense programs. Although Democrats may well question some technical development and the price tag attached to it, none would probably just asked for a cancellation of the whole program and the policy attached will probably live on with the next administration.

The policy on missile defense as it was put forward then planned on deploying a first nascent system to protect the United States as soon as possible. But a part of that policy was focused on the necessity to extend missile defense to the US allies and friends. Notwithstanding technical successes or failures, the Administration has in fact carried on this policy while making allies protection an effective causeway for enhanced military cooperation. The evolution of Japan on missile defense policy – from a purely technical cooperation to effective coordination of US and Japanese assets – although it mainly shows a modification of Tokyo's own view on its military also demonstrates how Washington intends to globalize MD so that its allies will be integrated in a system coordinating US assets and local defense systems<sup>3</sup>.

The consensus in Washington on the need to continue with the program stems from a globally shared view on the development of the threat and the possibility that someday rogue States may possess missiles with the range necessary to reach the continental US. Already, US troops based abroad or in operation are faced with large tactical ballistic missiles arsenal that could arguably be used in anti-access strategy<sup>4</sup>. Such is the case of North Korea or Iran which possess dozens of SCUD-derived systems. Coming back to the long range threat, recent flight tests in North

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<sup>3</sup> B. Gruselle, « Development and Role of Antimissile Defenses in Asia », FRS, Recherches et Documents, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006, pp. 17-22.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, R. Cliff & Al., « Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccesses Strategies and Their Implications for the United States », RAND Corporation, 2007, pp. 61-76.

Korea – including a Taepodong-2 on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2006 – and known developments in Iran points out to the continued interest of Pyongyang and Tehran in acquiring weapons capable of striking at several thousands kilometres from their territory.

Amongst its points, Moscow has insisted that no actually deployed or under development Iranian missile has the capability to reach the continental US. In fact, no one has ever challenged such an analysis, not even amongst the US most vocal supporters of the Administration Missile Defense plan. But, the question is not today's ballistic missiles but the possible next two decades threat. As it stands now, the Iranian program seems to be in the right tracks to be able to produce a viable missile of intercontinental range in the 2020-2030 period. And, there is not much doubt that Tehran will be able to produce a missile capable of hitting most of Europe well before that. This future Iranian capability could take the form of a deployed ICBM but also the guise of a space-launch vehicle with dual use application as shown by the February 25<sup>th</sup> launch.

Last but not least, the known export track record of North Korea's missiles raises a grave concern about the possibility to see newly ballistic equipped and potentially Western-adversed countries emerged in a matter of years without prior warning. Of course such a country would have to somehow absorb the new capability in its forces, which could potentially take a long time, but would not have to go through the decades long process of developing a long range ballistic missile.

By planning for a first missile defense capability to be deployed in Europe in 2013, the US somehow fits such a calendar.

### **How will the component planned to be deployed in Eastern Europe be integrated in the US Missile Defense System?**

Missile Defense has the particularity of requiring the coordination of several (complex) functions to be able to operate: warning, tracking and intercepting. Schematically, the architecture exploits several types of tools:

- Warning is obtained by the combination of space, air and ground-based assets being able to detect the launch of a missile. Such systems as SBIRS (space-based infrared system), over-the-horizon radars and, potentially, UAVs, could provide the system with information on the launch point of a ballistic missile.
- Tracking consist of predicting the trajectory of a launched missile including its impact point. This can be done by space-based, aerial or ground system. Tracking is mainly used to cue the interceptor on where it should be send to be able to find and engage its target.
- Interception can be done by missiles carrying conventional or even nuclear vehicles or by focused energy (e.g. laser). The multiplication of interception attempts rises the possibility to kill

the target as separate interception systems have a probability to malfunction, miss the target.. A multilayered architecture as envisioned by the US will thus give a higher chance to effectively destroy an incoming ballistic missile.

The projected deployment in Europe consists of a tracking radar based in the Czech Republic and dozen ground-based interceptors to be deployed in Poland. But other components are already existing in Europe, and are planned to be modernized to fit into the MD architecture. Such is the case of the early warning radars in Fylingdales, in the United Kingdom, or Thule, in Greenland.

This system will eventually be connected to the command and control centre situated in Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, which will under the supervision of Strategic Command (STRATCOM) coordinates engagements of all interception assets, whether from fixed sites, deployed AEGIS cruisers and destroyers or in the future the Airborne Laser (ABL). The final goal of the system is thus first and foremost to defend the United States.

### **Is an MD future deployment in Eastern Europe aimed at the Russian nuclear deterrent?**

Hence, seen from a US perspective the deployment of a European component of its Missile Defense makes sense in terms of calendar, considering that Iran will continue to develop its ballistic missile arsenal and, possibly, a clandestine nuclear military program. From a technical point of view, deploying that component somewhere in Eastern Europe does also make sense as a missile aimed to the US from that Region would have to fly above it going North and thus could be intercepted by a missile defense system deployed on its trajectory. Although Poland seemed like an obvious choice for the deployment others may have been considered such as England or Northern countries.

Finally, the proposed deployment could indeed have a use in defending Europe although such use would need to be precisely defined<sup>5</sup>. As intended, it would give a certain degree of protection to most of Europe from systems fired from the Middle East region. It has to be noted though that the most southern European countries (South of France, Spain, Greece and Italy) would probably not enjoy an important cover as trajectories would be passing far from interceptor deployment sites. But such a protection, if technically plausible, could pose delicate management problems. The choice to engage a few missiles fired at a European country from Iran would rapidly deplete the stack of available interceptors, leaving an opening in the US defense. Seen from Washington that situation may cause some reluctance to actually employ the system to protect Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> In particular, keeping in mind that US-extended deterrence to NATO will remain the backbone of its security and the main representation of transatlantic solidarity.

The existence of any European (or NATO)-owned missile defense system would of course modify the equation (especially if it is perceived as usable for the defense of the US) but such a system would have to be coordinated with any US deployment.

If Washington's goal was to begin deploying a capability to intercept Russian ICBMs, a deployment in Eastern Europe would make little sense. The missiles would indeed be flying North and interceptors would have to be shot in a pursuing course rather than an intercept one, making the kill near to impossible. Not to mention the argument that 10 interceptors would have a very low impact on a Russian warhead capacity that nears 1,500 and would be accompanied by countermeasures.

Yet, it has to be noted that the deployment of a tracking radar in the Czech Republic, as envisioned by the Missile Defense Agency could give the US some limited ability to follow missile tests conducted from Kapustin Yar, a Russian test range situated some 500 miles south-east of Moscow.

### **The consequences?**

In light of the previous analysis the reaction from Moscow seems to be mainly driven by two factors. First, Russia still is very touchy about the bond that such a project would create between former Warsaw pact's countries and the US. The fact that both recently became part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization which already brought yells from the Kremlin does probably not help on that matter. Second, Russia seems to be trying to back away from the special relationship it built with the previous US administration in the 90s and to make that as theatrical as possible. Plausibly, such gestures are destined to a very large international audience and especially to Russian's increasing number of client countries in the field of armament. But, under close examination this does not appear sufficient to completely explain the scale of Moscow's current reaction.

The repeated innuendoes of Moscow on the possibility to step out of the 1987's INF treaty, as a consequence of any US missile defense deployment in Europe, are truly chilling. More so when one considers that the Russian military have had a new tactical missile developed, the SS-26 Iskander, that could potentially replace the SS-23 Spider dismantled under the treaty provisions<sup>6</sup>. The SS-26 range is not known precisely, but experts expect that it would be close to 500 km – possibly more, which would actually breach the treaty provisions.

Everything points out to the fact that the Russian Chief of Staff threat is not empty. The Russian Army has always been unhappy with INF considering it had deprived them of a useful military tool: tactical nuclear ballistic missiles. Moscow's reaction could hence be fuelled by the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/theater/ss-26.htm>

militaries' desire to get that back while sending a message of defiance to the US on its ex-allies in Europe and their getting closer to Washington.

Another reason for Moscow's unhappiness could be related with the feeling that there is a growing missile gap between the US and Russia. The treaty signed in March 2002 on strategic offensive reductions was probably seen then in Moscow as a way to guarantee the parity of nuclear arsenals despite Russia's diminishing ability to maintain its own. But, the US new triad may now appear in Moscow as a way for the US to continue developing so-called strategic capabilities – including conventional systems – that would eventually bring such parity to an end. The absence of any transparency measures in the 2002 Treaty is also probably raising frustration in Russia the more so because START-I will probably only stay in force up until 2009. For the Russian leadership, not many options would remain to try to keep up with a perceived missile gap between the two countries. One of them could be to limit the reduction of operational missiles by increasing the number of carried nuclear warheads per system.

Although Russia's reactions to a future European deployment of missile defense could have serious repercussions, the possible impact on Europe itself deserves to be considered. As we have noted before, the deployment of a US missile defense system may require in the future coordination at several levels – NATO, EU, bilateral – as it indeed gives a potential protection to European countries. But it remains to be seen if Washington will be willing to engage in any discussions that would in fact reduce its ability to use the European component as it deems fit for its own protection. In other words, there is a very slim chance that a US component deployed in Europe would in fact be integrated in a European missile defense – if such a system is ever deployed – knowing that such integration would probably necessitate some form of European's decision on the use of the system. In a press conference on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007, President Chirac warned that a US future deployment in Europe could create « new lines of division in Europe »<sup>7</sup>. This may prove a very strong statement, but to say the least, there is not much chance that a European component of the US missile defense could in the future accelerate the creation of a European defense identity. On the other end, a debate on the impact of such a deployment on nuclear deterrence seems improbable since President Chirac's speech at l'Île Longue in 2006 which articulated the possible role of MD as potentially complementary to nuclear deterrence.

### **The French Debate**

Although President Chirac did intervene in the European debate on the US project, formal (and informal) reactions from Paris have remained non-committal and critics were quite limited. Although the fact that most of the media is focused on the May 2007 presidential elections probably accounts

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<sup>7</sup> « US Missile Shield a Threat to Europe Unity: Chirac », *Agence France-Presse*, Mar 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007

for much of that low-tune reaction, but other more substantial reasons have to be underlined.

The position of France on missile defense has changed a lot since the end of the 90s when Paris realised that the US would go on and deployed a shield whatever administration succeeds to the Democrats then in office. The French administration rightly analyzed that Washington would cut a deal with Moscow on modifying or abandoning the ABM treaty sooner or later which would lead to a brand new situation. In parallel, tactical missile defenses were being pursued and interest was given to early warning systems as a useful political and military tool.

Paris also realized that, to some extent, missile defense systems were just another military program that should be judged on its financial and technical feasibility as well as defensive merits rather than discussed on political ground. In other words, nuclear deterrence would remain the backbone of France's security regardless of the deployment of such and such missile defense system.

This strategic revision made it possible for France to embark on the Prague summit's missile defense study with a rather clear perspective on the issues that needed to be addressed. Among those, whether our territory could be protected by a system against our will raises some political concerns.

The US proposition to the Czech Republic and Poland is mainly perceived in Paris as a bilateral issue that does not require a debate either at NATO or amongst Europeans. Yet, France will remain ever watchful on its development to avoid collateral damages on the European defense project.

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