

Missile Defence – The debate in Germany

Thomas Bauer*

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Introduction

The current debate in Europe concerning the U.S. plan of a limited missile defence capability including the stationing of interceptors and radar sites in Poland and the Czech Republic is in some form both misleading and irritating. Some people argue it would be the initial point of a new arms race in Europe, others fear the political consequences in regard to the harsh Russian criticism. The debate also shows the different and in some cases even diverging threat perception European politicians put to the table when it comes to future missile threats against the European continent. There is no common position on whether or when trouble states like Iran will be able to politically blackmail Europe with medium or long-range ballistic missiles equipped with nuclear warheads. U.S. experts believe Iran could possess a long-range missile until the year 2015¹.

Different views and commentaries have been published in the recent weeks, with some of them representing a one-sided approach or being limited to the purely technological aspect of the entire topic. But there is more to the whole issue of international relations and missile defence than meets the eye. Especially in Germany the debate also has become an instrument for politicians to make their mark on the level of domestic policy. And for Russia the U.S. plans for limited missile defence capability rather seem to be one more opportunity to regain its influence as a global actor than a military issue. It is therefore the intention of the author to have a closer look at those parts of the Iceberg, which lie beneath the surface, especially in regard to role of Russia and the debate in Germany.

* Research Fellow, in charge of Security and Defence Policy and Transatlantic Relations at the *Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung* (CAP) in Munich.

¹ See also statement by John C. Rood, Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Non-proliferation, at the United States House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, 3rd of May 2007:
<http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/roo050307.htm>

Background – what lies beneath the surface?

The public became aware of the topic in February 2007, after the speech by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Munich Security Conference, in which he accused the United States to destabilize the international system by unilaterally pushing forward the build-up of missile defence sites in Poland and the Czech Republic. The plan would affect the Russian military nuclear capacity and force Moscow to respond in an adequate manner. Of course both points of criticism have meanwhile been refuted. Neither have the USA made it a secret that they were planning to build up limited missile-defence capacities within Europe in the recent years, nor is the planned missile defence system in any way directed against Russia. Lt. General Henry Obering, Director of the American Missile Defence Agency at the U.S. Department of Defence, declared that he has repeatedly informed Russian officials about the U.S. plans in recent years.² And U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that it would be anachronistic and unrealistic to call the stationing of ten interceptors and one X-band radar site a threat to Russia's still huge nuclear arsenal³. Interestingly, the already known involvement of the UK as a base for additional parts of the missile defence system has up to now not been part of the debate, which underlines the assumption that Russia's criticism is not directed at the system as such but at the involvement of states of the former Warsaw Pact zone of influence.

The heat of the debate increased with the Polish administration asking the USA to provide them with Patriot PAC-3 missile defence systems against a possible threat from Russia, which immediately was refused by Washington⁴. The USA from the beginning had made it clear that the new sites in Poland and the Czech Republic were not directed against Russia but against a limited ballistic missile attack from the Middle East region. Poland's intention to use the U.S. plan for missile defence to protect itself from Russia turned out to be a more than unpleasant sideswipe at the American efforts to ease Moscow's concern⁵.

Russia's power game

As already mentioned above it seems that Moscow is not concerned about the missiles defence as such but about Russia's role in the future international system. When the Bush-administration decided to cancel the Anti-Ballistic-Missile (ABM) treaty in 2002 the negative reaction from

² « Washington: Kein NATO-Projekt », Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Online, 15th of March 2007:

<http://www.faz.net/s/RubDDBDABB9457A437BAA85A49C26FB23A0/Doc~ED82C16517CB342FD910EBF87499C165A~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>

³ « Wir wollen kein neues Wettrüsten », article by Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates in the *German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26th of April 2007, page 6.

⁴ « Polen fordert Raketen gegen Moskau an », *Financial Times Deutschland*, 30th of April /1st of May 2007, page 1.

⁵ « Poland missile plan to raise tensions », *Financial Times Online*, 29th of April 2007: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/ad3d01f2-f675-11db-9812-000b5df10621.html>

Moscow was merely symbolic. Experts at that time already speculated that behind closed doors the United States and Russia were working on establishing a follow-up regime to the ABM-treaty or even on missile defence cooperation between both powers. But with the increasing American political weakness on the international level due to the unsatisfying and chaotic situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia seems to be working on redefining its relationship with the West on a broader spectrum. For example, Moscow does not favour the UN-supported Ahtisaari-plan concerning the future status of Kosovo. Experts state that this oppositional attitude is not based on the traditional ties between Moscow and Serbia but rather on Russia's willingness to show its dissent with the West whenever possible in order to diminish Western influence in the former Soviet areas of interest⁶. President Putin made it very clear at the Munich Security Conference that Russia's economic success of recent years would lead to a stronger political influence on a global level⁷.

This leads to a problematic situation. On the one hand it is clear that the Western response to the criticism coming from the Kremlin should take into account the broader power game by Russia. On the other hand the West should not be persuaded by Moscow to combine all the current disputes into one diplomatic effort. This approach would definitely lead to a longer and even more complicated process of consultation and coming to a compromise, in which core issues essential for the future of European security and stability would be demoted to bits and pieces by an international power struggle. There can be no doubt about the current development in Moscow. After having achieved its first dimension of political power by using energy resources to blackmail its neighbours, Russia is trying to establish the second dimension of a global super-power by regaining its former military strength and political influence on international relations. Another example for this behaviour is the attempt to suspend the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). Russia feels disadvantaged because Western states will not ratify the treaty in its adapted version of 1999 before the withdrawal of Russian forces from Georgia and Moldova.

Taking together all of the aforementioned factors it is obvious that Russia is concerned about losing its influence in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe and is trying to use its increasing economic power, based on its huge capacities of energy resources, to regain political influence as a global security actor. Therefore it is "outmanoeuvring a divided and indecisive West on almost every front"⁸. One additional important aspect is that the current debate is taking place in the run-up of the Russian presidential elections 2008, which seems to limit Putin's options for finding an

⁶ Tolksdorf, Dominik: Implementing the Ahtisaari Proposal – The European Union's future role in Kosovo, CAP-Analysis 1/2007, Munich, page 7:

<http://www.cap.lmu.de/download/2007/CAP-Policy-Analysis-2007-01.pdf>

⁷ « Neue Eiszeit », *Financial Times Deutschland*, 12th of February 2007, page 11.

⁸ « No divide, no rule », *The Economist*, 19th of May 2007, page 14.

agreement with the United States.⁹ Any attempt of giving way to Western proposals could weaken his position and reduce the chances to promote his candidate of choice for successor as President of Russia.

Finding the right forum for further debates

For Germany, which holds the EU-presidency in the first half of the year 2007 the whole debate comes at a most inopportune moment. As part of its historical legacy it has always been very difficult for a German government after World War II to declare itself in regard to defence related issues without consulting its Allies, especially when the issue develops its own centrifugal dynamic on the European level. It is therefore understandable that chancellor Angela Merkel in her position as President of the Council from the very beginning has shifted the topic to NATO, stressing the importance of consultations with Russia on the level of the NATO-Russia Council. Both the Minister for Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier and the German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung supported her in this move.

But NATO itself has not proven to be a magic potion for solving the dispute. This is not only due to Russia's refusal to discuss this matter within the NATO-Russia Council, but also due to various layers of interest in Western NATO members. In contrast to the official statements after the recent NATO-meetings there are still unanswered questions within the alliance. One group of member states – e.g. Belgium, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg – is not satisfied with the overall strategy to implement the system as such. They are worried about possible negative consequences for the NATO-Russia relations in the case that Moscow's concerns should be neglected during the further steps. Other states – e.g. Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey – are not satisfied with the current procedures because their territory won't be covered by the current U.S. Missile Defence plan¹⁰.

The EU's High Representative Javier Solana suggested that the European Union should also discuss this matter even though he agrees that the Union won't play a vital role during the decision making process¹¹. It has turned out that moving the issue to NATO has not lead to a satisfying answer in order to solve the dispute between Russia and the West because there are frictions between NATO members as well as inside Europe concerning the efficiency of the whole programme, its interoperability with NATO's own Allied Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence (ATBMD)

⁹ Elbe, Frank/ Weisser, Ulrich: Der Raketestreit wächst sich zu einer internationalen Krise aus, DGAP-Standpunkt, June 2007, page 5.

¹⁰ Bauer, Thomas/ Baumann Florian: Raketen für Europa – Die US-Pläne offenbaren die strategischen Schwächen Europas, CAP-Analyse 4/2007, page 9.
<http://www.cap.lmu.de/download/2007/CAP-Analyse-2007-04.pdf>

¹¹ The Agence Europe Bulletin on ESDP and NATO: Europe Diplomacy & Defence, No. 20, 31st of March 2007, page 4.

development, the involvement of Russia, and even the threat it is targeted against.

The debate within the German government

Besides the dispute between the United States and Russia and the not yet defined common position of NATO – Germany and other European States have criticized that their concerns stated in a protocol during the last meeting of the NATO-Council in regard to the issue have neither been recognized by the U.S.-administration nor NATO General Secretary Jaap de Hoop Scheffer – the issue also has tremendous implications for the current German government under chancellor Angela Merkel. While the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) favours the American approach of preparing itself and its Allies against a possible missile threat from the Middle East region before states like Iran have gained the technical capacities and political will to blackmail Europe, the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) under their party-leader Kurt Beck have more doubts concerning the implications for the stability in Europe and the relations with the Russian neighbour. For Kurt Beck the idea of installing anti-missile defence systems in Europe is closely connected with the initialization of a new arms race on the expense of diplomatic attempts to find answers to the current security challenges. Next to his concern for international politics his approach to the whole issue of missile defence seems to have a purely domestic dimension.

The Social-Democrats are struggling to recapture their identity as a peace-party, which they lost under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Ironically, it was at that time a coalition of Social-Democrats and the Green Party that pronounced the end of the German restraint in the sense of international commitment, especially in the area of military contribution to international conflict management operations. By playing the pacifist-card the SPD could re-conquer supporters and voters from the newly established left-wing party *Die Linke* who have overtaken the Social-Democrats, in the sense that they are a melting pot for anti-war and anti-American activists. But this move could turn out to be a *deja vu* experience for the Social-Democrats. In the beginning of the 1980s they abused for domestic reasons a necessary debate concerning proactive international security measures and lost power to the CDU. The topic back then was the German agreement on the NATO “Double-Track” decision as a response to Soviet attempts to install nuclear medium-range missiles in Eastern Europe.

Opposition parties in the Bundestag

Currently the grand coalition of CDU and SPD faces three opposition parties in the German Parliament. The Green Party and the left-wing party *Die Linke* are characterized by a profound anti-Americanism and a strong pacifist profile. Both parties therefore are now positioning themselves in opposition to the U.S. missile defence plan. They call for more political

solutions in regard to the destabilized situation in the Middle East and diplomatic initiatives to counter international proliferation. They doubt the Iranian ability to develop and launch ballistic missiles against Europe, and they use the current debate as an instrument to catch additional support and votes as pacifist parties in contrast to the current government instead of dealing with the topic from an objective point of view. The third and biggest opposition, the Liberal Party (FDP), after some internal debates, did not take sides at all. Their current view is that chancellor Merkel should force a debate inside the European Union concerning the issue, because Europe's security is directly influenced by the current development.

As a consequence the German government is currently not facing a common opposition from the parliament. While the Green Party and *Die Linke* oppose the whole U.S.-plan for building up a missile defence shield in Europe, the Liberals are not entirely in opposition to the whole issue, but rather stress the need for a debate inside Europe and a common solution achieved together with Russia. It is therefore the Social-Democrats who have to decide whether they want to support a comprehensive approach within NATO and the goal to find a common solution with Russia, or if they want to take their chance to regain voters from opposition parties by playing the anti-American and pacifist card.

Public opinion

The term "arms race" has been used very often in the recent weeks in Germany. In general the term is connected to the development and procurement decision, as a consequence of a third party's strategic military steps. But in Germany arms race is being referred to from a more moral point of view, describing the dominance of military actions over political or diplomatic solutions¹².

German public judges the involvement of Europe in the U.S. Limited Midcourse Missile Defence System very sceptical. Most Germans feel very safe from an external threat. Only one percent of the German public sees terrorism and homeland defence as an important topic¹³.

At the same time there is with sixty-three percent quite a substantial amount of approval for European Foreign Security and Defence Policy in general. This shows the sometimes irritating and contradictory opinion of the German and also the European public when it comes to Security and Defence issues and the relationship between threat perception and the implementation of proposals to counter the current challenges. As long as there is no sense for an imposed threat by terrorist or missile attacks the

¹² Krause, Müller: Raketenabwehr – Schutz oder Gefahr?, Internationale Politik, May 2007, page 84.

¹³ European Commission: Eurobarometer 65 – Public opinion in the European Union, January 2007, page 299.

plan for establishing a missile defence system does not lead to an increased awareness of security.

Summary

The issue of missile defence itself is not really the core of the current dispute on the international level. Of course some points concerning the technological aspects and the efficiency of such a limited midcourse defence system which will be interoperable with the Alliances TBMD approach still have to be discussed. But the real issues lie beneath the surface. Russia is trying to regain its former strength by striving for new forms of cooperation, negotiating new treaties and regaining political influence in its former area of interest. In Europe the debate has shown the existing gaps between some new member states and the rest of Europe. Especially Poland still is not ready to support a common European approach, not even a common NATO approach. They use both institutions and their special relationship to the United States to ease their own national security concerns against Russia, no matter what the consequences might be for EU or NATO. The debate has also shown the USA is neglecting the alliance as a forum for a strategic debate. Their decision concerning bilateral agreements with Poland and the Czech Republic will not depend on the future position of NATO or Russia.

The debate in Germany has shown that Germany still lacks an open debate concerning its strategic security interest and a definition of the role of Germany and Europe as a whole within the ever faster reshaping international relations. The transatlantic reflexes on the one hand and the traditional anti-American resentment of certain parts of the German political landscape and public on the other hand still working quite well despite the fact that the security environment and the challenges have changed dramatically in recent years. Foreign and Security Policy is either neglected by pushing it to other forums or abused for the purpose of defining a profile within domestic policy. It is therefore necessary to promote the topic to be discussed in a more objective way in order to find proper solutions. This means to debate both the political as well as the military dimension of the current U.S. plan without closing the eyes to the demands generated by the development in international relations and international security on the one hand and the possibilities for diplomatic solutions to counter threats and risks on the other hand.

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