The Case for European Missile Defense

Peter Brookes

After seemingly endless rounds of talks with its Polish and Czech counterparts about fielding a missile defense system in Europe, the United States made some progress in early February when Warsaw and Washington jointly announced they had reached an agreement—*in principle*—to move forward with the deployment of ten interceptors in Poland.

The devil, without a doubt, is in the details. The Poles are pushing for a deal which includes American support for bolstering their air defenses (likely in the form of PAC-3 batteries), a reflection of their fears of rising Russian animosity. (The Czech Republic also has to come to agreement with the United States, but will likely move in concert with its Polish neighbors.)

With Iran continuing to enrich uranium, the possibility of "loose nukes" in Pakistan, and a spate of ballistic missile tests (by Russia, China and Iran, among others) over the past year, the announcement of an agreement is undoubtedly good news. Concluding a deal this year will serve to bolster transatlantic security and protect the United States and Europe from the growing threat of long-range ballistic missiles and the unconventional payloads they may carry.

But this deal will not go unopposed. Public opinion in Poland and the Czech Republic is shaky, NATO member countries are not fully on board, and the Russians will continue their vociferous opposition. The Kremlin has not been shy about expressing its opinion that a European missile defense system is a serious threat to Russian interests. Indeed, days before the Warsaw-Washing-

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ton deal was announced, almost as if anticipating a breakthrough in talks, a top Russian general said Moscow may restructure its military presence in the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, which borders both Poland and Lithuania, in response to missile defense plans for Eastern Europe.[1] This is sure to rattle nerves in the region.

American angst

Despite the Kremlin's growling, the Bush administration sees the deployment of a missile-defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic—also known as the "third site"—as critical to blunting the growing worldwide ballistic missile threat, protecting the homeland and defending its European allies. Indeed, as President George W. Bush said in a speech at the National Defense University in late October: "The need for missile defense in Europe is real and I believe it's urgent."[2]

But it is also a race against the clock. The recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the supposedly dormant state of Iran's nuclear weapons program notwithstanding, the American intelligence community believes Iran could have an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of striking the United States by 2015.[3] (Notably, the NIE's findings are the subject of considerable debate at home and abroad; if its critics are correct, an Iranian missile could be mated with a nuclear warhead by this time as well.) These estimates, of course, do not take into account the possibility of a Manhattan Project-like effort by Iran, which could decrease the time needed to reach initial operating capability for either the missile or nuclear program. Nor do these dates take into account outside assistance, which might accelerate both programs. The most likely candidates for making that happen are North Korea (both missiles and nuclear) or the remnants of the Pakistani A. Q. Khan nuclear proliferation network.

According to the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency (MDA), if the green light were given today by all concerned to break ground for the Eastern European missile defense sites, the earliest the system could be fully operational would be 2013.[4] The inking of final agreements and likely American congressional debates over funding will only push that timeline out further.

Indeed, the ballistic missile and nuclear proliferation trend, in general, is not positive. Ten years ago, there were only six nuclear weapons states. Today there are nine. Twenty-five years ago, nine countries had ballistic missiles. Today, 27 do. Concerns about Iran's programs will only exacerbate the situation, as countries—especially those in the Arab Middle East—seek to balance Iran's rise. Of course, none of these arguments are likely to convince the Russians of the need for missile defenses in Eastern Europe.

Russian reluctance

Russian-American relations since the fall of the Berlin Wall have not really changed all that much. During the Cold War, the security relationship was characterized as one of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Today, it's still MAD—but now the relationship is one of mutually assured distrust. And nothing is making Russia's ties with the United States or Europe more suspicious—and contentious—than the simmering disagreement over Washington's plans to deploy anti-missile capabilities in Eastern Europe.

Although the Kremlin agreed to move beyond the Cold War strategic

balance of power with the signing of the 2002 Moscow Treaty, Russian President Vladimir Putin has had a significant change of heart about missile defenses, especially those of other parties. Indeed, Putin drew parallels at an October European Union (EU) summit between the plans for an Eastern European missile shield and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, which saw the two sides go to the brink of nuclear war.[5] A day later, the commander of the Russian Strategic Missile Forces, Col. Gen. Nikolai Solovtsov, warned that Moscow could restart the production of short- and medium-range missiles on short notice if directed, raising fears of rising major power tensions.[6]

Russia strongly objects to the U.S. proposal to install a high-tech X-band radar in the Czech Republic and deploy ten ground-based interceptors in Poland, claiming the defensive missile system would cause an "arms race" and turn Europe into a "powder keg." The Kremlin also insists the limited system would undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent, despite the fact that a Russian land-based nuclear strike on the United States would not be launched on a trajectory over Poland, but would fly toward its American targets over the North Pole, or Iceland and Greenland, depending on the targets.

In fact, according to the MDA, the proposed kinetic kill vehicle designated for deployment in Poland is simply not fast enough to catch a Russian land-based ICBM in a tail-chase scenario. These interceptors, therefore, would have no capability against Russia's sea- or air-based deterrence capabilities. (Interestingly, at the time, Moscow did not object to the U.S. decision six years ago to deploy missile defenses at California's Vandenberg Air Force Base and Alaska's Fort Greely to counteract the still-evolving North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile threat.)

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Possibly more fearful of the radar, which Moscow believes could give NATO intelligence on Russian maneuvers and weapons testing, Putin suggested to Bush last spring that the United States and Russia share an early-warning radar at Gabala, Azerbaijan, instead of building the Czech radar. But the leased, Soviet-era facility will not even come close to matching the American radar's tracking capabilities, according to expert estimates.

Putin has also suggested the United States put its Eastern European missile defense interceptors in Iraq or Turkey instead of Eastern Europe. As well, Russia recommended that the United States target Iranian missiles using U.S. Navy Aegis-class ships, equipped with the upgraded SM-3 missiles. (The latter is, in fact, a viable option. On the positive side, there are fewer political-military issues like basing to deal with, since U.S. Navy ships would be operating in international waters. But there are technical questions about the capabilities of current interceptors, concerns about ship deployment schedules, and, of course, no lack of parochialism within the U.S. Department of Defense.)

Not getting any traction on those offers, Putin made another counteroffer while with Bush in Maine in early July: a regional missile defense with a radar facility in southern Russia under the control of the NATO-Russia Council. In October, Defense Secretary Robert Gates made his own rejoinder, offering that the Eastern European system would not be activated until the United States and Russia could agree that an Iranian threat existed. (Hearing howls of protest from inside the Beltway about leaving U.S. national security to Russian discretion, Washington has since backed away from that idea.)

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Making matters worse, Moscow has threatened to vacate a number of arms control treaties on account of the missile defense facilities in Eastern Europe, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) accords. It made good on its threat to leave the latter in December 2007. The INF Treaty may be the next to fall.

Yet despite the proposals, counterproposals and threats of vacating treaties, neither Washington nor Moscow seems willing to abandon its position for—or against—the planned Eastern European sites. But it's not just about the United States and Russia.

European unease

All of this political jousting over missile defense is having an effect on the security debate in Europe, especially in Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as within NATO. In Poland, domestic public opinion is not entirely convinced about the need for missile defense. The Poles are less enamored with America than they were previously, partly as a result of the protracted conflict in Iraq. They also question the threat emanating from Iran, nor do they want to be dragged into a dust-up between Washington and Tehran.

Not surprisingly, the Polish national security establishment—worried about taking a ration of Russian wrath without appropriate compensation—wants to extract all it can from the United States for allowing the placement of interceptors on Polish soil near Slupsk on the Baltic coast. Although positive about closer defense ties with Washington, and by extension NATO, Warsaw has not been subtle about wanting deal "sweeteners" in exchange for hosting the missiles. The Poles have expressed interest in PAC-3 and THAAD missile-defense systems, defense modernization assistance and more intelligence-sharing, among other issues. Poland is already the largest recipient of U.S. military aid in Europe, but it has lingering concerns about the commitment of the NATO Alliance to its defense should Russia want to play rough (not surprisingly, considering the Polish experience with its British and French allies in World War II).

The X-band midcourse radar in the Czech Republic, to be located in the Brdy military district near a former Soviet base west of Prague, is not without controversy either. While the ruling government supports the

missile defense radar, concerns exist among the Czech public, especially about the system's environmental and health effects. Czech opposition parties are calling for a national referendum on the issue—and for the European Union and NATO to play a larger role in European missile defense plans.

NATO has generally considered the talks among Washington, Warsaw and Prague to be bilateral issues, and has chosen not to interfere. Indeed, in general, NATO has expressed support for missile defense in Europe, especially against short- and medium-range missiles. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated after the April North Atlantic Council meeting: "There is absolutely a shared threat perception between the allies. Allies all agree that there is a threat from ballistic missiles."[7] Subsequently, at a meeting of NATO's 26 defense chiefs in June 2007, the Alliance agreed to assess the political and military implications of missile defense in Europe in a report due in February.[8] The NATO summit in Bucharest this spring could therefore be a key meeting for missile defense on the continent.

While NATO is actively studying short- and medium-range ballistic missile defense programs for Europe, France and Germany have expressed concern about the deployment of assets "in theater" that are not controlled by NATO. The European Parliament has also asked for a say on missile defense. Europeans fear that missile defense will provoke Moscow on other thorny issues, such as Europe's energy security, which is heavily dependent on Russian natural gas, or on the question of Kosovo's independence from Serbia, which the Kremlin opposes, and on future NATO expansion (e.g., Ukraine and Georgia).

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But Russian anxiety about the Eastern European missile shield is more likely about the placement of the system in what it perceives as its old stomping grounds than any real strategic concerns. The supposed threat from missile defense could also provide a convenient excuse for the $200 billion defense build-up the Russian military is now undergoing following years of abject neglect of the once-mighty Red Army. Not even taking into account the sea and air legs of its strategic nuclear triad, the Kremlin should realize that the currently configured system could not deal with a massive Russian nuclear assault on the United States.

It is likely the Kremlin will try to leverage public sentiment in Eastern Europe and NATO countries to get impressionable, democratically-elected governments to back down on missile defense. Moscow will also try to make missile defense a wedge issue to divide Europe, undermine NATO and weaken transatlantic relations, all while carving out a sphere of political and military influence for itself. Worst of all, Russia might deepen its nuclear cooperation with Iran, beyond building and fueling Iran's Bushehr reactor, as a bargaining chip against missile defense. Notably, both Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made trips to Tehran in October within weeks of one another. It was

the first visit of a Russian leader to Iran since Stalin met with the Allies in Tehran in 1943. Military sales, such as the highly-capable S-300 air defense system, have also been recently rumored to be in the works, adding to previous deals for Russian equipment.

It appears the Russians will do all they can to prevent the deployment of missile defense in Eastern Europe—maybe all of Europe. Although hope may spring eternal, it is unlikely an increasingly confident Kremlin is going to change its position.

Hosting a transatlantic missile defense system will deepen, and further unify, the security relationship between European NATO members, especially Poland and the Czech Republic, and the United States, enhancing our mutual national security against external threats from ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

Best defense

In recent years, the United States decided that leaving itself deliberately vulnerable to any weapon system or state, as it did during the Cold War, was foolish. And rightfully so. Deliberate vulnerability can lead to perceptions of weakness, inviting provocation or aggression from another nation or transnational actor. In addition, being perceived as weak and vulnerable can lead a potential adversary to use threats, intimidation, "blackmail" or coercion to achieve its objectives. In a day when North Korea is a nuclear weapons state and Iran is still very likely on the path to becoming one, the chance that these weapons will be used against peaceful nations is a troubling but very real possibility.

Every state has an undeniable right to self-defense—and it only makes sense that all reasonable, necessary steps are taken to protect one's national security. It is even more logical if the capability is emerging to do so, as witnessed by over 30 successful missile defense tests to date by the United States alone. As these tests have shown, hitting a bullet with a bullet in the atmosphere, or even in space, is in fact possible.

But even though rogue states like North Korea and Iran are good examples of the need for missile defense today, developing and deploying such capabilities is not about the missile or a weapon of mass destruction threat from a single country, or even several. Rather, missile defense is about protection from these weapons no matter where the threat comes from, now or in the future.

There are other advantages to fielding a missile defense system in Europe for the United States, too. Hosting a transatlantic missile defense system will deepen, and further unify, the security relationship between European NATO members, especially Poland and the Czech Republic, and the United States, enhancing our mutual national security against external threats from ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. And despite the range of concerns about missile defense, it should be emphasized that missile defense is a defensive—not offensive—weapon. Indeed, the dominant design of the missile defense interceptor warhead does not even contain an explosive charge; traveling at 15,000 miles per hour, it destroys the missile warhead by the sheer force of the collision. Therefore,

the idea that missile defense is an offensive system, as many have suggested, is patently false. In a way, missile defense is like an umbrella; it is only needed *if* it rains.

This means that missile defense threatens no one. Missile defense only undermines the capability of one country to threaten or attack another with its ballistic missiles. The idea that the deployment of missile defenses in Europe will provoke an attack against Poland, the Czech Republic or any country that hosts them (including the United Kingdom or Denmark, which have missile defense radars) is a canard meant to encourage passivity. Defensive systems do not provoke attack. It is vulnerability or weakness that invites attack, not resolve and strength.

The United States—and others—have made it clear to Russia that missile defense does not threaten Russian security. Talks have emphasized that missile defense is part of an expanding effort in Europe to counter the growing ballistic missile threat—wherever it may come from. Of course, Russia should not expect to have a veto over European or American security—nor should that right be surrendered by the United States or Europe. Indeed, Moscow would do better to turn with its protests toward Tehran and Pyongyang, capitals that are driving the need for missile defense because of their growing offensive ballistic missile capability. Moreover, some security analysts have speculated—though cautiously—that the successful deployment of such effective defenses may one day convince countries like Iran and North Korea that their pursuit of missiles and weapons of mass destruction should be abandoned as futile endeavors. Mutually assured destruction or massive retaliation should not be the only policy options.

In the end, it is clear: missile defenses will improve America's security, and that of Europe, against the growing challenge of ballistic missiles and their unconventional payloads. It is high time the Americans, Poles and Czechs strike a final deal for deployment, enhancing both transatlantic ties and our common security.

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