# PERSPECTIVE

## "Tough Choices Ahead": An Interview with J. D. Crouch II

Dr. J. D. Crouch II served from January 2005 to May 2007 as Deputy National Security Advisor to President George W. Bush. Before that, Dr. Crouch served as the U.S. Ambassador to Romania, where he worked to expand democracy in Eastern Europe, increase cooperation between the United States and Romania in the global war on terror, and foster Romania's incorporation into Western security institutions such as NATO and the European Union. Earlier, from August 2001 through October 2003, Dr. Crouch served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy.

On February 2, 2008, he spoke with *Journal* associate editor Jim Colbert about missile defense, the challenge of Russia and the future of U.S. policy toward Iran.

*One of the Bush administration's most significant achievements since taking office in 2001 has been to move the United States closer to being defended from ballistic missile attack. You were one of the principal architects of the administration's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2001, and of the capabilities that the United States has begun to put into place since then. What do you see as the major missile defense milestones of the past seven years?*

Obviously, the most important thing was to move beyond the Treaty, and to do so in a way that did not create a crisis in our relationship with Russia. That was effectively achieved, if you look at the date of the withdrawal announcement and the subsequent announcement by President Putin that, while they were not happy with it, they were going to continue to reduce their nuclear forces. This gave lie to the argument that withdrawal from the ABM Treaty would return us

to an arms race situation with the Russians, and took a lot of potential political sting out of the decision, both here and abroad. Most importantly, it liberated the engineers and scientists who had been working on missile defense under the ABM Treaty from having to work around its various restrictions—some of them clearly articulated, some of them ambiguously so. That lifting of constraints has enabled us to do things in a rational way and increase the effectiveness of our defenses.

Another major accomplishment was the decision to begin a deployment of initial capabilities. The most significant aspect was that it forced the United States to think through the command and control arrangements for missile defense, and to begin to get the military involved in the operational aspects. It conceptually broke through the barrier that we had on strategic missile defense; until then, it was essentially a research and development program, and therefore not really taken very seriously within the uniformed military. The assigning of Strategic Command to the overall missile defense mission, and its integration into the mission sets for Northern Command and Pacific Command, were all important developments.

*These efforts have been quite controversial. In particular, the administration's recent attempts to enlist Poland and the Czech Republic as partners in a European basing site have become the subject of considerable debate abroad—including within the European Union. How important is European participation to American missile defense efforts?*

The so-called "third site" envisions the placement of a small number of interceptors in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic. These could be used to protect the United States from potential ICBM-range systems, particularly those emanating out of Iran. But it also would be able to protect Europe from ICBM-range and intermediate-range ballistic missile systems emanating either from Iran or other sources, although not Russia. From a strategic standpoint, this closes a gap in our coverage, and begins to provide the West with some leverage over Iranian missile systems, which continue to be fielded and tested.

So, from a technical standpoint, as well as a strategic/military standpoint, it has value. But it is, again, a very modest deployment, and certainly not something that is capable of threatening the Russian Federation, nor should it be viewed as such. Despite the rhetoric out of Moscow these days, this is not a system that would have any capability against their strategic deterrent.

At the political level, it is quite important that the United States be seen as being deeply involved with—and able to be an ally of choice for—European nations. Right now, the Iranian ballistic missile threat may seem theoretical to Europeans. But if, in fact, the day comes when the development of the follow-on "Shihab" systems puts European capitals under threat, the situation would likely be very different. One can imagine a very stressful situation if Iran were able to directly threaten America's closest allies, and the United States would either not be able to defend them or only able to threaten retaliation.

Now that the "third site" has been announced, it is critical that the United States go forward with it. A lot of our European allies who have spoken out in favor of the deployment are expecting us to. But the controversy is there; it is there principally because the Russians have seen an opportunity to drive a wedge between the United States and our allies. Unfortunately that resonates with some in Europe, particularly in a post-Iraq environment.

*You mentioned Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin has condemned the Bush administration's plans and taken a number of confrontational strategic steps in response, including withdrawing Russia from the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty last year. Is a modus vivendi with the Kremlin on missile defense really possible?*

The Russians are going to act in their own interest. That means there are areas where we can cooperate with Moscow, and where we in fact are cooperating. But there are also areas where we are not going to be able to cooperate.

For example, the Russians have pegged their decision on the CFE Treaty to the "third site." Yet if somehow that were to go away, the Russians would not, in fact, reverse their decision. They had been complaining to us about CFE Treaty limitations long before there was any decision to deploy a "third site." Indeed, the Russians have not been in compliance with that agreement for years. Their withdrawal, therefore, is in fact a *de jure* representation of what they had been applying *de facto* for the past decade, back into the Clinton administration.

While there may be political cover for the Kremlin to argue it is withdrawing from the CFE Treaty or taking other sorts of actions as a result of missile defense, the reality is that Moscow sees the deployment as an opportunity to drive a wedge between us and our allies. As long as they see it that way, there is very little prospect of cooperation on missile defense.

The United States has offered extensive cooperation with the Russians in a wide variety of different areas relating to missile defense. We have tried to put every possible *hors d'oeuvre* on the table, just to see what Moscow might be interested in. There are probably some in Russia, perhaps in their military-industrial complex, who are interested in the technical aspects of such cooperation. But the overriding political imperative not to cooperate with the United States on strategic missile defense seems to have won the day, and probably will continue for as long as President Putin and his hand-picked successors are in power.

*Speaking of Russia, it is no secret that relations between Moscow and Washington have grown increasingly frosty over the past two years. U.S. officials have repeatedly expressed concerns regarding the growing authoritarianism of the Putin government, as well as its neo-imperialist impulses toward the countries of Eastern Europe and the "post-Soviet space." What changes do you see taking place in Russian foreign policy, and what challenges do they pose for the United States in the years ahead?*

What we are seeing is not so much a change in Russian policy as its enablement as a result of Russia's return to the status of a fairly wealthy country. I am not of the view that Russia is going to try to recreate the Soviet Union. But the jury is out on that, and we will have to see what direction Moscow finally takes. There's probably a position somewhere in the Russian political spectrum that would like to do that. The current group in power is not quite that ambitious, however. What they are trying to do is to ensure that they blunt any further NATO expansion, weaken the Atlantic Alliance by driving wedges between the United States and our European allies—and among them, as they have successfully done between Eastern Europe and Central and Western Europe.

We will no doubt continue to see that kind of activity. But this is not a return to the Cold War. Russian policy does not have the ideological component that it did during the Cold War. It does, however, have its own set of challenges and dangers that we are going to have to manage.

It is a key reason why the United States has to stay engaged in Europe, stay engaged in NATO, and continue to develop the political, diplomatic and military capabilities to remain the ally of choice. Moving forward on the "third site" is an important element of that.

*Finally, Iran. The new National Intelligence Estimate(NIE) on Iran issued by the U.S. intelligence community this past December—with its key judgment that Iran halted its work on nuclear weapons development in 2003—has ignited a heated debate at home and abroad about Iranian capabilities and intentions. Can you put the NIE in strategic context?*

If you look closely at the Iran NIE, what it really says is that there are three major aspects to Iran's nuclear weapons program. One of those was the weapon design capability, which the drafters claim to have evidence was frozen at some point in 2003. But they do not say at what state weapons design was frozen, whether we would know if it were unfrozen, or how long it would take if it were unfrozen to complete the work. They also go on to say that the crucial piece that the Bush administration has been worried about, the so-called "long pole of the tent" in developing nuclear weapons—that is, the capability to create fissile material either through uranium enrichment or through the creation of plutonium—continues, and probably will be expanded. In other words, the thing we worry about most, and the thing that is the hardest to do in the development of nuclear weapons, is continuing. The third thing we are seeing the Iranians continue to develop is delivery systems—particularly missile systems—for these capabilities. So the NIE leaves a lot of questions unanswered.

However, the administration's concerns about Iran are not just related to its development of nuclear weapons. The Iranian regime—as distinct from the Iranian people—is a key enabler of terrorism throughout the Middle East. This includes suborning democracy in Lebanon through its Syrian allies. They have been supporting destabilizing terrorist activities in Iraq, which have helped fuel the cycle of sectarian violence there. And they have been the principal supporter in recent years of obstructionist elements that try to keep a Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement from emerging. So there are lots of reasons to be concerned about the authoritarian and expansionist ideology of Iran. You mate that up with the potential to have a nuclear weapon, and it is clear why the concern is there.

*Nevertheless, post-NIE, the White House will be waging an uphill battle in crafting a comprehensive, multilateral approach to Iran. What is the Bush administration's strategy likely to be in the months ahead, and what role does Europe play in it?*

Clearly, the political fallout from the NIE is going to make it more difficult to hold together any anti-Iran coalition. You are going to continue to see the U.S. trying to work with our European partners on Iran, but it is going to be in a more difficult context. It is going to be more difficult for the IAEA to be a willing and helpful player in this context as well. But it was going to be hard anyway; several resolutions have increased sanctions on Iran, yet these do not seem to have worked. There are some pretty tough choices ahead, in other words, either for this administration or the next one.