



BULLETIN

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Missile Defense Program: Obama Administration's New Approach

by Beata Górka-Winter

As revealed by Barack Obama's administration on September 17th, the missile defense (MD) is going to be modified dramatically in the years to come. The USA will reduce to a minimum investments in technologies that have proven ineffective, meaning that only so-called "theater" programs (land - and sea-based components) will be developed. US will suspend the project of building the GBI base in Redzikowo and the X-band radar in the Czech Republic. Instead, the US plan to develop the new MD architecture in Europe, aiming at the countering current ballistic missile threats.

Background. On September 17th, the Obama administration presented the preliminary results of the review of missile defense programs. Several factors led to these estimates. Firstly, there were the unusually critical opinions that had been voiced in the USA for years, in both Democratic and Republican circles. Critics primarily pointed to the enormous financial outlays (about USD10 billion per year, on average) earmarked for the budget of the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) responsible for the realization of the program, in comparison with the limited or unproven effectiveness of some projects (most of them have never been used in operational conditions). Allegations were also voiced about giving in to the pressure of arms industry lobbyists, suspending the "fly before you buy" principle (holding that the U.S. government should not invest in systems that are untried, are at the testing stage, and that have not attained initial operational capabilities), and about a lack of consideration for the negative political consequences for the USA of implementing some of the projects, including the potential for conflict with Russia, China or some NATO allies.

Secondly, military operations conducted by the USA, especially the one in Afghanistan, have become high-priority security issues for the Obama administration. For this reason, it has announced additional comprehensive funding for these operations, something that will lead to reduced financing for other projects.

Thirdly, in times of a financial crisis, the elimination of programs that have not demonstrated their effectiveness is also a natural consequence of the adoption of tougher budget discipline. As early as May 2009, the U.S. Congress adopted the so-called Weapon Systems Acquisition Reform Act of 2009, which is to prevent the waste of funds in connection with weapons purchases. According to the 2008 report of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (the Congress' investigative body), nearly 70 % of all defense programs underway exceeded their planned budget. The resulting losses were estimated at almost USD300 billion. In keeping with the premises of the new law, weapons procurement will be subject to more stringent oversight, there will be greater supervision of the purchasing process and test results will be decisive for the selection of specific equipment.

New Premises of the Missile Defense Program. During George W. Bush's two terms, the missile defense program was an unquestioned priority among defense projects that were to ensure America's security at the strategic level. The United States wanted to create a system that would protect U.S. territory and that of its allies, as well as U.S. forces in various combat theaters, from the full spectrum of ballistic threats. This entailed a simultaneous pursuit of several dozen programs with the aim of building a "multi-layered" system capable of intercepting ballistic missiles of any range and at any phase of flight.

The Obama administration decided to review all those options. A convenient moment for the presentation of its vision for the continued development of the MD program came as early as during the debate on the U.S. defense budget for 2010. Participants in the debate included Defense Secretary Robert Gates, MDA head Patrick O'Reilly and many other experts assessing the development of the program. Their pronouncements indicate that the United States will concentrate on the development of only those programs that will be able to protect the U.S. first of all from a potential attack from states like Iran (which possess a limited arsenal of ballistic missiles; according to the intelligence estimates the Iranian regime will be able to develop the capability of developing the ICBMs on much slower pace that it was previously estimated), and also from an attack on U.S. forces or those of its allies participating in armed operations. In practice, this means that that the MD aim put forward by the Obama administration is far less ambitious than that of the previous one, when the planned architecture of the project was designed to attain a maximum of anti-missile protection capability. The scale on MD-related work pursued under the former administration pointed, contrary to President Bush's declarations, to a desire to reach capabilities far in excess of mere interception of missiles fired from Iran or North Korea. As was pointed out during the budget debate, additional funding in the next few years can only be expected in the case of programs that have proven to be effective in operational conditions or which have produced positive results during testing (and whose realization from a technical point of view is certain).

MD Architecture. The adoption of the above premises changes significantly the entire architecture of the future MD system. On account of its considerable technological superiority, the US will develop first of all the so-called theater systems (land and sea), which are able to intercept missiles at the terminal phase of their trajectory and, in the case of more advanced systems, also during the ascent phase (between the initial and middle stage of the missile's trajectory). Thanks to their mobility, they can be used not only for the protection of forces participating in operations but also of strategically important places on U.S. and other countries' territory. The preliminary budget for 2010 contained a proposal to increase outlays for the ground-based THAAD mobile system and to work out upgraded versions of the SM-3 missile mounted on ships along with the Aegis guidance and firing system. The United States, which already has a fleet of 18 ships outfitted with the Aegis system (mostly in the Pacific), plans to equip three additional ships therewith over the next few years. Moreover, some of these ships are most probably to be stationed in the Mediterranean and the North Sea in the framework of 2011.

In keeping with the announcement made by Patrick O'Reilly, programs aimed at achieving the ability to intercept ballistic missiles in mid-course, especially ground-based ones, will be significantly limited. Among other things, it was decided that the number of intercepting missiles in bases in Alaska and California will not exceed 30 (44 had been planned). According to the MDA, this ability will be sufficient to neutralize threats from North Korea. It was also pointed out that such an option is warranted for financial reasons.

Given the costs and encountered technological obstacles, considerable limitations will also be placed on boost-phase programs, such as the ABL laser (intended to destroy oncoming missiles with an energy beam). It was also decided to terminate the Kinetic Energy Interceptor and the Multiple Kill Vehicle (a multiple warhead missile) programs. The latter one, according to Gates, would have greater capabilities than defense against "rogue nations." This declaration should be viewed as a signal of the new administration sent in the direction of China and Russia—the two countries objecting most strongly to the missile defense system.

Conclusions for Poland. The decision to shelve the "European site" of MD in the shape the Bush administration planned was announced on September 17th. The two-stage rockets that were to be based in Redzikowo have not yet been tested and given the present budgetary constraints and political situation (negotiations with Russia on nuclear arsenal reductions), the United States will not begin the construction of the base. Instead, the plans of building the bases with land-based SM-3 rockets in Europe, including Poland, were drawn up. The Obama administration also declares that it continues to be interested in developing European countries' capability to protect themselves against ballistic missiles threats, coming especially from Iran. For this reason, Poland's efforts in this sphere should concentrate on joining those efforts—something that could require willingness to shoulder a part of the costs they entail.