

BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Katarzyna Staniewska (Executive Editor),
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Roderick Parkes, Beata Wojna

The U.S. Missile Defence System in Europe. Current Status and Prospects

Jacek Durkalec

The United States has made significant progress in implementing the European Phased Adaptive Approach to missile defence (EPAA). However, the timeframe and scope of EPAA's further implementation remain uncertain. In addition to the decisions of the next U.S. president, current plans will be influenced by the U.S. Congress and development of MD technologies.

Status. President Barack Obama's administration has made noteworthy progress in the implementation of the EPAA. Since March 2011, an American ship equipped with an Aegis BMD system and SM-3 IA interceptors has been deployed to the eastern Mediterranean within the framework of the EPAA's first phase. Following an agreement with Spain, two U.S. Aegis ships will be based at the naval facility in Rota from 2014, with two more due to join them the following year. Equally important is that, in December 2011, the U.S. AN/TPY-2 radar in Kürecik, Turkey, became operational. EPAA command and control has been established in Ramstein, Germany. Currently, the U.S. systems in Europe provide protection for southern Europe against attacks from the Middle East using short and mid-range ballistic missiles with maximum distances of up to 3,000 km.

The United States' basing agreements with Poland (which came into force in September 2011) and Romania (December 2011) allowed land-based SM-3 sites to be installed in these countries. The installation at Romania's Deveselu air base, with SM-3 IB interceptors, will be the key element of phase II of the EPAA, envisaged for 2015. U.S.–Romanian preparatory works are proceeding according to plans. Both sides have already agreed on part of the implementation arrangements relating to the construction and operation of the site. The land-based SM-3 site in Redzikowo, Poland, is planned to become operational in 2018, as a part of EPAA phase III. The presence of SM-3 IIA in Poland, Romania and on board Aegis ships will provide missile defence protection for all European members of NATO.

There are indications that the SM-3 IIB interceptors which will be a core component of phase IV are planned to be deployed only in Poland. This will provide additional protection from the United States, against potential intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) threats from the Middle East and will augment Europe's defences against intermediate-range ballistic missiles (up to 5500 km).

The Alliance's Context. At the Lisbon Summit, NATO members agreed to build the NATO territorial missile defence system. The system will include a commonly funded command and control element, able to link sensors and interceptors contributed voluntarily by individual NATO members. The EPAA will be the U.S. national contribution to NATO's system. In practical terms, use of the EPAA in the defence of NATO members will be under the political control of all allies and will follow the operational procedures about which NATO members reached consensus.

At the Chicago Summit in May, NATO announced the achievement of Interim Capability of the allied missile defence system. This provides Alliance members with shared real time situational awareness, planning capability, and, to limited extent, a capability to direct a missile defence battle. NATO members approved operational procedures for the use of the system. The United States has transferred operational control of the radar in Turkey to NATO. If conditions warrant, the U.S. can also transfer command the Aegis ships to NATO.

Prospects for Implementation. The timeframe and scope for the EPAA's realisation remain open. Further build-up is contingent upon financial resources authorised by the U.S. Congress.

Despite general congressional support for financing the development of missile defence, it may transpire that the level of funding for EPAA elements could be influenced by the necessity to cut the U.S. budget deficit. Furthermore, Congress may in the coming years grow reluctant to fund systems providing protection primarily to European states. This may happen especially if the European contribution to NATO missile defence is perceived as insufficient. Similar positions were visible in the House of Representatives during the debate on the National Defence Authorization Act for fiscal year 2013.

Timeframe for the EPAA's implementation will be contingent on the technological development of missile defence systems. In line with congressional restraints, the U.S. secretary of defence cannot allocate funds for deployment of missile defence interceptors in Europe if their effectiveness has not been proven in realistic tests. However, deployment of SM-3 IB interceptors in Romania will most probably not be delayed. After the failure of an initial intercept test, the two consecutive tests were successful.

During the term of the next U.S. president, the prospects for the planned implementation of phases III and IV of EPAA will become clearer. In the second half of 2016, the U.S. plans an intercept test of SM-3 IIA. In case of failure, phase III may be postponed. Far more uncertain is the future of SM-3 IIB. The interceptor is currently being designed. Congressional reductions of SM-3 IIB funding delayed the expected operational readiness of this interceptor from 2020 to 2021. Additionally, expert analyses indicate the SM-3 IIB would have limited effectiveness in augmenting the defence of the U.S. against ICBMs. In coming years, phase IV of the EPAA may be revised.

Impact of the U.S. Election. Both presidential candidates agree that the U.S. should deploy a missile defence system and should extend missile defence protection to its allies. Democrat President Obama's administration underscores its firm commitment to implementing the EPAA in its current form. Republican Mitt Romney supports the EPAA on the condition that it will be effective.

The implementation of the EPAA will be influenced by the next U.S. administration's perception of the ballistic missile threat from the Middle East. If Romney wins, absent a breakthrough in the Iranian issue, the U.S. will probably strive to strengthen the continental United States' protection against such a threat more quickly. Greater emphasis will be put on improvement of GBI and its deployment on the east coast. If the pace of development and effectiveness of SM-3 IIB is unsatisfactory, or if estimates of the Iranian ballistic missile threat change, the U.S. may return to the idea of deploying the two-stage Ground Base Interceptors in Europe. A second Obama administration would, in the absence of a visible acceleration of Iranian ICBM development, continue to stress that current missile defence assets are sufficient to provide protection for the U.S. If the pace of the development of the Iranian missile threat slows, the U.S. may be more willing to postpone implementation of phases III and IV.

The result of the election will influence U.S. policy towards Russia. It is probable that, during a second term, Obama would, within limits imposed by the U.S. Senate, offer Russia additional transparency measures, cooperation (not compromising NATO's operational autonomy) or political guarantees that the EPAA is not a threat to Russian deterrence capability. Despite Obama's statements suggesting his flexibility after the election, it is unlikely that he will agree on legally binding limitations of the U.S. system or to the Russian proposal of sectoral missile defence in Europe. Romney announced an assertive U.S. stance vis-à-vis Russia, and criticised the Obama administration's resignation from the previous administration's project as an unnecessary concession to Russia. His "reset of reset" may mean that a dialogue with Russia on missile defence will be stuck at a relatively low level.

Conclusions for Poland. During the next presidential term, prospects for implementation of next phases of the EPAA will become clearer. Poland can only influence developments in the U.S. in this area to a limited degree. Most importantly, Poland should cooperate with the next U.S. administration in order to create conditions for the deployment of SM-3 installations on its territory according to the current plans, i.e., by finishing work on implementation arrangements under existing agreements. While Poland should continue to advocate that a lack of cooperation with Russia should not influence the form and pace of the EPAA's development, it should also, through consultation with the U.S. and other NATO allies, continue to explore new ways of finding satisfactory compromise with Russia, notwithstanding the result of U.S. election. Furthermore, while building its national air and missile defence system, providing protection against short and medium-range missiles, Poland should stress that some elements of the system could be transferred to NATO's operational control if needed. In this way Poland will strengthen the European role in NATO's missile defence system. It is also in Polish interests that any changes in the EPAA's implementation will be conducted by the U.S. only after bilateral and NATO-wide consultations.