



BULLETIN

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The Impact of a Possible Agreement on the Iranian Nuclear Programme on NATO Missile Defence

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A new round of negotiations could lead to agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme. A deal would most likely spark discussions about NATO's plans to build territorial missile defence, including the construction of a U.S. installation in Poland. Several arguments can be put forward for not changing the current plans. However, reassessments of MD policy should not be totally discarded. Poland should push for a formulation of clear positions from the U.S. and NATO on this issue, highlighting that any modifications should be based on solid premises.

On 15 and 16 October 2013 in Geneva, the first round of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany with the participation of the EU) after the change in the Iranian presidential administration took place. Whether an agreement on Iran's nuclear programme will be reached remains an open question. There is a need to agree on detailed measures that would provide confidence that the Iranian nuclear programme would not be used for military purposes. Possible controversies include the scope of further Iranian nuclear activities (especially related to uranium enrichment) and a timeframe for easing international sanctions against the country. However, the talks in Geneva and signals from Iran of its willingness to reach rapid compromise provide grounds for cautious optimism about a way out of the impasse.

The Iranian threat was the main reason for the U.S. to decide to deploy elements of its missile defence system in Europe. Therefore, it is relevant to ask whether and how a possible deal could influence further implementation of the U.S. European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), the crucial national contribution to a NATO missile defence system. The consequences of an agreement for NATO's work on joint missile-defence command-and-control and European national contributions to the system also require clarification.

Arguments for a Continuation of the Current Plans. NATO has stated that territorial missile defence is a response to the threat posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles. Although Iran is not officially mentioned as one of these threats, the decision to build the system was primarily dictated by actions taken by the country. The Iranian missile threat is directly highlighted by the United States as the implementation of consecutive phases of EPAA is contingent upon the threat level emanating from the Middle East. However, neither the NATO or U.S. statements do not link the development of territorial missile defence with the nuclear programme of any specific country. Therefore, it could be argued that a deal on the Iranian nuclear programme would not provide a sufficient basis for a change in existing missile defence plans.

So far, nothing indicates that Iran would voluntarily agree to any constraints on its ballistic missile capabilities. Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria are in range of Iranian short- and medium-range missiles. It is also reported that Iran may possess BM-25 ballistic missiles, which have a range of 3,000 km and could reach Central Europe. Also, Iran will most likely continue development of its space-launch programme. The technologies needed to put a satellite into orbit to a great extent overlap with those needed to build an intercontinental ballistic missile. Iran could therefore increase its capabilities to build missiles with greater ranges. It would be even easier if international sanctions that limit Iran's

access to ballistic missile-related materials and technologies were lifted. Iranian access to ballistic-missile-related equipment was curtailed because of the prospect that its missile arsenal could be used to deliver nuclear warheads.

The possible agreement most likely would limit Iran's nuclear programme and would provide additional time for reaction if Iran decided to break it. However, a deal would not give one hundred percent assurance that Iran would not in the future decide to acquire a nuclear arsenal. Iran might also use its missiles to deliver other kinds of weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the role of the Alliance's MD system is not limited solely to countering the Iranian threat. It provides the capability to defend against future threats from various directions, including from Asia. Arguably, it could also dissuade new countries from building ballistic missile arsenals for use against NATO countries.

A last point, another modification of EPAA could be also interpreted as a signal of a decreasing U.S. commitment to European security. Completion of EPAA has been regarded on the continent so far as a form of U.S. visible assurance of its European allies and an instrument for strengthening transatlantic ties and NATO deterrence capabilities.

Arguments for a Change. It should not be excluded, however, that a deal on the Iranian nuclear programme would influence the build-up of missile defence in Europe. According to the 2010 Lisbon Summit Declaration, NATO's missile defence system will be developed while taking into account "the level of threat" and "in accordance with the latest common threat assessments agreed by the Alliance." Similarly, the U.S. notes that the implementation of EPAA is related to the level of the ballistic missile threat. However, the perception of threat is shaped not only by the number and ranges of ballistic missiles but also by their potential payloads. To a great degree, this last factor necessitated the construction of the missile defence system given the possibility that Iran could put nuclear warheads atop its missiles. Limiting this possibility, together with a lack of indications that Iran could arm its missiles with chemical or biological weapons, might decrease the level of urgency of MD development. Iran's possession of ballistic missiles that could deliver only conventional warheads might be seen as insufficient rationale for building a system to defend the territory of all European NATO members in the currently projected timeframe.

Possible alterations to MD policy could also be indirectly influenced by other factors. In the face of a less potent and imminent ballistic missile threat amid budgetary constraints, NATO members could decide to reallocate some funds from territorial missile defence command-and-control to other, more pressing needs. Also, European NATO members might be less willing to invest in national capabilities that could reinforce territorial MD. The postponement of EPAA implementation could also result from a further increase in the North Korean missile threat. The U.S. could conclude that instead of strengthening defences against the Iranian threat it would be better to invest more to defend its allies in East Asia or to improve missile defence capabilities on its own territory.

The postponement of full EPAA implementation could also provide the U.S. and NATO with extra time to reach a compromise with Russia, lessening the risk of a deterioration in that relationship. Russia has expressed an expectation that a solution to the Iranian nuclear problem would lead to reconsideration of the current U.S. plans. Russia could also exploit a lack of willingness to change the current plans as confirmation that the U.S. system in Europe is aimed against Russia's nuclear deterrence capabilities.

Conclusions for Poland. Agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme would most likely trigger a debate about the future of missile defence in Europe, including U.S. plans to deploy an SM-3 site in Redzikowo. Although the cancellation of the current plans seems unlikely, postponement of work on joint NATO missile-defence command-and-control and EPAA implementation is possible. Changes could be announced if NATO members have a high degree of confidence that Iran will fully comply with all of its obligations.

The base in Poland, which is one of the last EPAA elements to be deployed and which has generated controversy in relations with Russia, is especially vulnerable to any alterations in the plan. As developments in North Korea lead to the cancellation of EPAA's fourth phase in March 2013, a deal on the Iranian nuclear programme could be used as a justification of the postponement of the third phase. Although the U.S. administration emphasises its "ironclad commitment" to the implementation of all three phases of EPAA, modifications of U.S. policy should not be excluded.

It is in the interest of Poland to initiate consultations within NATO on a link between a possible Iranian nuclear deal and a schedule of further implementation of missile defence plans. It is also crucial to obtain a clear U.S. position on this issue. It would be valuable if NATO members were to develop a list of criteria that could justify delays or changes in the current plans. The presentation of the list to Russia might be useful in countering possible Russian demands that further EPAA implementation should be frozen after a nuclear deal with Iran. Also, it would lessen the risk of internal divisions in NATO on the issue.

Poland should highlight the current schedule of work on joint NATO missile defence command-and-control and insist it be sustained. Its final operational capability has been postponed many times already. Poland should also stress that any changes to EPAA's implementation pace should be based on solid grounds. The U.S. and other NATO allies should refrain from precipitating decisions without consultation and take into account that Iran could increase its missile arsenal while retaining the capability to acquire a nuclear weapon even after a deal with the P5+1 countries.