

US MISSILE DEFENSE: A STRATEGIC CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE

The US intention to establish parts of its strategic missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic has given rise to intense controversy in Europe. Major points of contention concern the repercussions of the planned protective umbrella on the West's relations with Russia, the extent of the threat emanating from Iran, and the concrete role of the Europeans and NATO in the area of missile defense. The future demands of strategic stability in Europe are bound to be the subject of long transatlantic debates.



Reuters/David W. Cerny

Supporter of a US missile defense radar system in the Czech Republic during a rally in Prague, 12 March 2007

The US plans for a comprehensive protective shield against ballistic missiles have long been the subject of transatlantic consultations. Nevertheless, the Bush administration's announcement that it intends to initiate negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic on the stationing of interceptor missiles and building a radar installation has provoked controversial reactions in Europe. Russia has used the topic as a wedge to divide the NATO members; at the same time, several European governments question both the necessity and the feasibility of a missile defense screen. In view of the US determination to create a missile defense capability in the near future, however, the Europeans will not be able to avoid taking a stance in this question any longer.

A new sense of urgency

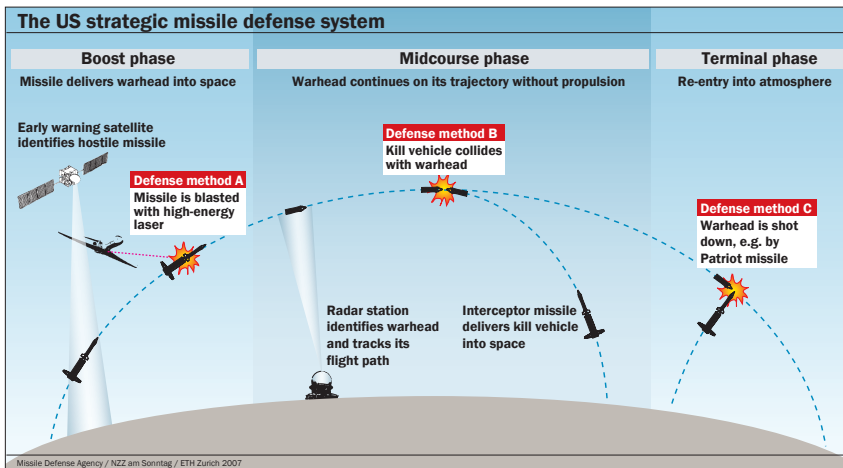
The US has been evaluating the feasibility of defense against military projectiles since

the 1950s. The idea of strategic missile defense gained public attention for the first time under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who in 1983 announced his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) for a space-based defensive screen against Soviet nuclear weapons. After the end of the Cold War, the topic initially lost attention before being reintroduced to the political agenda by a bipartisan commission led by the future defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld. In view of the fundamentally transformed strategic environment and the increasing proliferation of mass casualty weapons and their delivery systems, the Rumsfeld Commission concluded that the US intelligence system had underestimated the threat emanating from ballistic missiles. Specifically, it claimed that Iran and North Korea could be five years away from being able to attack the US with ballistic missiles, and that Iraq could have such a capability in ten years' time.

The National Missile Defense (NMD) system was conceived under President Bill Clinton to supplement and enhance the US strategy of deterrence, which was traditionally based on offensive capabilities and the threat of retaliation, with a defensive component. While the concept received limited attention only under Clinton, the Bush administration gave orders to install an anti-missile umbrella as quickly as possible. In 2002, the US abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that it had concluded with the USSR 30 years earlier, and which banned the construction of a strategic missile defense system. Since then, the US Missile Defense Agency has had a huge budget at its disposal. It will receive US\$9.4 billion in fiscal year 2007, with the independent Congressional Budgetary Office anticipating further annual increases to as much as US\$15-19 billion in the year 2013. All in all, the US has spent more than US\$110 billion on missile defense since the mid-1980s.

A comprehensive system

Compared to the SDI project, which was never realized, the US is aiming for more modest targets today. The NMD is primarily intended to offer protection from single long-range missiles from Iran or North Korea, not from the nuclear arsenals of Russia or China. The system itself is planned as a multi-layered array that will be able to intercept short-, mid-, and long-range missiles in all flight phases. The planned defensive shield is of strategic significance, as it is expected to offer protection to the US homeland as well as to its allies' territories and its troops stationed abroad. The already existing tactical and theater missile defense systems, by comparison, only aim



to protect deployed troops or, in the case of countries like Japan or Israel, to offer protection for regional conflict areas.

The NMD system is based on various types of sensors (satellites and radar) as well as interception arrays that are integrated under a so-called C2BMC (Command, Control, Battle Management, Communications) architecture. During the boost phase of a hostile missile, which lasts between three and five minutes, airborne high-energy lasers would be applied (as well as kinetic energy interceptors, which have yet to be developed fully) to make the missile crash.

In order to intercept a missile during its midcourse phase outside of the Earth's atmosphere, which can last for up to 20 minutes, the US has deployed the Aegis ballistic missile defense system for use against hostile short- and medium-range rockets. However, efforts in this area are being focused on the development of a Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD), which it is hoped will be able to intercept intercontinental missiles in the future. This core element of the NMD system envisages booster rockets that would deliver kill vehicles into space, where they would be set on a computer-generated collision course with the targeted warhead. So far, 15 such missile batteries have been set up in Alaska and in California. It is anticipated that 54 GMD interceptors will be deployed by 2013.

A number of US interceptor systems may be deployed against an enemy missile during its terminal flight phase of 30 to 60 seconds. There is the land-based Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system; the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) anti-aircraft missile, which was also deployed during the invasion of Iraq in 2003; the US-Israeli Arrow system; and the mobile Medium Extended Air Defense

System (MEADS), which is being jointly developed by the US, Germany, and Italy. These systems for last-minute intercepts are also employed in tactical missile defense and are mainly designated for use against hostile short- and medium-range missiles.

Forward defense in Europe

In order to be able to provide a broad and reliable defensive shield, the NMD system requires the stationing of interceptor missiles in Europe. The GMD interceptors in the US are well placed to defend against potential attacks from North Korea, but less than ideally positioned to intercept attacks from the Middle East. Therefore, it is planned to install ten of the planned 54 GMD missiles in Poland, linked to an X-band radar in the Czech Republic. According to Washington, this forward-defensive posture would allow the interception not only of missiles targeted against US territory, but also attacks on Europe itself.

So far, reactions to the integration of individual European states into the strategic US missile defense system have been mixed. The governments in Poland and in the Czech Republic are favorably disposed towards the plans and have agreed to take up negotiations. They expect that an even closer alliance with the US would give them additional protection from Russia. The UK and Denmark have indirectly supported the US plans by agreeing to modernization of radar installations in Northern England and Greenland. According to media reports, London is engaged in intense efforts to secure the stationing of interceptor missiles on British territory as well. Other European states such as Germany and France have reacted with reticence or hostility to the notion of a defensive shield over Europe. There are three main reasons for such criticism of US plans.

Political exploitation by Russia

First of all, Russia has used the US proposal as a pretext to distance itself from the West and to attempt to divide the West, if possible. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin lashed out against the US attempt to establish a "unipolar world" and the "militarization of outer space", warning of an "inevitable arms race". Since then, Russia has repeatedly stated that an increased US strategic capability in Europe could diminish Russia's deterrent power, especially since Washington could hardly be expected to be content with stationing ten GMD missiles in Poland in the long run. Moscow has also threatened to include Poland and the Czech Republic in its database of targets and to abrogate the treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF), which bans nuclear medium-range missile systems.

The US has countered the Russian criticism by saying that for technical reasons alone, the NMD system would not be able to impede the Russian deterrent force. To achieve that purpose would not only require several hundred GMD missiles. More importantly, these interceptors would not be able to catch up with Russian missiles, especially since part of the Russian arsenal would not cross Europe to reach the US. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that Russia is not so much concerned about the NMD system as it is interested in justifying its own increased defense spending, as well as a possible cancellation of the INF treaty, an option the Kremlin is believed to have been considering for several years. Furthermore, Putin is also trying to halt the erosion of the Russian sphere of influence, not least in view of the fact that the US Congress is already discussing NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. In Europe, however, and especially in Germany, where the current debate is focused on the possible negative repercussions of missile defense on the relations between the West and Russia, it appears that the Russian saber-rattling has served its purpose.

Iran as a threat to strategic stability?

A second reason for the controversy surrounding the NMD system is due to the disagreements over the necessity and the operability of a missile defense screen. A number of European governments and experts are by no means convinced that Iran will be able to threaten Europe and the US with nuclear-tipped missiles by the year 2015, as predicted by the US Department

of Defense. Furthermore, they see mainly regional motivations for the Iranian missile program. They are also concerned about possible negative repercussions for the standing of Europe in the Gulf region and for its diplomatic leverage in the conflict over Iran's missile program if Europe should offer backing for the US defensive measures against rockets launched by Tehran.

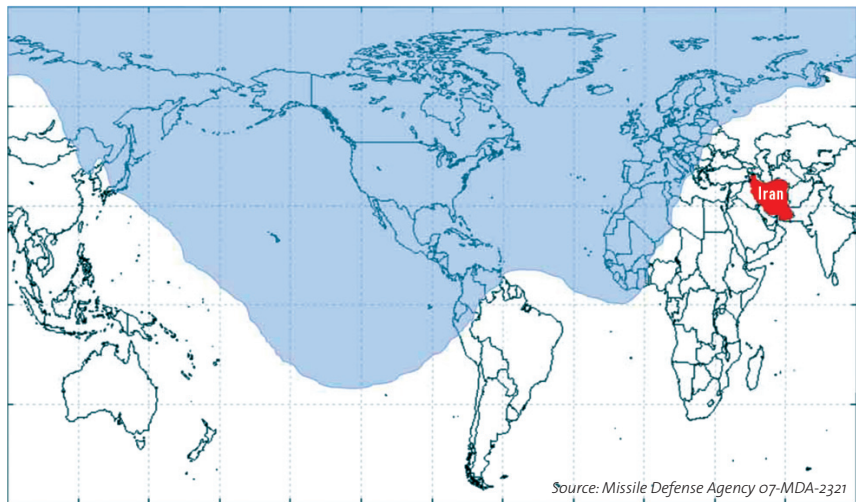
Even if the threat from Tehran became real, many Europeans have doubts concerning the security benefits that a missile defense shield can offer. The technical feasibility of strategic missile defense is highly controversial even in the US. The US scheme is frequently compared to the attempt to shoot down a bullet with another bullet. All tests conducted so far have been based on unrealistic scenarios. Many Europeans also expect better answers to questions that matter to them, such as regarding the threat of possible secondary damage from the debris of a destroyed missile. Furthermore, experts point out that with or without a defensive shield, a credible Iranian missile threat would inevitably limit Europe's room for maneuver in the Middle East, since in the case of an escalating conflict, European governments could hardly afford to base their political decisions on the reliability of a missile defense system.

There is no doubt that the importance of Iran's arms program for strategic stability in Europe still requires more detailed discussion on this side of the Atlantic. For the moment, it is certain that many Europeans regard diplomacy, a consistent non-proliferation policy, and traditional deterrence (largely based on the US nuclear arsenal) as being more efficient security tools than the new military technology advocated by the US.

The role of NATO

The third major bone of contention concerns the lack of a clear NATO dimension in the current US plans. The bilateral agreements that the US is aiming to conclude with Warsaw and Prague raise fundamental questions concerning the European role in strategic missile defense as well as European security policy in general.

The German government's proposal to make NMD a multilateral NATO project has been met with rejection in Washington. On the one hand, the Bush administration has indicated in recent weeks that it would be prepared to discuss the coordination of a *tactical* NATO missile defense with the



Area covered by NMD system against potential Iranian ballistic missile attack

NMD system. Washington is referring to NATO's Active Layered Theater Ballistic Missile Defence (ALTBMD) system, which is to be deployed beginning in 2010 to protect alliance troops in overseas deployments (integrating systems like the PAC-3, MEADS, THAAD, the seaborne US Standard Missile-3, and the French SAMP-T, i.e. *Sol-Air Moyenne Portée Terrestre* or Ground-to-Air Medium Range Missile System).

Concerning *strategic* missile defense, however, the US has made clear that it will not relinquish control of the NMD system. Not only has Washington so far borne the development costs on its own; more importantly, a multilateral decision-making process on the deployment of the GMD missiles in an emergency is hardly practicable, due to time constraints. Also, with a NATO approach, Washington would risk a massive delay in the construction of the system, if it were completed at all.

Should the US insist on pursuing a bilateral course with individual European states, there are two major points that require clarification from the European point of view. First of all, it is still unclear how those allies that would not be included in any agreement would be able to influence decisions on a defensive missile shield for Europe, which would affect them directly. There are apparently no current plans for a consultative body in the matter of missile defense that would correspond to NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. A common launch doctrine might be more than the US could accept, while not going far enough to resolve the matter of decision-making authority from the European point of view. As an alternative, experts are discussing the possibility of a double structure involving two defensive screens deployed by both

NATO the US. This model, however, presupposes a common European agreement on deploying a missile defense system. While NATO has carried out a feasibility study for a defense system protecting the territory of the alliance, no political decisions have yet been made. Duplicating the GMD system would create huge costs for the Europeans and demand close coordination with the US array. At the same time, it might indeed increase the ability to protect Europe. In view of the relatively short distance involved, the interception of an Iranian missile targeted at Europe could require firing more GMD interceptor missiles than the planned US base in Poland could provide.

The second point concerns the repercussions of the NMD system on the NATO paradigm of collective defense. This core principle of transatlantic security could be undermined if the US, for example, should espouse any Polish requests for bilateral security guarantees in return for US command authority over GMD missiles stationed on Polish territory. This scenario again makes one thing very clear – that a protracted and controversial debate on the future foundations of strategic stability in Europe can be expected, regardless of how the Europeans respond to Washington's plans for missile defense.

Author & responsible editor:

Daniel Möckli
analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

Translated from German:
Christopher Findlay

Other CSS Analyses and mailing list:
www.isn.ethz.ch

German and French versions:
www.ssn.ethz.ch