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Sensitive rationalization or overlooked expansion? Demystifying the Obama plan for missile defense in Europe

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“Our new missile defense architecture in Europe will provide...greater defenses against the threat of missile attack than the 2007 European missile defense program.”¹ –President Barack Obama (2009)

On 17th September 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that the Pentagon would be canceling the plan to deploy assets of its global missile defense system in Europe to counter the growing long-range missile threat from Iran. Obama’s cancellation of the proposed ‘third site’ in Poland and the Czech Republic – so called because it was designed to complement and add to the missile defense assets already fielded in Alaska and California – has been widely viewed as a significant transformation in U.S. ballistic missile defense policy. Commentators and officials on both sides of the debate have suggested that the decision represents a conscious attempt to rein in the ballistic missile defense (BMD) program so cherished by George W. Bush. Conventional wisdom seems to hold that the decision is the product of focusing on proven technologies and near-term threats, in part to pave the ground diplomatically for better relations with Russia.

However, and despite that fact that the decision has been greeted favorably by those both at home and abroad keen to see a new era of a more responsible and humble U.S. foreign policy, Obama has not canceled the idea of deploying missile defenses in Europe. In fact, as will be shown below, the new “phased, adaptive approach” to BMD in Europe, unveiled on the same day as the cancellation of the Bush program, may actually prove to be larger, more comprehensive, involve more assets, and become operational far more rapidly than the ‘third site’ system. What is more, and because of this, the new plan could well end up being more politically and diplomatically problematic than the one proposed by Bush. Further confusing things is the fact that the U.S. BMD program continues to be riddled with technological uncertainties, and remains at the mercy of both international and domestic politics.

Altering, not cancelling, the plan for missile defense in Europe

What to do about the Bush administration's nascent plan to deploy 10 long-range interceptor missiles in Poland and an X-band radar in the Czech Republic to counter the missile threat from Iran, had been one of the key foreign policy decisions facing the embryonic Obama administration as it took office in 2009. Although Obama had been at best lukewarm about the plan during the 2008 Presidential election race, making it clear in an interview with *Arms Control Today* that "any missile defense, including the one proposed for Europe [must be] proven to work ... before we deploy it" and that even then, such defenses must be "pursued as part of an integrated approach that uses the full range of non-proliferation policy tools in response to the full range of threats we face,"² relatively little progress had been made on the issue during the first 9-months of his administration. Moreover, despite the fact that the President seemed to have little interest in the system strategically, politically or technologically, and even though it remained a major stumbling block in arms control negotiations with Russia, Obama seemed reluctant to cancel a program that would likely see him cast as baying to pressure from Moscow.

The decision to cancel the "third site" missile defense plan for Europe was generally understood by commentators and politicians on both sides of the political divide to represent a substantial scaling back of the previous administration's missile defense plans. However, and while the majority of media and congressional attention was primarily focused upon the implications of the cancellation, relatively little consideration was given to the plan that the Obama administration had proposed in its place. Rather than cancelling missile defense in Europe entirely – as some Democrats had wanted, Obama announced that the Pentagon would be pursuing a less expensive and more efficient system that would "build on the most effective technologies currently available to continue to address the most pressing short and medium-range Iranian missile threats."³

Although the decision was probably underpinned by a collection of dynamics – not least of which the priority placed on negotiating an arms

reductions agreement with Russia and enlisting Moscow's support in dealing with Iran – the President cited two main rationales for his change of plan; first, evidence from the National Intelligence Council suggesting that the Iranian long-range missile threat was evolving slower than originally expected but which also believed that Iran's short and medium-range programs were developing far quicker; and second, reports from the ongoing internal "missile defense review" that suggested that the most promising and proven technologies such as the Aegis sea-based system and SM-3 interceptor missile should be prioritized over the expensive and unreliable Ground-Based Interceptor (GBI) program.⁴ A White House spokesman declared:

"Changes in threat as well as our capabilities and technologies underscore the need for an adaptable architecture. This architecture is responsive to the current threat, but could also incorporate relevant technologies quickly and cost-effectively in responding to evolving threats."⁵

Instead of the 10 GBI missiles in Poland and X-band radar in the Czech Republic, which under the original plan would have become operational towards the end of the next decade (2018 at the earliest), Obama's replacement plan, known as the "phased, adaptive approach," called for a more evolutionary commitment that would gradually expand to meet possible future developments in threat and to incorporate advances in technology, potentially utilizing numerous radars and possibly hundreds of the SM-3 interceptor missiles on land and at sea.

Beginning with the provision of a rudimentary defense of Southeastern Europe against short-range missiles by 2011 and potentially finishing with a comprehensive defense against all types of missile threat aimed at Europe or the United States by 2020 – with the possibility of incorporating the ground-based interceptors if deemed necessary – the new plan relies extensively on the Aegis sea-based BMD system and the Standard Missile-3 interceptor, both of which remain among the better performing and more mature programs under development at the Pentagon. The four stages of the plan are listed below:

- (1) The first phase calls for fielding by 2011 the Aegis sea-based BMD system armed with SM-3(IA) interceptor missiles to protect U.S. troops and parts of Southeastern Europe against short-range missile attack.
- (2) The second phase calls for fielding by 2015 a new SM-3(IB) interceptor missile both at sea and on land (at bases in Northern and Southern Europe), allowing for protection of a wider area against short and medium-range ballistic missiles.
- (3) The third stage by 2018 would be to deploy an even more powerful SM-3(IIA) interceptor missile, in addition to previous deployments, that could be used against short, medium and intermediate-range attacks against the entire European landmass.
- (4) By 2020 the plan would see the deployment of the SM-3(IIB) interceptor missile against all types of threats giving the system the capacity to protect the United States against ICBM [Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile] threats.⁶

Each stage will involve the deployment of a more advanced SM-3 interceptor missile and the integration of more radar and sensor technology by linking in with current NATO and European (and possibly Russian) missile and air defense programs. To this end the White House has not ruled out the possibility of returning to the idea of housing long-range interceptor missiles in Poland or a radar in the Czech Republic should changes in threat or technology necessitate. The Congressional Research Service has estimated the cost of the system over the next decade to be around \$5bn, though this is likely to change.⁷

Reaction – a major change and retraction in U.S. policy?

The general reaction to the announcement both in the United States and abroad did little to dispel the popular perception that the alteration of the European BMD plan represented a major change and retraction in U.S. policy. Peter Baker writing in *The New York Times* went as far as to suggest that the decision to end the third site was “one of the administrations sharpest revisions of the national security policy inherited from Mr. Bush.”⁸ Domestically missile defense advocates and large sections of the Republican Party saw the decision as a dangerous move driven primarily by Russian

pressure. Congressman Howard McKeon (Republican-California) stressed his concern that “the administration is heading down a path where it is willing to undercut our allies and cave in to Russian demands on vital national security matters.”⁹ Representative John Boehner (Republican-Ohio) remarked that the decision “shows a willful determination to continue ignoring the threat posed by some of the most dangerous regimes in the world,”¹⁰ and Senator Mitch McConnell (Republican-Kentucky) that it was “short-sighted and harmful to our long term security interest.”¹¹ On the other side of the debate, the decision was received well by arms control advocates and by Obama’s natural political base within the Democrat Party who saw the decision as a sensible rationalization of a costly, unnecessary and unproven program. However many arms controllers remained disappointed that missile defense in Europe had essentially been changed rather than abandoned.

Internationally, Russia initially reacted positively to the news and even floated the idea of allowing the U.S. Aegis ships access to and use of the Black Sea, seemingly to suggest that a major obstacle had been removed from the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) replacement talks. America’s NATO allies – keen to see a diffusion of tension between Moscow and Washington, greeted the decision with some relief. Even in Poland and the Czech Republic – after they had been assured of continued American support and protection under the new plan – and in other parts of Central Eastern Europe, opposition was relatively muted. The reaction from all quarters, whether positive or negative, seemed to suggest that the ‘phased, adaptive approach’ represented a significant scaling back of American missile defense plans in Europe.

However, at no point has the Obama administration claimed that the cancellation of the “third site” and its replacement with the “phased, adaptive approach” represents a downsizing of the U.S. missile defense commitment in Europe. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates for one has been keen to stress that the administration is “strengthening – not scrapping – missile defense in Europe,” even going as far as saying that “the new configuration

provides a better missile defense capability than the program I recommended almost 3 years ago.”¹² What is more General James Cartwright (Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) has made it abundantly clear that that the administration remains committed to BMD, stating that the “long-range goal is to deploy a global network of mobile interceptors and sensors [and] a sufficient number of ships to allow us to have a global deployment of this capability on a constant basis.”¹³ Pentagon officials have been equally quick to point out that “every phase of the plan will include scores of SM-3 missiles,”¹⁴ and have made no secret of the fact that system is almost certain to involve significantly more interceptor missiles than the 10 that would have been fielded in Poland.¹⁵ If the current plan goes ahead as scheduled it is quite likely that as early as 2015, around 40-50 SM-3 interceptors could be in place on land in Europe (in addition to those already deployed at sea) – at least 3 years before the previous plan would have come to fruition. But perhaps most importantly, phase four of the plan – which would involve a highly developed version of the SM-3 interceptor capable of protecting Europe and America from long-range missile attacks – would represent a far greater defensive capability than *anything* proposed by the Bush administration.

Wider political and strategic implications

So what are the wider implications of this change of approach for missile defense in Europe? There are undoubtedly positive ramifications of the plan, and many reasons to suggest that it will improve the security situation in Europe and help facilitate Obama’s wider foreign policy agenda. But equally there is reason to believe that the new plan may also cause significant strategic problems, particularly regarding Russia. Thus a lot will probably depend on how the system expands and evolves, which itself will undoubtedly be reliant on technology, threat and the inevitable fluctuations in missile defense politics.

The most obvious advantage of the phased, adaptive approach to BMD in Europe is that it will provide protection of substantial parts of Europe that would not have been covered under the third site proposal against a wider range of missile threats. Unlike the third site plan, the phased,

adaptive approach will also be semi-mobile giving it the capacity to be moved or recalibrated as changes in threat, technology or other dynamics necessitate – thus allowing far greater flexibility. Above all it shifts the main focus of the program from long-range protection of the United States to short and medium-range missile protection of Europe – and also from long-term to more near-term threats.

What is more, by providing protection of Southeastern Europe and western parts of the Middle East, the new plan also has significant political implications for the wider region; (1) firstly, it will decrease the likelihood of a destabilizing Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear program by providing additional protection of Israel against Iranian missile attack; (2) secondly, it encourages countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt not to pursue and develop nuclear weapons in order to assure their regional status or in response to perceived developments in Iran.¹⁶ More widely the program should allow for a continued U.S. strategic presence in Europe without undermining the drive to reduce nuclear weapons or negotiations over START. Additionally the plan should also ensure closer BMD cooperation with NATO and possibly extended cooperation between NATO, the United States and Russia, with the prospect of Russia becoming involved in the European missile defense plan in some capacity in the future.

Despite this wide range of potential positive externalities there is much to suggest that the phased, adaptive approach could become a bigger diplomatic and strategic problem than the Bush administration’s third site. The primary reason for this is because a close inspection of the plan shows that it is a much bigger commitment than anything the Bush administration had proposed and will almost inevitably cause problems with strategic competitors. Underpinning this is the unlikelihood of real and worthwhile BMD cooperation with Russia. Instructively, and although the decision to cancel the third site deployments was greeted warmly by Moscow, when asked about the new program, Major General Vladimir Dvorkin (Head of the Moscow-based Center for Strategic Nuclear Forces) was very quick to warn that “everything depends on

the scale of such a system.”¹⁷ It is here that the greatest concerns and potential future problems lie. For example, by around the same time that the 10 interceptors and radar were scheduled to become operational under the Bush plan, the new architecture will theoretically be capable of protecting the entire European landmass against all but the most advanced ballistic missile attacks by utilizing numerous radars and potentially hundreds of missile interceptors. Two years later the system may have the capability to intercept all types of missiles aimed at Europe and the United States from this region – including large amounts of the Russian nuclear arsenal. Added to this is the fact that the new plan gives the United States a far greater tacit and potential strategic capacity in Europe – a key Russian concern with the third site system was that interceptor missiles could easily be converted to offensive ballistic missiles. In the eyes of Moscow, this potential threat will be bigger rather than smaller under the new plan.

Obama has also announced that efforts will be stepped up towards establishing joint data exchange and threat assessment cooperation, something that has been greeted warmly by NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and which seems to suggest that a new era of BMD cooperation has been raised into “the realm of possibility.” However the idea and concept of a joint missile defense goes back at least two decades and has made palpably little progress thanks to the wide range of military, technological and political obstacles, not to mention the issue of trust.¹⁸ Referring to the possibility of joint-defenses with Russia, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) analyst Jonathan Eyal has stated that “we are years away. It’s like a discussion of what we’ll do once we land a man on Mars.”¹⁹ Underpinning this is the political value of the anti-U.S., anti-BMD rhetoric inside Russia, which continues to be a powerful tool of the governing elites.²⁰ It would seem therefore that because the “phased adaptive approach” for Europe looks set to be far more comprehensive, include far more assets and become operational far more quickly than the program proposed by the Bush administration, and because it seems unlikely that any tangible progress will be made on BMD cooperation between the United States and Russia (especially in the short-run), it is hard to

see Moscow remaining acquiescent to the new approach for long.

A key variable for how Barack Obama’s new missile defense plan fares in the near future, and whether the various diplomatic dynamics examined above play out, will be missile defense technology. Although the Aegis and SM-3 programs have been more successful in terms of testing than the GBI program (the interceptor missile currently employed to defend the United States and originally slated for Poland), and generally seem to look more promising, neither program has undergone “real world” tests or been pitted against enemy countermeasures. Moreover the phased, adaptive approach is heavily reliant upon significant future technical advances in the SM-3 interceptor – which as the history of missile defense has shown is by no means guaranteed.

Conclusion

Much suggests that the Obama administration’s “phased, adaptive approach” to ballistic missile defense in Europe will represent a far greater commitment to the region than might have been the case under the original “third site” plan favored by his predecessor. Despite this, the new approach still seems to be regarded as a “scaling back” of previous plans or even a “dangerous move inimical to national security” in the popular debate.

As with all things only time will tell. Developments in politics, technology, or the Iranian missile threat could have wide-reaching implications for the future of the plan. Moreover, although this could mean that fewer assets are deployed than have been stated, the opposite is also true, and the Obama administration still has not ruled out the idea of deploying long-range GBI interceptors in Poland or elsewhere in Europe in the future if the situation changes. The move certainly has positive ramifications: providing a better link with Europe and NATO while addressing the most pressing and near term threats, and providing differing external benefits to Israel, Egypt and Turkey, while still addressing the threat from Iran. But the longer-term implications for relations with Russia seem likely to be more conflictual, and this could have significant ramifications for future

arms control deals or in dealing with perceived international nuclear pariahs such as Iran in the coming years.

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NOTES

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