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Ballistic Missile Defense: New Plans, Old Challenges

By Elizabeth Zolotukhina

Introduction

On September 17, 2009—the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 that marked the beginning of World War II—the Obama Administration announced its intention to shelve plans for the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) that had been developed under former President George W. Bush. Pointing to a new intelligence assessment, President Obama argued that his predecessor's plan to deploy an X-band radar station outside of Prague, Czech Republic, and 10 two-stage interceptor missiles in Poland would not adequately protect America and its European allies from the Iranian threat and reiterated his opposition to utilizing unproven technology in any European BMD architecture.¹

A Revised BMD Deployment Strategy

Based partly on the intelligence assessment, which suggests a sharper threat from Iranian short-range missiles rather than from a future Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capability (Iran does not yet have such a capability), the President unveiled a revised BMD deployment strategy. This plan would use smaller, mobile SM-3 interceptors to counter short- and medium-range missiles, based first aboard Aegis-equipped ships and possibly later on land in Eastern Europe.² Although issues of cost and effectiveness cloud this proposal,³ recently, the U.S. Senate unanimously adopted an amendment to the fiscal year (FY) 2010 Military Construction Appropriations Bill allowing the Pentagon to use \$68.5 million in unspent fiscal 2009 missile defense funds to build a Hawaii test facility for the Navy's Aegis Weapons System, which is central to realizing the administration's revised BMD deployment strategy.⁴

The decision, which has been characterized as "one of the biggest national security reversals of his young presidency,"⁵ received praise by some observers while fueling discontent among others. Many Republicans derided the move for appeasing Russia and Iran at the expense of America's European allies, while some Democrats were displeased because the administration had not scuttled the European BMD plans entirely. Meanwhile, some Czech and Polish leaders—who had probably anticipated the

decision even if they were not informed of the precise details or timing of the public announcement until shortly before media leaks forced the President to deliver a hasty speech on the topic⁶—reacted to the Administration's decision with "deep dismay"⁷ fearing that Washington had succumbed to Russian pressure, and Atlanticist politicians in Prague felt "humiliated."⁸ In addition, former Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, whose government cooperated closely on the BMD issue with the Bush Administration despite domestic opposition to the proposal, issued a statement in which he raised questions about "whether the United States is stepping back from the region of Central and Eastern Europe in exchange for better relations with Russia."⁹ That sentiment was also expressed in the letter of concern written by many former East European leaders to the Obama Administration.¹⁰

The public response of the Polish government has been more measured. Unlike the Czechs who had adopted a more compromising negotiating position,¹¹ the accord Warsaw signed in August 2008 with the outgoing Bush Administration pledged to deploy a Patriot battery operated by 100 U.S. service members—an extra source of some controversy among Polish citizens—to augment the country's air defense capabilities in Poland. This plan was in addition to the 10 two-stage interceptor missiles that comprised Poland's share of the BMD architecture under the Bush plan. While Poland has reluctantly¹² agreed to host SM-3 missiles,¹³ which are part of the Obama Administration's revised BMD deployment plan, Warsaw would like to see Washington abide by its promise to deploy a Patriot battery on Polish soil. The U.S.-financed move, which would be viewed as a symbol of NATO's commitment to the country's defense and fully integrated with Poland's air-defense system, elicits concern from American officials who say that "there is still plenty to discuss"¹⁴ in this regard.

The Russian Reaction

President Obama has at various times denied that the reversal of the European BMD policy was an attempt to appease Russia, which has strongly objected to the plan on the grounds that it would threaten its own nuclear arsenal. Nonetheless, many governments in the region have interpreted the reversal as an attempt to elicit Moscow's cooperation in imposing additional sanctions on Iran for noncompliance with several United Nations National Security Council (UNSC) resolutions related to Tehran's nuclear program, or a signal of American withdrawal from East/Central Europe.¹⁵ In an attempt to counter these perceptions, the administration

dispatched Vice President Joseph Biden to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania approximately one month after the decision was announced.

In the Czech Republic, Vice President Biden reassured the assembled leaders that the Obama Administration would "exert influence where possible"¹⁶ to ensure that Prague—which currently receives the vast majority of its oil and natural gas supplies from Russia—does not become even more dependent on Moscow. In return, interim Prime Minister Jan Fischer reiterated Czech support for the new American missile defense plan under NATO auspices and for the Alliance's missions abroad. As planned, shortly after Biden's visit, high-level Czech and American defense officials gathered in Prague to consider the role that the country would play in the revised missile defense architecture. Following the consultations, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Alexander Vershbow told the media that Washington had "[presented] ... some concrete ideas to begin that process of developing the Czech role in the new approach," and added that part of the Czech Republic's role could be the hosting of "potential facilities here on the territory of the [country]."¹⁷ Biden also received a relatively warm reception in Poland.

Moscow's reaction to the news of Obama's decision has been mixed. Although Russian President Dmitry Medvedev welcomed the move using cautious language, other high-ranking officials, such as Dmitri Rogozin, Moscow's envoy to NATO, have termed the policy shift "a mistake that is now being corrected,"¹⁸ and characterized it as a response to an agreement allowing the transit of American military supplies and personnel through Russian and Central Asian territories to Afghanistan. Vladimir Putin, the Russian Prime Minister, said that he expected additional concessions from the United States, while General Nikolai Makarov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, noted that the BMD plans "had only been modified not scrapped."¹⁹

Conclusion

Despite the unforgiving rhetoric, Medvedev now is reportedly "100 percent ready"²⁰ to back new sanctions on Iran for Tehran's noncompliance with UNSC resolutions related to Tehran's nuclear program, one of the oft-cited, and frequently denied, benefits of Washington's revised BMD policy. However, the Russian President's statement should be viewed with a degree of caution given that Putin is an opponent of sanctions on the grounds of efficacy²¹ and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has argued recently that "we are not at that point [of sanctions] yet."²² Over-

all, it is likely that Moscow expects additional concessions from Washington on the BMD issue if its cooperation is sought in other areas. However, the outstanding question—which remains largely unresolved by Vice President Biden's visit to East/Central Europe—is how the administration should best balance the interests of allies large and small.

About the Author

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Journal of Strategic Security

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