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NATO and European Missile Defence

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This November at their Lisbon Summit, NATO members will decide whether or not to go ahead with the development of a missile defence system to cover all 28 member countries and a population of some 900 million people. US Vice President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen both back this idea, and cite the possible development of nuclear weapons and new missiles by Iran as the reason. The suggestion is that NATO and the US combine their current missile defence developments in Europe to form one large missile shield – an idea that is causing a great deal of controversy.

NATO's Missile Defence System

NATO is currently developing an Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence (ALTBMD) system for theatre missile defence[1]. At a cost of some 20-27 billion Euros,[2] this is designed to protect deployed forces within or outside NATO territory against SCUD and No-DONG type short and medium-range ballistic missiles (with ranges up to 3,000km). The ALTBMD Programme was established in September 2005 following a four year feasibility study on the missile threat to Europe and how to defend against it. Ian Davis has pointed out in "The NATO Watch Observatory" that the results of this study were completed on behalf of NATO by Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) – a transatlantic consortium of defence manufacturers:

> *Although the 10,000-page feasibility study funded by European and US taxpayers remains classified, NATO officials declared that it found missile defence for Europe technically and financially feasible. And who 'won' the contract to build the system? SAIC: the same international consortium of industries that defined the threat also identified the most appropriate response.*[3]

(Photo credit: NATO)

So, despite the elected government officials of NATO countries not being allowed to read the report, ALTBMD goes ahead and is now scheduled to be fully operational in 2016. It is being developed in two phases. The first phase will include the Air Command and Control System (ACCS) "backbone" which will integrate American Patriot PAC-3, Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD), US-German-Italian Medium Extended Air Defence System (MEADS), Franco-Italian Surface to Air Missile Platform Land based (SAMP-T) and various ground, air and space-based components provided by several NATO nations. A special Integration Test Bed facility became operational in The Hague in 2008 to test various components of the ALTBMD and ensure their interoperability.[4] In July this year the head of the NATO theatre missile defence programme, General Alessandro Pera, announced that key tests had been passed, prior to its handover to NATO commanders. General Pera said:

> *During the exercise we linked the missile defence command and control system that NATO has developed with both real and simulated sensors and shooters, to practice operations to counter simulated threats … We saw the kind of performance necessary to conduct a theatre missile defence battle.* [5]

This means that the ALTBMD interim capability, to enable commanders to plan a theatre missile defence battle (InCa Step 1), has officially been delivered. InCa Step 2 will be the addition of a real-time situational awareness capability and missile defence components from NATO nations are due to be linked in the first of a number of Ensemble Tests for Interim Capability scheduled for December this year.

US Missile Defence

Defence against a missile attack has occupied the US military since the early 1960s but it has always been costly and technically very difficult to achieve. New impetus was provided by President Reagan's 1983 "Star Wars" speech which envisaged the development of a system of space and ground based components to protect the US against an all out missile attack. It was soon realised that this was probably going to be impossible and so less ambitious schemes were developed to cope with much smaller numbers of

missiles. However, these were still considered by many to be destabilising as they could be used to deny the possibility of an effective retaliation after a nuclear first strike.

In the 2002 US Nuclear Posture Review, President George W. Bush determined that missile defence systems needed to be actually deployed. US nuclear forces were moved to a so-called "capabilities-based" posture in order to deal with multiple aggressors across a range of contingencies. A new nuclear triad was formed consisting of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons systems teamed up with missile defences. Despite strong objections from Russia, President Bush withdrew the US unilaterally from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to pursue a missile defence programme. So far the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has managed to install some two dozen ground based interceptor missiles in Alaska and California and agreements were also reached to upgrade the early warning and tracking radars in Greenland and the UK.

The European Connection

In the UK permission was granted for the US to use two bases in North Yorkshire for missile defence. These are the phased array radar system at Fylingdales and the receiving dishes at the US Menwith Hill electronic interception base. The UK first received an offer of participation in Missile Defence just after the US withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002. When US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asked the UK Ministry of Defence for permission to use the ballistic missile early warning radar at RAF Fylingdales for missile defence, the UK government opened a ludicrously short public consultation exercise. The public were given a few weeks over the Christmas holiday to register their views on missile defence with the MoD. A few weeks later the UK government announced its decision to grant the US permission. In October 2004 the UK and US governments signed an agreement and the UK House of Commons was informed of this through a Written Statement.[6] This prompted strong comment from the Defence Select Committee:

> *Despite the Secretary of State's unequivocal statement that he wanted the decision to be informed by public and parliamentary discussion, he has acted in a way that has effectively curtailed such discussions.*[7]

Even at that time it was known that the US electronic interception base at Menwith Hill would be used for missile defence. In fact the Ministry of Defence had issued a statement as long ago as 1996 to say that it was:

> *pleased to announce that the European Relay Ground Station (RGS-E) for the new Space Based Infra-Red System (SBIRS) will be established at RAF Menwith Hill.*[8]

(RAF Fylingdales – photo credit: *Menage a Moil*flickr)

SBIRS was to act as a space based system to give early warning of missile launches and detailed information about the missile's trajectory. Two receiving dishes were built at Menwith Hill even before the US gave notice to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. However, the UK government did not admit to the missile defence role until July 2007 when it was announced that the US had been given permission to use it for just that. Then Prime Minister Tony Blair had also offered to host US interceptors in the UK the previous February. The Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Select Committee voiced their concern:

> *We regret the manner and timing of the Government's announcement that RAF Menwith Hill is to participate in the US ballistic missile defence (BMD) system, and the resulting lack of Parliamentary debate on the issue... We recommend that there should be a full Parliamentary debate on these proposals.* [9]

There was no discussion or debate in the House of Commons. However, a debate in the House of Lords[10] enabled Lord Wallace of Saltaire to comment that he hoped the Government would be shamed into providing a *"fuller and more detailed justification of its decision."* They haven't and opinion polls show that the British public have also been consistent in their opposition to missile defence – with some 54% saying that they believe that US Missile Defence would make Europe less safe, while only 24% think otherwise.[11]

And Britain was not the only location for US missile defence architecture. In spite of widespread criticism, in 2007 the Bush administration announced plans to install 10 modified versions of existing interceptors (two-stage missiles rather than the three-stage ones deployed in the US) in Poland and an X-band radar in the Czech Republic, saying it was concerned about the possibility of Iran developing

long range missiles.[12] It was claimed that this system, together with a forward based radar (in an unspecified location), the upgraded phased array radar at Fylingdales and the development of a new satellite down link at Menwith Hill would be able to detect, track and intercept long range missiles from Iran by 2013.[13]

(US Missile Defence Protest, Prague, 8 July 2008 – photo credit: *tredford04f*lickr)

However, like in the UK, while the governments in Poland and Czech Republic were keen for these plans to go ahead, many of their citizens were not convinced. Opinion polls in both countries suggested that the majority of public opinion was against the establishment of missile defence bases on their territory. In addition, despite the fact that these decisions would affect the security of all of Europe, they were being made without any real discussion or debate with the governments of European neighbours.

Russia's head of missile forces, General Nikolai Solovtsov, insisted that Russia would aim its nuclear missiles at Poland if American interceptors were placed there.[14] In turn, Polish Defence Minister Bogdan Klich requested greater security guarantees, insisting on US help in strengthening Poland's short- to medium-range air defences with Patriot missiles. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk also argued that the missile defence site should eventually be part of a NATO and European security system and wanted to consult with Russia.[15]

At one time there was some doubt as to whether agreement could be reached with Poland, and Lithuania was floated as a possible alternative location for the interceptors.[16] However, the 2008 South Ossetia war (between Georgia on one side, and Russia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the other) resulted in an increase in popular support for the missiles and the US and Poland signed an agreement in August 2008.[17] The conflict in Georgia together with a number of other factors (such as the withdrawal of Russia from a missile defence agreement and a desire to join NATO) also prompted Ukraine to offer its radar installations for European use.[18]

Despite the controversy surrounding this issue, there was little discussion and exchange of views in the parliaments of Europe and governments seemed to be making their own decisions (and bilateral agreements with the Bush administration) without consultation with their European partners, despite the fact that all European countries would be affected by the decision of any individual state to participate. The one exception was the ongoing debate within NATO.

Joining the Two Together

The NATO Summit in Prague in November 2002 had committed member states to a feasibility study to examine the various options for protecting Alliance forces, territory and populations. An Interim Report was delivered to the the North Atlantic Council in 2006 and NATO leaders considered and agreed to the integration of the US system into any future NATO-wide missile defence architecture at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. At that time President George W. Bush, as noted above, was pursuing a system of interceptors in Poland, which would have provided only 75% coverage of Europe. This was the situation when Barack Obama became US President in January 2009.

Obama's Missile Defence Strategy

Before being elected President, Barack Obama had said that, although he supported missile defence in general, he thought that it should be developed pragmatically and cost-effectively and with assurances that the technology works. Soon after being elected it appeared that he might be about to pull back from or even scrap missile defence altogether when, in September 2009, it was announced that the plans for the missile defence bases in Poland and the Czech Republic were to change.

(US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski on the press conference after signing the Protocol to the Agreement on missile defence system, 3 July 2010 – photo credit: Polish MFA/flickr)

The Obama concept is for a new "phased adaptive approach"[19] based on the US Navy's Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) to counter short- and medium-range Iranian missiles such as the Shahab-3. According, to US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, this change was needed because "the threat of potential Iranian intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities has been slower to develop than was estimated in 2006". The new

system is designed to focus on addressing threats to Europe and US military personnel deployed in the region, rather than on longer-term threats to the United States (which would be covered by extending the existing number of ground based interceptors in Alaska and California).[20]

The first phase of the new approach involves locating a forward-based Raytheon radar station in southern Europe and equipping ships with Lockheed Martin's Aegis combat systems and Raytheon's SM-3 interceptors. The sea-based Aegis system has been developed to intercept medium range missiles in space and it has been suggested that some enhancements will enable it to intercept long range Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) as well. It was a ship based Aegis system that the US military used to shoot down one of its own satellites early in 2008. Perhaps this helped convince the new President and others that such a system might work. However, there is a great deal of difference between shooting down one of your own relatively slow moving satellites in a known orbit and detecting, tracking and targeting a fast moving missile. In addition, the operation was nearly cancelled because of adverse weather conditions and a rough sea.

The second phase of the US system involves the deployment, from around 2015, of improved interceptors and sensors and an initial land-based SM-3 site somewhere in southern Europe. The final two phases would produce new generations of SM-3 missiles, co-developed with Japan and deployed on land and at sea, with greater speed and range to cover the whole of Europe. Agreement has already been reached with the Romanian government to site interceptors there and talks with Bulgaria have begun.[21] In addition, in July this year a new agreement between the US and Poland was signed which sees Poland hosting US mobile interceptors from 2018[22] and plans were announced for an early warning centre in the Czech Republic to collect satellite information and detect missiles "aiming at NATO territory."[23]

The integration of US and NATO systems will probably not be a problem. NATO has a lot of experience in managing multinational military structures such as the integrated air defence system. However, there is a very tight timeline for operational decision-making for missile defence and there is no time to convene a meeting of the North Atlantic Council to make a joint decision on what to do. New rules of engagement may be required and specific procedures will be needed to authorise commanders to take responsibility and make key decisions. An ICBM attack would have devastating consequences and important decisions on how to delegate decision-making powers to relevant commanders will be required.

The Cost

The US 2011 budget has put aside nearly $20 billion dollars for missile defence radars, interceptors and launch sites. Since 1985 the US has spent some $130 billion on missile defence, with an additional $50 billion said to be needed up to 2014. It is expected that the cost of the overall NATO system will run to some 200 million Euros to be spread over all members over a 10 year period. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen considers that this is "very manageable" and is pressing member states to agree the scheme at the November Summit in Lisbon.

(NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen – photo credit: European Parliament/flickr)

However, although this may sound like an "attractive proposition" it is not clear how many member states will agree as the US and Europe are currently faced with severe financial problems and there is little chance of a recovery before November. The urgency of developing this combined system has not been established and it is not clear at this stage what other obligations European countries would be liable to should things go ahead. A big question for many might be: who has ultimate control of the integrated system? It is unlikely to be a European state. On top of that, these types of systems usually go significantly over budget and take much longer than expected to develop.

French Defence Minister Herve Morin has already expressed doubts over the cost, emphasising that military budgets will be squeezed and NATO countries are already stretched supporting the military efforts in Afghanistan. He has concerns that European forces sometimes lack even basic equipment like helicopters and, speaking at a news conference in March, he commented:

> *We want a series of clarification: the cost of the program, the threat analysis, the role of Europe and the American proposals about command and control… My deep concern is that missile defence would come at the expense of the military capacity of Europeans, which is already a weakness of Europe.*[24]

Others may consider the effects it might have on relations with Russia, which views the whole venture with considerable suspicion.

Russian Concerns

Russia has continuously criticised US plans for a missile shield, seeing it as a threat to its own nuclear arsenal. Of particular concern to the Russians are the discussions on stationing missiles and radars ever closer to its borders in Poland, Romania and Bulgaria.[25] Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned just hours after President Obama took office that he would deploy short-range Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad if the US went ahead with plans for a missile shield in Europe. In January this year Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, called the planned deployment of Patriot missiles in Poland "reckless"[26] and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov asked Bulgaria's ambassador to Russia, Plamen Grozdanov to explain its talks with the US on missile defence.[27]

(NATO-Russian Council logo – photo credit: NATO)

Russia does not appear to believe the repeated assurances from the US that the missile shield is not aimed at them but Iran.[28] In response, NATO Secretary General Rasmussen has been pushing for collaboration with Moscow on the European shield.[29] Talks began in the NATO-Russia council in May this year and Rasmussen has suggested that missile defence could not only re-invigorate the relationship between European allies and the US but also NATO's relationship with Russia. However, US missile defence was a stumbling block in negotiations leading up to the recent signing of the START arms control treaty. The missile defence issue was essentially sidestepped in the treaty and Russia has said that it reserves the right to withdraw if it does not agree with the way that the US pursues missile defence.

The START Treaty still has to be ratified by the US Senate and the Russian parliament. There are suspicions on both sides – Republicans in the US feel that it may restrict the development of missile defence (although this is firmly denied by Democrat supporters) while some Russians believe that it gives the US too much freedom to develop and deploy missile defence.

Can it work?

In the May edition of "Arms Control Today", physicists George Lewis of Cornell University and Theodore Postol of MIT declared that US missile defence plans are based on "technical myths" and that interceptors have mostly failed to knock out incoming warheads in military tests.[30] They reviewed 10 'successful' tests of the SM-3 missile carried out by the Pentagon between 2002 and 2009 and concluded that the interceptors were successful in hitting the target warhead in only one or two cases. They state that:

> *This means that, in real combat, the warhead would have not been destroyed but would have continued toward the target and detonated in eight or nine of the 10 SM-3 experimental tests.*

They also question if a network of early-warning satellites and radar systems can track missiles precisely enough and distinguish them from debris or decoys. It seems that US officials and the authors of the study disagree over the importance of whether the interceptors hit the body of a rocket or the warhead.

If Lewis and Postol's claim is correct then, as they say, "the policy strategy that follows from these technical myths could well lead to a foreign policy disaster." The Obama administration's new Nuclear Posture Review asserts that missile defence can compensate for the deterrent capability that will supposedly be lost due to reductions in the US nuclear stockpile.

Conclusions

It is almost certain that NATO countries will soon agree to combine Alliance and US missile defence systems to cover Europe. The major reason given for the need of a missile shield over Europe is the possible future development in 5-10 years of longer range missiles by Iran. But this same concern was expressed almost ten years ago in February 2002 by William Cohen, the US defence secretary, who said during a speech in Munich that the US needed go ahead with their missile defence plans because North Korea, Iraq, Iran and Libya:

> *want long range missiles to coerce and threaten us – the North American and European parts of NATO. We project that in the next 5 to 10 years these rogue countries will be able to hold all of NATO at risk with their missile forces.* [31]

Now, seven years later, it appears that there may not have been any nuclear weapons in Iraq; Libya abandoned its nuclear weapons programme in 2003 following diplomatic negotiations with the US and Britain; and in 2007 North Korea did agree to cut back its nuclear facilities in exchange for aid and improved relations with the US and Japan. Unfortunately, negotiations have not gone well in this latter case and severe problems with relations between North Korea and the US and South Korea, remain. In the case of Iran, however, in December 2007, US intelligence officials

concluded that Tehran had probably halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003.[32]

Thus, things can therefore change for the better or for the worse. And it seems that the more we prepare on the basis of 'worst case' scenarios, the more likely that these will come about. This is of particular concern in a region like the Middle East where the slightest provocation at this time could lead to disastrous consequences. The US has been jointly funding missile defence systems in Israel for some years and these now appear to be integrated with the US and NATO systems. [33]

Another serious issue derives from the question of effectiveness of the complex technologies involved. The 2010 US Ballistic Missile Defence Review (BMDR) clearly states that:

> *The United States now possesses a capacity to counter the projected threats from North Korea and Iran for the foreseeable future.*

And:

> *The United States is currently protected against the threat of limited ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] attack, as a result of investments made over the past decade in a system based on ground-based midcourse defence.*

However, current missile defence systems cannot reliably intercept even a single missile launched at a known time and on a known trajectory, and there have not yet been any realistic tests – e.g. against salvos of missiles with decoy warheads in a surprise attack. How then can the Review make these declarations? If political and military leaders are being misled into believing that missile defences actually work and they think that their country is protected from missile attack they may take much bigger foreign policy risks than they should. Imagining that they have largely addressed the threat from ballistic missiles, policy makers might feel less urgency to fight nuclear proliferation.

Even if missile defence were to work would it be desirable? It may mean that other methods of persuasion, such as diplomacy and negotiation will be neglected. NATO as a military alliance may focus too much on military solutions to what are essentially political and diplomatic problems. Missile defence has an additional aggressive use. The shooting down of a 'rogue' satellite by the US ship based missile defence system[34] has clearly demonstrated an anti-satellite capability. Do we really want to extend war fighting into space - with all the possible consequences of a new arms race there?

(International March for Peace and a Nuclear-Free Future, Times Square to UN, 2 May 2010 – photo credit: *asterix611* /Flickr)

There is much that the combined resources and skills of the US and Europe could do – the challenges of global financial recession and climate change are enormous. It is perhaps time to think in terms of collective human security rather than defence. Supporters of missile defence in Europe suggest that it can be seen as an extension of NATO's "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P).

However, no European country has expressed concern about an immediate threat from missile attack and critics argue that it is actually providing a "Reason to Proliferate". It has often been said that development of missile defence would lead to a new arms race. A shield enables you to wield your sword with confidence that there can be no successful retaliation. So, the opposition swords grow bigger (or smaller and more asymmetric) and you respond with bigger shields, and so on. Russia and China have both stated that they will increase their nuclear arsenals in response to the development of US missile defence systems in their neighbourhood. Russia, China and India are also now developing their own missile defence programmes and Pakistan may well follow. These can only inevitably lead to increases in nuclear stockpiles - and so it goes on.

If the linking of US and NATO's missile defence systems are viewed in this light then, far from making nuclear weapons obsolete (as President Reagan originally envisioned), they will be the cause of further nuclear proliferation.

Notes

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4 Missile Defence, NATO, March 2009.- *http://www.nato.int/issues/missile_defence/index.html*

5 See: *http://defpro.com/news/details/17091/*

6 Upgrades and testing have now been completed at Fylingdales, which was integrated into US missile defence on 2 April 2010.

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