

2008-01-01

US Missile Shield Plan Heightens European Insecurities

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Recommended Citation

Clonan, T., 2008: US Missile Shield Plan Heightens European Insecurities, Dublin: The Irish Times.

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European Missile Shield

The US Missile Defence Agency (MDA) – without recourse to NATO – is engaged in bilateral negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic to site missile-shield silos and X-Band radar facilities in central Europe. The US intends to site 10 long-range interceptor missiles at one weapon silo - approximately the size of a football pitch - in Poland by 2011. They also intend to forward-deploy an X-Band radar station from the Marshall Islands in the Pacific to the Czech Republic in the same time period.

The Russians have reacted angrily to this development with Russian Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov stating in advance of NATO's Barcelona summit that 'the deployment of the missile defence system in Eastern Europe will create conditions for higher tensions, violate strategic balance in the world and pose a threat to our national security'. The United States, by virtue of its exclusive bilateral negotiations with the Polish and Czech governments on this issue has also generated considerable unease among its NATO partners.

The US has been steadily building up its missile defence shield since the advent of Ronald Reagan's 'Star Wars' initiative in the 1980s. Through extensive – and very expensive – research and development programmes, the US military have developed viable, anti-ballistic missile long range interceptor missile silos at Fort Greely in Alaska and at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. They have also developed and deployed so called 'X-Band' anti ballistic missile radar stations in Hawaii and at other locations throughout the Pacific and Asia.

The X-Band radar is designed to lock on to the flight paths of ballistic missiles headed towards targets in the United States. The launching of such missiles – from potentially hostile states as identified by the MDA such as North Korea or Iran – would be detected by a network of satellite-borne 'space detectors' that have been placed in orbit by the US. In order to counter an attack from Iran for example, upon detection of missile launch, the US X-Band radar located in the Czech Republic would guide the long range interceptor missiles based in Poland towards Iranian missiles over Central European airspace. On the interceptor missile's final approach towards an Iranian projectile, an 'exoatmospheric kill vehicle' or EKV would be released which is designed to collide with and destroy by kinetic energy the enemy warhead. The detection, interception and destruction phases of the US missile defence shield would take place within minutes of an Iranian launch – and crucially, the warhead of a rogue state missile would be destroyed over European airspace.

According to the US Missile Defence Agency, the American military have developed a range of such interceptor missiles – and even airborne lasers - designed to intercept and destroy the ballistic warheads of rogue states in their midcourse and terminal flight path stages. For the US, the interception and destruction of rogue warheads in the midcourse range - far from US airspace – represents the optimum scenario for the neutralisation of what they consider to be an emerging missile threat. The US currently lists the proliferation of ballistic missiles capable of carrying warheads to US cities as a growing imminent threat to US security – second only to the Global War on Terror.

Some of the United States' partners at NATO however have concerns about the location of its proposed European missile shield. NATO sources have informed the Irish Times that the interception of ballistic warheads in European airspace would inevitably lead to 'collateral damage' and 'contamination' over European territory – particularly if such missiles were fitted with nuclear, biological or chemical warheads. One such source within NATO stated that the interception of nuclear warheads by Polish-launched American EKV's would carry with it the risk of a sub-atmospheric nuclear detonation over Europe. The electromagnetic pulse or EMP of such a detonation alone would in theory result in the immediate loss of hundreds of passenger jet aircraft within European airspace. In the medium to long term, in such circumstances there would also be the potential for catastrophic environmental damage and the prospect of serious radioactive contamination as permanent 'collateral damage'.

According to partners of the US in NATO, the '3rd site capabilities' offered by the location of US missiles in Europe are part of a worldwide initiative to make a 'higher and wider system of strategic missile defence' that would give the United States a 360 degree in-depth anti-missile defence. When one looks at the global footprint of the proposed international US missile shield, it looks more like a system designed to protect the US from potential missile strikes from emerging nuclear powers in Asia than an attempt to counter a local and emerging missile threat from Iran.

Thus, whilst the siting of US interceptors in Europe would benefit the strategic interests of the United States, it has little appeal for NATO's European members. Despite these European misgivings however, the US Ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland is bullish about American intentions in this regard. In an interview given to the Irish Times at NATO Headquarters, she states 'In the transatlantic space in what we could call our respective homelands, our number one concern would be to combat not just the threat of domestic terrorism but also the threat of WMD's, chemical, biological and nuclear threats to our cities ... We are also pursuing missile defence solutions as the Iranians continue to perfect their short and medium range missiles and keep open the option of long range missiles down the line'. Consistent with US rhetoric on the European dimension of their proposed missile defences, Ambassador Nuland cites the threat from Iran as the *raison d'être* for a Polish missile silo. 'We are preparing to defend ourselves with initiatives such as missile defence should the Iranians continue to develop technologies that could hurt us'.

In answer to a question on the possibility of a pre-emptive missile strike on Iran's burgeoning nuclear facilities at Isfahan and Natanz, Ambassador Nuland states, 'I think we've been very clear on this. Washington has been very clear and President Bush has been very clear that we want a diplomatic solution in Iran but we also don't take options off the table'. Whatever the outcome of US negotiations on a European dimension to their Missile Defence Programme, it is clear that in a figurative and literal sense, WMD's and the ballistic missile are firmly on the radar of the US as a primary security concern. The implications for Europe of the US strategic missile shield need to be given very careful consideration, not just by NATO's European member states, but all member states of the EU.

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