

by Sally McNamara

On his first presidential visit to Moscow this week, Barack Obama continued to cast doubt on U.S. plans to deploy elements of its missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. Since taking office, President Obama has conditioned his support for the "third site" deployment of 10 missile interceptors in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic on a number of factors--its workability, its cost-effectiveness, and the provability of an Iranian nuclear threat. On a visit to Prague in April, President Obama gave a keynote speech focusing on total nuclear disarmament whereby missile defenses would be completely unnecessary.

Following revelations in April that President Obama "secretly" offered Moscow a grand bargain whereby it would sacrifice the third site in exchange for Moscow's help discouraging Iran's nuclear program, President Obama has seemingly gone out of his way to back away from the missile defense deal, which was concluded with Prague and Warsaw in the final months of the Bush Administration. This week's Obama-Medvedev summit has reinforced the message that the third site remains a bargaining chip that can be played at the President's will in exchange for achieving his higher profile political agenda items such as strategic arms reductions.

Constitutionally mandated to ratify or reject treaties, the U.S. Senate should make clear to President Obama that it will not sacrifice missile defense in exchange for a new treaty with Russia reducing strategic nuclear weapons.

Will He or Won't He?

President Obama's commitment to negotiating a new strategic arms treaty with Russia before the expiration of the current START treaty this December has topped his political agenda. Although missile defense has not yet been officially incorporated into the negotiations for the new treaty, Russia has made it quite clear that the issues are interlinked and that it will not separate these agenda items.

President Medvedev stated that the new treaty must be linked specifically with Moscow's objections to the third-site deployments. President Obama has offered to "discuss" both offensive and defensive weapons systems in the context of the new treaty.

By investing so much political capital in a new treaty and fudging uncomfortable issues such as missile defense, President Obama risks having to sacrifice this vital aspect of U.S. national security in order to advance the negotiations. Further, he has repeatedly sent the message that the third-site deployment is not important to him.

At best, President Obama has been deliberately vague with regard to the third site; at worst, he is simply looking for a way out, while keen to avoid the accusation that he has caved in to

Russian pressure. However, it has become increasingly obvious that the third-site deployment is a red-line issue for Moscow and that President Obama will have to choose between abandoning its Central and Eastern European allies and U.S. national security interests and appeasing Russian aggression on this issue.

The Third Site Is Workable and Cost-Effective

President Obama and his Administration, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden, have repeatedly hinged the Administration's support for deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic on the proven workability of the ground-based system. This caveat, however, has already been satisfied--missile defense technology already works.

In a December 2008 test, the Missile Defense Agency performed a successful interception and destruction of an incoming ballistic missile. In September 2007, the U.S. missile defense system destroyed the mock warhead of a long-range missile. Since 2001, 37 of 46 "hit-to-kill" missile defense tests have been successful. As General Trey Obering, former director of the Missile Defense Agency, states in The Heritage Foundation's 33 Minutes documentary, "Our testing has shown not only can we hit a bullet with a bullet; we can hit a spot on a bullet with a bullet."

Alternatives to the third site include the deployment of sea-based or mobile theater-based missile defense systems. However, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has stated that these alternatives do not provide a level of defense comparable to that of the third site.

The CBO states: "None of the alternatives considered by CBO provide as much additional defense of the United States." The report also found that the estimated \$9-14 billion 20-year cost of the third site was half of the estimated costs of a ship-based alternative.

The Third Site Is Urgently Needed

The negative implications for the security of the United States, its forward-deployed troops, and its allies in Europe should not be underestimated in the event that the third site is abandoned.

The violence meted out to its own people in the wake of rigged elections illustrates the repressive and belligerent nature of the Iranian regime, which has continued developing its nuclear and missile programs regardless of international pressure. On May 20, Iran successfully test-fired the Sajjil 2 solid-fuel missile, which has a 1,200-1,500 mile range, putting Israel within Tehran's reach. Israel's Space Research Center also reports that Iran intends to accelerate its production of even longer-range ballistic missiles and their delivery systems in the near future. And in April, the National Air and Space Intelligence Center stated that Iran could develop a missile capable of reaching the United States as early as 2015.

President Obama is determined to negotiate with Iran--a strategy that is so far failing--and work closely with Moscow in seeking to persuade Tehran away from its nuclear and missile proliferation programs. However, it would be dangerous not to employ other strategies simultaneously, including missile defenses, stronger sanctions, and preparations for the

potential use of force against Iran's nuclear facilities. Ultimately, Moscow may not work with Washington to disarm Iran and may even work against American interests. It is important, therefore, that President Obama has alternate options.

Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen has described Iran's pursuit of a nuclear bomb as a ticking clock--and time is not on President Obama's side.[17] The CBO report states that alternate options to the third site may not be available as early as its estimated 2013 timeframe.

Considering the time necessary to complete ratification of the treaties in Poland and the Czech Republic, appropriate the funds necessary for its construction from Congress, and physically construct the installations, the Obama Administration must press forward with the deployment of the third site sooner rather than later.

The Third Site: Critical to U.S. National Security

Departing Moscow with a tentative agreement on strategic arms control that will severely limit America's delivery systems as well as its strategic stockpiles, Obama has given away far more than he gained. He cannot afford to give away missile defense too.

The deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Europe has become a critical matter for Moscow, which is determined to have a sphere of privileged interest in its near-abroad. Since Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and its subsequent annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow has yet to face any serious consequences for its actions. For the sake of U.S. national security and to prevent another dangerous geopolitical setback in Russia's neighborhood, President Obama must make it clear that he supports the deployment of missile defenses to Poland and the Czech Republic and seek full funding of these sites from Congress.

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