

by Nile Gardiner, Ph.D. and Sally McNamara

Reports in the Polish media strongly suggest that the Obama Administration is about to abandon its plans for "third site" missile defense installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. Abandoning the third site would represent a huge turnaround in American strategic thinking on a global missile defense system and a massive betrayal of two key U.S. allies in Eastern and Central Europe. Such a move would also significantly weaken America's ability to combat the growing threat posed by Iran's ballistic missile program and would hand a major propaganda victory to Moscow.

President Obama's Lukewarm Approach to Missile Defense

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 a demonstrable Iranian nuclear threat. Yet despite this pledge of conditional support to third-site deployment, President Obama has seemingly gone out of his way to distance himself from the missile defense deal, which was concluded with Prague and Warsaw in the final months of the Bush Administration.

For instance, 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. Additionally, it was revealed that President Obama "secretly" offered Moscow a grand bargain whereby America would sacrifice the third site in exchange for Moscow's help in discouraging Iran's nuclear program.

A Naïve Deal with Moscow?

This shift in U.S. policy is intricately linked to a naïve deal struck between Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow last July, when the two leaders established a framework to reduce their countries' respective nuclear stockpiles by a third over the next seven years. The deal, expected to be concluded in December, also significantly cuts both sides' nuclear delivery systems, such as long-range bombers, thereby leveling the playing field for Russia (the U.S. currently has superiority in this area).

Russia favors the agreement as its strategic conventional weapons capability remains weak, and the technological ability to rejuvenate its nuclear weapons arsenal is limited.

Obama has made progress toward a "nuclear free world" a priority of his presidency and is clearly willing to sacrifice U.S. interests, as well as those of its allies in Europe, on the altar of political vanity. Moscow has made it abundantly clear that any steps toward nuclear disarmament have to involve the abandonment of missile defense installations in Central

Europe--what Russia considers its own backyard--including former Soviet satellites that are now members of NATO and the European Union. Russia has, however, expressed interest in basing missile defense sites in Azerbaijan (Gabala radar station) and in the south of the Russian Federation, closer to the Iranian border.

Missile Defense Works

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 has been repeatedly proven to work.

For example, in a December 2008 test, the Missile Defense Agency successfully intercepted and destroyed an incoming ballistic missile. In September 2007, the U.S. missile defense system destroyed a mock warhead mounted on a long-range missile. Since 2002, 37 of 38 ground, sea, and air missile defense intercept tests have been successful.

Alternatives to the third site include the deployment of sea-based or mobile theater-based missile defense systems. However--due to President Clinton's gutting of the program and President Bush's unwillingness to fully restore it--as they stand at present, these alternatives do not provide a level of defense comparable to that of the third site, especially against Iran's rapidly developing long-range ballistic missile threat.

The Congressional Budget Office states: "None of the alternatives considered by CBO provide as much additional defense of the United States [as that offered by the third site]." Although sea-based alternatives may provide effective defenses against intercontinental ballistic missiles, such effectiveness would be subject to future testing and development which is currently underfunded in both the House and Senate's version of the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act.

The Iranian Threat

There is little indication that the Obama Administration's risky policy of engagement with Iran is actually working. With every passing day, Iran grows closer to acquiring nuclear capability, and according to Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it has already amassed sufficient uranium to build an atomic bomb. Mullen's statement at the beginning of April followed a February report by the International Atomic Energy Agency that revealed that Iran had already stockpiled over a ton of low-enriched uranium, far more than previously estimated.

Iran is also making significant progress with its ballistic missile program. 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 U.S. as early as 2015.

Congress Must Speak Out

If the Obama Administration drops the planned third-site installations (due to be deployed by 2013), such actions would represent an accommodation of Russian demands and the shameful appeasement of an increasingly aggressive regime that is openly flexing its muscle in an effort to intimidate its neighbors and revise existing European security architectures.

Cancelling the third site would also send a clear message to America's allies in Europe that Moscow's bullying will be tolerated and even tacitly encouraged. Furthermore, it would be a dangerous signal that the U.S. is unlikely to stand up to Russian demands that Georgia and Ukraine be barred from becoming full members of the NATO alliance.

In the coming days it is vital that those in Congress who believe that the transatlantic alliance still matters--and that U.S. agreements with its allies are worth the paper they are written on--speak out against any attempt to abandon plans for missile defense in Europe. Constitutionally mandated to ratify or reject treaties, the U.S. Senate should make it clear to President Obama that it will not sacrifice missile defense in exchange for a new treaty with Russia reducing strategic nuclear weapons.

The Poles and the Czechs know what it means to live under the boot of Russian domination. The third-site issue is of huge symbolic importance to both nations, and if Moscow emerges the victor, with an effective veto over U.S. policy in Europe, it would represent a massive surrender of American strategic influence and a betrayal of two of its closest friends in the region.

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