



CENTER FOR ARMS CONTROL AND NON-PROLIFERATION

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National Missile Defense in Europe: Premature and Unwise

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The Bush Administration has announced its intention to build a national missile defense complex in Europe to supplement current deployments of the system's components, including interceptor sites based in Alaska and California. This decision is premature, misguided, wasteful of billions of dollars, and damaging to U.S. relationships with our European allies and Russia.

The plan for the new European complex is to transfer a narrow-beam X-band midcourse tracking radar from the Pacific Test Range to the Czech Republic and to deploy up to 10 silo-based long-range interceptor missiles in Poland. The program also calls for forward-basing an acquisition radar—designed to provide detection, initial tracking, and cueing information—to a location not yet designated.

The national missile defense system, now called the Ground-Based Midcourse Missile Defense System (GMD), is being developed to protect the United States against a limited attack from warheads launched on long-range ballistic missiles by so-called rogue states. The intent is to destroy incoming weapons during their flight in space, called the “midcourse” phase of their trajectory.



Interceptor missile being emplaced at Fort Greely, Alaska, December 18, 2005. Courtesy Missile Defense Agency.

Yet GMD is still in its developmental phase, by no means ready for deployment. It has not demonstrated the capability under realistic conditions to destroy a target in space, and operational testing of the system is not yet even scheduled. Knowledgeable defense scientists believe the system will never be able to defeat countermeasures that any nation capable of fielding complex intercontinental ballistic missiles will be able to employ with ease.

In focusing initially on defense against a potential threat from North Korea, the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) perceived that there would be gaps in the coverage of missiles launched from Iran that could be filled by a European deployment.

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Recently, however, the Agency concluded that without deploying elements of GMD in Europe, other system components could protect the entire U.S. against an Iranian attack by 2011, well before that country will be able to field an intercontinental missile capability.

So now MDA cites the indivisibility of U.S. and European security interests as a justification for deploying a missile defense complex in Europe. Yet the administration negotiated directly with the Czech and Polish governments without broader consultation, thereby triggering considerable consternation throughout the European continent and disrupting the NATO alliance. As the NATO Secretary General stated critically, “NATO is the right place to have this discussion on missile defense.”

Also, the fact that the planned deployment will not cover a large portion of southeast Europe is potentially divisive. MDA claims on the one hand that there currently are no defenses in the European theater capable of engaging long- or intermediate-range ballistic missiles launched from Iran. On the other hand, it argues that tactical systems designed to intercept short- and medium-range missile threats can substitute for the lack of coverage of southeast Europe by the proposed GMD deployment.

MDA also claims that deploying GMD in Europe will promote regional stability. But the announcement of the deployment and the reaction to it has in fact created considerable instability. Russian President Vladimir Putin has angrily denounced the deployment. He perceives it as yet another U.S. and NATO military encroachment into former Warsaw Pact countries close to Russia’s western border, despite earlier assurances by the U.S. that NATO would not move east if a unified Germany could join NATO. Putin also suspects that further development of the European GMD complex could threaten Russian security in the future.

Carrying out Putin’s earlier threat, Russia formally suspended participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty on July 14, and a Kremlin political consultant stated that the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty could be next. These actions deeply concern our European allies.

Putin also has suggested that the GMD interceptors should be emplaced in Turkey or Iraq, and he has offered the use of a Russian early warning radar in Azerbaijan to substitute for the proposed deployment of the tracking radar in the Czech Republic, which he correctly views as potentially intrusive. At best, the Russian radar could perform the function of a forward-based acquisition radar, but it does not have the capabilities of the more advanced tracking radar planned for deployment in the Czech Republic.



Interceptor missile test launch from the Marshall Islands, December 13, 2005. Courtesy Missile Defense Agency.

There are other serious problems with a GMD missile defense in Europe that should be considered:

- The interceptor missiles planned for installation in Poland involve difficult and less-tested technology than those presently deployed in Alaska and California. Although initial flight tests are not scheduled until 2010, the deployment of up to 10 operational missiles is programmed to be completed by 2013. This overly optimistic scenario suggests that MDA once again will be deploying a missile still in the early stages of development.

- The complex in Europe will have only 20 minutes to detect, track, and intercept a missile launched from Iran. This would present a highly difficult challenge to a system that has met stringent test standards and is manned by a well-trained crew on quick-reaction alert. But essential operational testing to prove the effectiveness of the system is not yet even projected for the European complex.
- The European deployment is currently estimated to cost a little more than \$4 billion. If past is prologue, this will increase substantially.

Whatever marginal benefit may be perceived to accrue from deploying a European component of GMD is clearly outweighed by its costs, both financial and political. Since Iran will not be able to develop long-range missiles until well into the next decade, as intelligence agencies estimate, there is ample time for continued development of the GMD system to determine if it somehow can be made to work.

It also would be imprudent to rush to deployment of the system without thorough consultation with, and the agreement of, our NATO allies and Russia.

Since the launch of a ballistic missile can be traced to its source, it seems highly doubtful that Iran would choose to attack the U.S or Europe in this fashion, thereby inviting a devastating retaliatory strike. Even in the unlikely event that the GMD system and its European component eventually prove workable, the opportunity cost of its deployment should be considered in comparison to expending the funds to counter more likely threats to U.S. and European security.

The bottom line is a no-brainer: the third GMD missile defense complex, programmed for deployment in Europe, should be put on ice.