

U.S. and NATO Ballistic Missile Defence in Europe

Academic Essay

Juliana Crim

MA double degree student in European Studies at the
University of Glasgow and Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Email: juliana.crim@student.uj.edu.pl



Institut
Studiów
Strategicznych

Abstract

In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama announced a new U.S. approach to missile defence in Europe. Over the years that followed, the U.S. and NATO have combined resources to create a ballistic missile defence shield protecting their allies in Europe. The implementation of this shield has contributed to the strain in U.S./NATO relations with Russia and continues to be a source of tension in Russian relationships with the West.

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Introduction: Ballistic Missile Defence in Europe

During the years of the George W. Bush presidency (2001-2009), the U.S. government began formulating a plan for the creation of a missile defence shield in Europe with the stated intention of protecting its allies from threats in the Middle East.

Negotiations continued into the presidency of Barack Obama (2009-2017), during which time President Obama declared that the U.S. would pursue a different approach to missile defence, including the placement of defence shield sites in Poland and Romania. Soon after, NATO announced an expansion of its Strategic Concept to include missile defence while using the U.S.-created system to augment NATO's own abilities.

From the shield's inception, the Russian government has been openly outspoken in their distrust of, and displeasure at having this system so close to their borders. Senior Russian government officials including President Vladimir Putin have expressed their belief that the shield was designed as an offensive measure by the U.S. to alter the strategic balance in the European region in the U.S.'s favour.

Creating the U.S. and NATO Ballistic Missile Defence System

In 2007, during the George W. Bush administration, the U.S. worked to place sites for its missile defence shield in Central Europe, specifically in the Czech Republic and Poland. Washington's justification for the shield was that it was necessary to 'protect the U.S. and Europe from possible attack by hostile nations such as Iran'.² Because of the shield's location in Central Europe, it would protect most NATO member states, but coverage would not extend to parts of Greece or to Turkey.² NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer expressed NATO's desire that the U.S. shield should be able to 'work alongside any additional NATO defensive system to extend coverage to these two member states'.²

In the Czech Republic, a huge backlash caused the Czech government to ultimately resist accepting the site on their territory. On the other hand, the Polish government, then headed by Jarosław Kaczyński, was amenable to placing the site in Poland, despite a lack of popularity for the base domestically.¹¹ The Kaczyński administration viewed hosting the site as essential to Polish security with the belief that this would, in and of itself, increase Polish national security.¹²

After the election of the Citizens' Platform party under Donald Tusk in 2007, there was a shift in policy.¹¹ The Tusk administration was also open to hosting the site; however, contrary to the Kaczyński administration, the new government believed that locating the site on Polish soil would expose Poland to additional threats and ultimately undermine its security.¹² Because of this, the delegation that went to Washington for the second stage of negotiations in February 2008 conveyed Tusk's view of Polish security. Polish Defence Minister Bogdan Klich led the negotiations outlining Poland's requirements in terms of security guarantees from the U.S., consisting of the delivery of multiple mobile air defence systems.¹²

Ultimately, the two governments signed an agreement in August 2008 placing ten ground-based missile interceptors in northern Poland along with the promise of increased strategic cooperation. This promised cooperation emphasised the 'intentions of Poland and the U.S. to enhance their mutual security by cooperating in the industrial, research and technology areas of defence and, above all, through sharing information regarding political-military concerns',¹² while also 'work[ing] together to counter military as well as non-military threats posed by third parties'.¹² In doing so, the U.S. and Poland strengthened their alliance with a U.S. guarantee of support for Poland in the event of a security issue stemming from their participation in the shield.¹²

In September 2009, newly-elected U.S. President Barack Obama announced that his administration would be pursuing a 'new, phased adaptive approach for missile defense',⁵ or EPAA. The first phase, or Phase 1, would include building a radar system and moving ships to the Mediterranean in 2011. Phase 2, was to construct an interceptor site to counter short- and medium-range threats in Deveselu, Romania by 2015. Phase 3, scheduled for 2018, will see the completion of an interceptor site in Redzikowo, Poland to serve as a counter to short-, medium-, and intermediate-range threats. Phase 4, in 2020, is slated to consist of interceptor deployment to counter medium- and intermediate-range threats.⁵

In 2010, the NATO member states gathered for the Lisbon Summit where they revised the NATO Strategic Concept stating that they would ‘develop a missile defence capability to protect all NATO European populations, territories and forces’ as one of the core elements of their collective defence.⁶ Additionally, they welcomed the U.S. EPAA as ‘a valuable national contribution to the NATO missile defence architecture’.⁶ In the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, NATO clarified its position stating that ‘missile defence can complement the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence; it cannot substitute for them’.⁷

In 2014, the NATO member states assembled for the Newport Summit. Considering Russia’s recent and unexpected annexation of Crimea earlier that year, NATO agreed that each member state would increase its defence budget and expenditures to at least 2% of its GDP.

In May 2016, the Aegis Ashore site in Deveselu, Romania, was officially opened. Following that, there was a ground-breaking ceremony at the site in Redzikowo, Poland, heralding in the beginning of EPAA Phase 3. The site is set to open in 2018. Later that summer, at the Warsaw Summit in July, NATO declared Initial Operational Capability of its ballistic missile defence and reiterated its commitment to pursue both nuclear and ballistic missile defence deterrents.¹⁰ NATO and the U.S. continue to work towards their shared goal to create a comprehensive missile defence shield that will protect all their European allies.

Russian Reaction

Since its inception, the missile defence shield has drawn a great deal of criticism and ire from Russia. Despite numerous assurances to the contrary by key U.S. and NATO officials, the Kremlin has continuously insisted that the U.S. and NATO missile defence shield is intended for use against Russia and places their country in an increased state of threat.

When plans for a U.S. missile defence shield first emerged in 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin interpreted this as an aggressive act, a fear which U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called ‘ludicrous’.³ In his annual address to Parliament that year, Putin threatened to have Russia withdraw from the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty until all NATO members had ratified it.³ The CFE Treaty is a key part of defence in the region, as it limits military deployments in Europe. He interpreted U.S. and NATO actions as a violation of this treaty.³

In response to Putin's threats to withdraw from the treaty, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated, 'Ten interceptors will not and cannot affect the strategic balance, and ten interceptors can also not pose a threat to Russia'.²

However, in August 2008, NATO-Russia relations broke down even further when Russia decided to suspend all military ties with NATO after NATO's urging that Russia withdraw its forces from Georgia where they were clashing with Georgian troops in South Ossetia.⁴ That same year, Russian military expert Pavel Zolotarev warned that the missile defence shield, which he believed was intended to destroy Russian ballistic missiles, had the potential to lead to a proliferation of anti-ballistic missile systems in Europe, altering the delicate post-Cold War balance of power.¹⁵

A few years later, in October 2015, President Vladimir Putin gave a speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club in which stated, '[The U.S. was] lying. It was not about the hypothetical Iranian threat, which never existed. It was about an attempt to destroy the strategic balance, to change the balance of forces in their favour not only to dominate, but to have the opportunity to dictate their will to all: to their geopolitical competition and, I believe, to their allies as well'.⁸

At a press conference in May 2016 that followed activation of the site in Romania, Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova discussed the missile defence shield stating that the 'Aegis Ashore systems being deployed in Romania and Poland feature launching devices virtually identical to those being used aboard U.S. Navy warships for launching missile interceptors and Tomahawk medium-range cruise missiles'.⁹ Furthermore, she added, 'We [Russia] view the deployment of ground-based launchers as running counter to a key provision of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The United States has therefore violated the INF Treaty. We have to state this openly, without any additional diplomatic wording'.⁹

The INF Treaty, signed 8 December 1987 between the U.S. and USSR, was designed to decrease Cold War tensions based on the global arms race requiring that each party destroy their 'ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometres, their launchers and associated support structures and support equipment'.¹ Following the dissolution of the USSR, the U.S. sought to revise the treaty and include Soviet successor states, primarily Russia.¹

Zakharova boldly claimed that the U.S. was in violation of this treaty and that the missile defence shield is a threat to Russia, a claim repeated countless times over the past decade. Russia views the partnership between the U.S. and NATO on the missile defence shield as both an offensive and defensive threat: offensive, in the sense that it is ‘virtually identical’ to launchers of Tomahawk cruise missiles;⁹ and defensive, because the shield could counteract any potential incoming missile threat from Russia and, in their view, give the U.S. and its allies time to launch an offensive strike against them while Russia is defenceless.¹⁴

The official Kremlin spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, reiterated these sentiments the same day as Zakharova, stating, ‘We have been saying right from when this story started that our experts are convinced that the deployment of the ABM system poses a certain threat to the Russian Federation ... Measures are being taken to ensure the necessary level of security for Russia’.¹³

The U.S. reiterated that the site did not house any Tomahawk cruise missiles, and U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work reconfirmed that there were ‘no plans at all’ to increase the coverage of the shield to defend against Russia,¹³ while Russian academic Konstantin Bogdanov warned that these sites might reawaken the tensions of the Cold War and make targets of the countries hosting them.¹³

At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO included in its conclusions, ‘NATO missile defence is intended to defend against potential threats emanating from outside the Euro-Atlantic area. We have explained to Russian many times that the BMD system is not capable against Russia’s strategic nuclear deterrent ... Russian statements threatening to target Allies because of NATO BMD are unacceptable and counterproductive’.¹⁰

Conclusion

For as long as the concept of a U.S. and NATO missile defence shield in Europe has existed, it has drawn an enormous amount of disdain from Russia. This war of words between Russian and NATO/U.S. officials is likely to continue for as long as the missile defence shield remains active in Europe.

Perhaps Russia is genuinely outraged over this and truly believes its accusations. Or, perhaps Russia is simply arguing for the sake of arguing, to maintain or increase strategic standing in the region, as they would not be expected to simply stand by while a new military

apparatus is being built in their own backyard. In either case, construction on the shield will continue while likely remaining a blight on relations between the U.S., NATO, and Russia in the foreseeable future.

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