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Missile Defense: Debunking Arguments Against the Third Site in Eastern Europe

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Speaking in Prague on October 23, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested that the United States might delay activation of America's proposed missile defense shield in Europe until there is "definitive proof" that Iran possesses long-range missile capability.¹ Speaking in Washington just hours later, however, President Bush said that the need for missile defense in Europe is "urgent" and that proposed congressional cuts of \$139 million for the European program from an earlier stage in the legislative process seriously jeopardizes the initiative.² Fortunately, it appears Congress paid more attention to President Bush's statement than Secretary Gates' suggestion. The latest version of the defense appropriations bill will reduce funding for the missile defense sites in Europe by \$85 million, as opposed to the \$139 million cut proposed earlier in the year.

Still, the conflicting statements by the Bush Administration and the proposed budget cuts by Congress can put the initiative at risk. Russian rhetoric has also intensified with categorical condemnation of U.S. plans to put a high-tech X-band radar in the Czech Republic and deploy 10 ground-based interceptors in Poland. President Putin has warned of a new "arms race" and turning Europe into a "powder keg." The Poles and the Czechs have also expressed concern about mixed messages from the Bush Administration.

Separating fact from fiction is the next step toward fielding a defense program that is critical to the national security of the United States and its friends and allies in Europe.

Myth #1: The Iranian threat is not urgent.

In fact, the emerging Iranian threat is nothing less than a race against the clock. Iran is involved in both a long-range missile program and a clandestine nuclear weapons program. Both programs could reach initial operating capability in the 2013–2015 timeframe or even earlier. Pending immediate approval, current projections forecast completion of the Polish and Czech "third site" installations within five years, which is only marginally ahead of Iran's estimated long-range ballistic missile capability and nuclear capability.³ Moreover, with the possibility of a Manhattan Project-like effort by Iran, supported by countries such as North Korea, Iran's capability may well be realized even earlier than currently expected.

With Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad saber-rattling and threatening to "wipe Israel off the face of the earth,"⁴ it is incumbent upon the United States to take the growing Iranian threat seriously by taking steps to protect itself, its forward-deployed troops, and its friends and allies.

Furthermore, the threat of ballistic missile attack from other quarters has grown exponentially, with 27 nations now possessing such capabilities, nearly

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double that of 15 years ago. North Korea completed several missile tests last summer, including the failed or aborted test of a long-range Taepo-Dong-2 missile. Hezbollah's estimated 13,000 missiles were its weapon of choice in its war with Israel last year, which Israel had difficulty countering.⁵ Less than 10 years ago, there were six nuclear weapons states; today there are nine.

Secretary Gates seems to suggest delaying activation of missile defenses in Europe until Iran tests a long-range missile or until the Russians agree on the state of the threat. That strategy would allow U.S. national security—or that of its friends and allies—to potentially be held hostage to Iranian missile developments or Russian judgment about the imminence of the Iranian threat.

Myth #2: *NATO is opposed to a U.S. missile defense system in Europe.*

Quite the contrary. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated after the April 2007 North Atlantic Council meeting: "There is absolutely a shared threat perception... Allies all agree that there is a threat from ballistic missiles."⁶

NATO military experts are currently studying plans for a short-range missile defense system to protect southern European nations that will not be covered by the U.S. initiative.⁷ Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has indicated that this system will complement the U.S. missile defense system, giving the clearest indication yet that NATO considers U.S. plans vital to Europe's defense.

Third site installations allow the United States to extend its own security umbrella and protect its

NATO allies in Europe from long-range missiles. For Warsaw and Prague, this would mark a new milestone in their integration into the transatlantic security community. They would be providing a significant contribution to their own defense and that of NATO, making a powerful statement in support of the alliance's principle of mutual defense.

Although NATO has generally considered the talks between Washington and Warsaw and Prague as a bilateral issue, it is broadly supportive of American missile defense plans in Europe. Individual members fear provoking Russia with this initiative, influencing Moscow negatively on other thorny issues, such as European energy security, Kosovo independence, and future NATO expansion.

Myth #3: *Missile defense is not well tested or reliable.*

Not so. On September 28, 2007, some 75 miles into space over the Pacific Ocean, a kill vehicle from America's missile defense system destroyed the mock warhead of a long-range missile. This test of the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system provides further evidence that its "hit-to-kill" technology works. The GMD interceptor destroyed the mock warhead by the force of collision and did not use an explosive warhead of any kind.

Hit-to-kill technology is common to a variety of missile defense interceptors now in either development or deployment. In addition to the GMD system, the technology is used in the Navy's Standard Missile-3, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and Patriot PAC-3 interceptors. Roughly 80 percent of recent tests across all four of these programs have been successful.

1. Kristin Roberts, "U.S. Offers to Keep Missile Shield on Stand-by," Reuters, October 23, 2007, at www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSL2333690920071023.
2. George W. Bush, "President Bush Visits National Defense University, Discusses Global War on Terror," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, D.C., October 23, 2007, at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071023-3.html.
3. The Defense Intelligence Agency predicts Iran could have intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by 2015.
4. Ewen MacAskill and Chris McGreal, "Israel Should Be Wiped off Map, Says Iran's President," *The Guardian*, October 27, 2005, at www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,12858,1601413,00.html.
5. Frank Gardner, "Hezbollah Missile Threat Assessed," BBC News Online, August 3, 2006, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5242566.stm.
6. "NATO United on Missile Defence Approach," NATO Web site, April 19, 2007, at www.nato.int/docu/update/2007/04-april/e0419a.html.
7. Al Pessin, "NATO Accepts US Missile Defense System," GlobalSecurity.org, at www.globalsecurity.org/space/library/news/2007/space-070614-voa02.htm.

Yet, critics continue to argue that missile defense will prove ineffective. Congress should reject arguments that cloak policy preference in technical analysis and should protect Americans with a policy of designing and building the most effective missile defense system possible.

Myth #4: Missile defense is destabilizing.

If anything, the opposite is true. Defensive weapons systems such as missile defense have a stabilizing effect on the security environment, as opposed to offensive weapons, which research has shown can be destabilizing. As a defensive capability, U.S. missile defense plans for Europe will act as a deterrent to rogue nations and non-state actors from acquiring ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

There will be less motivation for ballistic missile capability if Europe has the ability to defend against it. To make America and its allies deliberately vulnerable to attack is not only nonsensical, it is likely to incur further proliferation. As President Bush stated, “Missile defense is a vital tool for our security, it’s a vital tool for deterrence and it’s a vital tool for counterproliferation.”⁸

However, the failure of third site negotiations would embolden those in Russia who believe that the United States is negotiating from a position of diplomatic and military weakness. Putin would claim—with some credibility—to have scored a diplomatic victory over the United States. Failure would also increase Russian boldness in intimidating former satellite states, adding to instability in Eastern Europe.

Myth #5: Other missile defense systems such as THAAD and Aegis would be more valuable than the proposed third site installations.

In fact, they’re complementary. The Bush Administration’s overall approach to missile defense is to field a layered missile defense capability for countering missiles of different ranges on a worldwide basis.

This capability entails a variety of components that are optimized to counter different kinds of missiles. Thus, it is wrong to state that one particular component is more valuable than another. The GMD system proposed for Europe is optimized to counter long-range missiles, whereas THAAD and the Aegis systems are designed to counter short- and intermediate-range missiles. Fielding only the THAAD and Aegis systems in the European arena would not fully meet the need to counter long-range missiles and would not provide Europe with the most effective missile defense possible.

Conclusion. On both sides of the Atlantic, there are obstacles to deploying a U.S. missile defense system in Europe. The Polish public is not entirely convinced about missile defense, having become less enamored with the United States over the war in Iraq and the issue of Polish admittance to the American visa waiver program. Neither are the Czechs overwhelmingly convinced about the initiative. Russian anxiety about the Eastern European missile shield is likely more about the placement of the system in what it perceives as its neighborhood than strategic concerns.

Overall, however, the deployment of 10 long-range, ground-based missile defense interceptors in Poland and a mid-course radar in the Czech Republic would strengthen transatlantic security and counter the evolving Middle Eastern ballistic missile threat. The United States, along with its European partners, must show the resolve and leadership necessary to take this program forward.

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8. Michael Abramowitz and Walter Pincus, “Administration Diverges on Missile Defense,” *The Washington Post*, October 24, 2007, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/23/AR2007102300706_pf.html.