

Defence against whose missiles?

Abi Rhodes

Since the early 1980s, the implementation of an anti-ballistic missile defence system has been high on the political agenda of the United States. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, US administrations were in talks with several European governments about establishing US military sites on their territories. Russia has consistently suspected the intentions driving such a system, which the US claims is to defend its own interests, and those of parts of Europe, from missiles developed by 'rogue states' such as Iran in the Middle East and North Africa. Moscow argues that the sites currently being developed in Poland and Romania could be used to render its own nuclear arsenal ineffective.

In 2009, President Obama called a halt to the Bush Administration's version of missile defence in Europe, and replaced it with a new missile defence architecture, known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA). This change hasn't diminished Russian fears, as was highlighted at a recent meeting between Obama and the outgoing Russian President, Dmitri Medvedev. On 26 March 2012, the eve of the Global Nuclear Safety Summit in Seoul, a brief 'private' conversation between the two became completely public when President Obama was caught on a live microphone explaining to Medvedev that he will have greater 'flexibility' on missile defence after the US election has taken place in November 2012. President Medvedev returned Obama's friendly grasp, and assured the US President he would tell 'Vladimir'. Subsequently, Mr Putin, once more inaugurated as Russian President, pulled out of the G8 Summit

*Abi Rhodes works at the
Bertrand Russell Peace
Foundation.*

Meeting in the United States citing other political priorities!

In a portion of the exchange that was picked up by the ‘hot’ microphone, Obama was overheard telling Medvedev *‘after my election I have more flexibility’*. Within days of this ‘open mic’ incident, Josh Earnest, the White House’s deputy press secretary, issued a statement saying: *‘There is some work to be done to reach an agreement with Russia ... And the President is hopeful that in the next year or two we can start to demonstrate some tangible progress in finding common ground on this missile defence system.’*

Some background

The initial concept for Ballistic Missile Defence or BMD was introduced by President Reagan in his 1983 Address to the Nation on Defence and National Security, which was immediately dubbed the ‘Star Wars’ speech. He envisaged a system that would protect the United States from potential missile attacks. The proposed initiative would use ground-, sea- and space-based systems to defend the United States from nuclear ballistic missile attacks. It was an ambitious scheme and one that was going to take a long time to achieve, which he acknowledged:

‘Let me share with you a vision of the future ... What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant US retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies? I know this is a formidable technical task, one that may not be accomplished before the end of the century. Yet, current technology has attained a level of sophistication where it’s reasonable for us to begin this effort.’

President Reagan’s Strategic Defence Initiative Speech,
March 23, 1983¹

Ten years later, in 1993, after a number of technical failures, President Clinton’s administration shifted the scope of the system from regional (US based) to global coverage. But it wasn’t until 2002 that the US Nuclear Posture Review claimed that a missile defence system was needed to counteract missiles deployed by ‘rogue states’ such as Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea. In that same year, President George W. Bush withdrew America from the original Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty signed with the Soviet Union in 1972, in preparation for a new, more extensive ballistic missile defence system to be put in place.

Talks between the US, Poland and the Czech Republic about the proposed installation of an Anti-Ballistic Missile Defence System in Europe began in 2002, with formal negotiations commencing in 2007. The

US missile defence development in Poland, the European Interceptor Site (EIS), was announced by the Bush Administration in 2007. It was to consist of up to 10 modified versions of the existing silo-based interceptors and a two-stage version of the three-stage Ground Based Interceptor (GBI). The site in the Czech Republic was to have had an X-band radar that would be able to collect information on missile movements not only from the Middle East, Asia and North Africa, but also from Russian airspace.

Russia strongly opposed the system being built so close to its borders, complaining that it was being encircled by US military installations.² Instead, President Putin proposed sharing the Qabala Radar located in Azerbaijan, with joint Russia-US operation, but this was rejected by the Bush Administration.³ At the time, the US claimed that its reason for proposing to position the missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic was to protect itself and parts of Europe against potential long-range-missile attacks from Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea, and said it was not aimed at Russia's nuclear deterrent. However, the US National Intelligence Estimate⁴ of 2007 highlighted the fact that development of Iran's nuclear weapons potential had been halted in 2003 and, more importantly, that the range of the weapons Iran already possessed did not reach Central Europe.

Obama scales back the project

President Obama cancelled this missile defence project in September 2009, but it was soon replaced by a scaled-down version. The European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) uses the fully operational sea-based Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence system (BDM), which is apparently to deal with the perceived threat posed by short- and medium-range ballistic missiles fired from Iran. Smaller versions of silo-based interceptors are to be placed on Polish territory, which have the capacity to shoot down short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. It was claimed that the cancellation of the project was due to an updated US military intelligence report, which suggested that Iran's missile capabilities were stunted and so protection from long-range missiles was no longer needed.

The decision to scale back the missile defence project riled Republican critics of Obama's administration.⁵ They accused President Obama of caving into Russian pressure on the issue and claimed the change was a betrayal of some of the United States' allies in Europe.⁶ The White House adamantly denied that the change to Bush's missile defence proposals was in any way a concession to Russian objections, and reiterated its stance

that the stunted missile capabilities of Iran and other states meant that the US no longer required protection from long-range missiles.

This US statement did not address Russia's concerns because, by 2011, two countries close to its borders had agreed to install elements of the so-called European Phased Adaptive Approach. On 13 September 2011, the US and Romania signed an agreement to deploy components of the US missile defence on Romanian territory. According to the agreement, signed by Hillary Clinton and Teodor Baronschi (Romanian Foreign Minister), the Romanian Air Force Base in Deveselu will house around 200 US military personnel, the radar complex Aegis, an operational control centre, and mobile missile batteries with Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptor missiles.⁷

Turkey also agreed to station elements of an early warning system (known as AN/TPY-2) on its territory. A spokesperson for the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Selcuk Unal, stated that an early warning radar is to be located in the south-eastern part of the country, which allows a radius of several thousand kilometres to be scanned. Like the Romanians, the Turks claim that the system is not directed at Russia.

Norway has also tried to reassure Russia that its agreement with NATO plans to deploy the European Phased Adaptive Approach would not be a threat to Moscow. The Norwegian government was originally critical of the United States' missile defence plan, but fell into line at the 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon, agreeing that collaboration on a missile defence system would bolster the collective defence architecture of Europe. However, Norway was keen to emphasise that deployment of such a system should include Russia.⁸

NATO – Lisbon 2010 and beyond

NATO and Russia agreed to discuss co-operation on the European missile defence system at the NATO-Russian Council Summit held in Lisbon in November 2010.⁹ They agreed on 'a joint ballistic missile threat assessment and to continue dialogue in this area' and further talks were set for June 2011. However, the meeting of the NATO-Russian Council (NRC), which was held in Brussels, did not result in any mutual agreement between the two sides. It was reported that the Russian proposal to establish a common missile defence system was rejected and NATO once again refused to give Russia any written guarantees that the system currently in place was not directed at them.

In a press statement after the meeting, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO Secretary General, said no legal assurances that the missile defence system was not directed against Russia could be given at this time. The Russian Defence Minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, did not hide his dissatisfaction at

this statement: ‘our fears were not allayed. NATO does not hear the proposals of Russia on missile defence at the moment’.¹⁰ He went on to stress that failure to take into account Russian objections meant that a ‘return to the arms race [would] be inevitable’.

This warning by the Defence Minister was born out in President Dmitri Medvedev’s national address on 23 November 2011, in which he threatened to target the new European Phased Adaptive Approach installations if the US failed to provide legal guarantees. Medvedev said Russia would deploy short-range missiles from its Kaliningrad enclave in order to destroy US/NATO interceptors, and would also withdraw from the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) signed with George W Bush.¹¹ The official response from both the US and NATO was that they intended to continue with their plans regardless of the concerns expressed from Moscow, but they reiterated that the system is designed to ward off threats from outside Europe.

What lies ahead?

On 7 May 2012, Vladimir Putin was sworn in again as Russia President. Since his election in March, there had been speculation about future co-operation between NATO, the US and Russia on missile defence. Putin declined to attend the NATO summit, held in Chicago on 20-21 May, but initially confirmed his attendance at the preceding G8 summit, which was moved to Camp David.¹² In the event, he didn’t show. On 10 May, the Kremlin said that Putin was too busy after his inauguration, shaping his new cabinet, to attend the meeting, and so Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev was sent in his place. It has been suggested that it was the lack of agreement thus far, and the inability of President Obama to make any concrete decision on missile defence prior to elections in November, that contributed to Putin’s non-attendance.¹³

Despite the absence of the Russian leader in Chicago, possible co-operation between the Russian Federation and NATO over missile defence was still discussed. In its *Deterrence and Defence Posture Review*, issued on 20 May 2012, NATO presented an analysis of the changes to international security and its ability to react against threats to the Alliance.¹⁴ Articles 21 and 25 state that:

‘The Alliance, in a spirit of reciprocity, maximum transparency and mutual confidence, will actively seek cooperation on missile defence with Russia’ and ‘Allies look forward to continuing to develop and exchange transparency and confidence-building ideas with the Russian Federation in the NATO-Russia Council.’

During the summit, NATO announced that the missile defence systems in Europe had reached an ‘interim capability’ and declared that phase one is already operational. According to a recent report, phase one consists of

‘ship-based Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptors in the Mediterranean Sea and tracking radar in Turkey. Subsequent phases include the stationing of land-based SM-3s of increasing capability and number in Romania (2015) and Poland (2018) and the 2020 deployment of the SM-3 IIB, which is advertised to have some capability against long-range ballistic missiles.’¹⁵

Notes

- 1 <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Missile/Starwars.shtml>
- 2 Military expert and senior vice president of the Academy of Geopolitical Issues, Konstantin Sivok, refers to this encirclement as part of the ‘Anaconda Loop’ project. See: <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-usnato-encirclement-of-russia-4474/>
- 3 http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Russia_Gives_Up_Ukraine_Missile_Radars_US_Says_Azerbaijan_No_Substitute_For_Poland_999.html
- 4 http://dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf
- 5 http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/18/world/europe/18shield.html?_r=2&hp
- 6 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/22/world/europe/22biden.html>
- 7 <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-usnato-encirclement-of-russia-4474/>
- 8 Norway’s New Defence Plan (NDP) white paper is due to be published and debated by the Storting (Parliament) later this year. The Norwegian government declared ‘interim operational capacity’ for the system at the NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012. <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120412/DEFREG01/304120003/Norway-Sees-Russian-Role-NATO-8217-s-Ballistic-Missile-Defense>
- 9 <http://www.nato-russia-council.info/en/official-documents/official-document-11/>
- 10 http://balita.ph/2011/06/09/russian-defense-minister-to-attend-nato-russia-council-meeting/?doing_wp_cron=1333446707
- 11 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/23/medvedev-threatens-us-missile-shield>
- 12 More than ten years earlier, in 2001, Putin had met with President Bush to discuss a new anti-ballistic missile system (see Spokesman 72, *Star Wars Starts Wars*).
- 13 <http://news.yahoo.com/putin-skip-g8-summit-us-next-week-053855196.html>
- 14 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87597.htm?mode=pressrelease
- 15 <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/5285>