

Romania's Decision to Host US Missiles Sparks Regional Domino Effect

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Romania and Moldova have kicked off bilateral talks as unrecognized republic Transdniester proposes hosting Russian Iskander missiles on its territory. Meanwhile, Bulgaria has requested its own missiles.

Romanian President Traian Basescu announced earlier this month that his country could host US medium-range interceptor missiles. The surprise announcement comes on the heels of US President Barack Obama's decision last year to shelve plans for a radar and interceptor missiles in the Czech Republic and Poland due to a "reassessment" of the threat of a missile strike against Europe.

In addition to attracting criticism from Moscow, which argues that any missile defense system near its borders could destroy the fragile military balance in Europe, the decision has triggered no small amount of apprehension in Romania's neighbors, specifically Moldova and the de facto independent republic of Transdniester.

Moldova has been monitoring the situation carefully ever since the leader of the unrecognized republic of Transdniester, Igor Smirnov, commented on Monday that his republic would deploy Russian Iskander missiles to counterbalance a US missile shield in Romania.

Transdniester, a Russian-speaking province, has been independent from Moldova since a brief war in 1992 sparked by a dry tinderbox of tensions following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Russia has stationed peacekeepers in the region since July 1992.

Thus, Romania's willingness to host the missile defense system puts landlocked Moldova between a rock and a hard place since its relations with Romania have been in doubt ever since Moldova declared its independence in 1991.

Yet Moldova is attempting to downplay the new realities.

"Every sovereign state has a right to decide for itself on the mechanisms of national security according to its national interests," Valery Turya from the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration said before the bilateral talks in Moldova's capital Chisinau.

At the same time, Turya added that Transdniester was "not authorized" to hold talks "of a military nature" with Russia.

"The government of Moldova has not authorized Smirnov to conduct negotiations of a military nature," Turya commented before his talks with Romanian officials. "Moldova and

Russia are engaged in a constructive dialogue in different areas. It will acquire new aspects after Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat's upcoming visit to Moscow."

Transdniester leader Igor Smirnov turned up the heat against Moldova on Wednesday when he said that Moscow had given him "firm assurances" that Russian troops will stay in the region until a final solution is reached in the 20-year-old territorial dispute with Moldova.

Smirnov added that Russian troops provide security against "provocations" from Moldovan authorities.

The territory of Transdniester, a tiny shoestring of territory that borders eastern Moldova, broke away in 1990. A war between Moldovan forces and separatists in 1992 left around 1,500 people dead.

On top of these regional concerns, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov said last week that his country was also ready to host elements of US missile shield on its soil, something which Russia's military chief said Moscow would view "negatively."

But Bulgaria's possible participation in a US missile defense system is not targeted against Russia, Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov said on Wednesday.

"There is an ongoing discussion within the framework of NATO with regard to the general makeup of a missile defense system for all NATO countries. At this stage, Bulgaria is holding negotiations within the NATO framework about the conceptual outline of the system," he said.

"This shield is not directed against a threat coming from Russia. The threats that exist for us also exist for our Russian friends," Mladenov added, without explaining why Russia has not been invited to participate directly alongside US troops in the defensive system.

Why rile Russia?

In September, US President Barack Obama announced that he would "shelve" a Bush administration plan to develop an anti-missile shield in Eastern Europe with components in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Washington's change of plans, ostensibly part of the hugely hyped "reset" in US-Russian relations, was meant to mitigate anxiety in Moscow, which views US missile facilities near its border as nothing less than a national security threat. Unfortunately, however, Moscow's apprehensions over Washington's plans have not disappeared. Indeed, they seem to be intensifying.

The reason is that shortly after Obama announced his decision to shelve the Bush system, Robert Gates, the US Secretary of Defense - who, it is important to note, also served under Obama's very hawkish predecessor George W. Bush - speaking from the Pentagon immediately after the president's announcement, denied that the United States was "scrapping" missile defense, but rather introducing a different system.

The defense secretary's glowing assessment of the new system could best be described as odd, especially if Washington had any real intention of calming Russia's fears.

“This new approach provides a better missile defense capability for our forces in Europe, for our European allies, and eventually for our homeland than the program I recommended almost three years ago,” said Gates.

Here is the US Secretary of Defense’s description of the new system, published on September 19, 2009, in *The New York Times*, which he calls a “far more effective defense” than the original concept:

“In the first phase, to be completed by 2011, we will deploy proven, sea-based SM-3 interceptor missiles – weapons that are growing in capability – in the areas where we see the greatest threat to Europe. The second phase, which will become operational around 2015, will involve putting upgraded SM-3s on the ground in Southern and Central Europe. All told, every phase of this plan will include scores of SM-3 missiles, as opposed to the old plan of just 10 ground-based interceptors. This will be a far more effective defense should an enemy fire many missiles simultaneously... At the same time, plans to defend virtually all of Europe and enhance the missile defense of the United States will continue on about the same schedule as the earlier plan as we build this system over time, creating an increasingly greater zone of protection.

Steady technological advances in our missile defense program – from kill vehicles to the abilities to network radars and sensors – give us confidence in this plan. The SM-3 has had eight successful tests since 2007, and we will continue to develop it to give it the capacity to intercept long-range missiles like ICBMs. It is now more than able to deal with the threat from multiple short- and medium-range missiles – a very real threat to our allies and some 80,000 American troops based in Europe that was not addressed by the previous plan.”

Moscow’s request for more precise information on the new system went practically ignored by Washington, until earlier this month when Romanian President Traian Basescu formally announced his country would host the missile defense system. Basescu then uttered the same reassurances that other countries have been pronouncing ever since these plans took flight.

“The new system is not against Russia. I want to categorically stress this, Romania [will] not host a system against Russia, but against other threats,” he said.

It is important to remember the context in which all of this is happening. First, NATO expansion seems to know no limits, and despite Georgia’s reckless attempt to annex the republic of South Ossetia, and Ukraine’s heavy opposition to membership in the Cold War-era institution both continue to receive assurances of future membership.

Moreover, the United States promised not to expand the military bloc at the end of the Cold War.

“Instead of embracing post-Soviet Russia as an equal partner in ending the Cold War and the arms race, both the Clinton and the George W. Bush administrations undertook a triumphalist winner-takes-all policy of extracting unilateral concessions,” wrote scholar Stephen F. Cohen (*The Nation*, February, 2005). “They have included the eastward expansion of NATO (thereby breaking a promise the first President Bush made to Gorbachev); the withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had discouraged a new nuclear arms race... and the ongoing military encirclement of Russia with US and NATO

bases in former Soviet territories.”

Meanwhile, one of the most important documents to be signed between the two nuclear superpowers, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), is presently being redrafted following its expiration on December 5, 2009.

Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev pledged at their first meeting in April 2009 to replace the treaty.

Although diplomats have confirmed that about 95% of the new document is ready, the issue of an American anti-missile system so close to Russia’s borders could easily derail the historic document, which was made clear in comments by the Chief of Russia’s General Staff on Wednesday.

“Recent events in Eastern Europe have to some extent affected the negotiations. But this will be reflected in the new treaty,” General Nikolay Makarov said, while adding that the Russian Defense Ministry is “categorically opposed” to US missiles based in Eastern Europe, while mentioning the “demilitarization” of Kaliningrad, the tiny Russian exclave that borders Poland and Lithuania.

“Our position is negative, of course,” Makarov said. “Russia has undertaken a major demilitarization in the Kaliningrad region in light of Eastern European concerns,” he said, as quoted by Interfax.

“We have removed more than 600 tanks, 500 armored vehicles and armored personnel carriers, and about 600 weapons and mortars from the Kaliningrad region,” Makarov said.

The West is not taking this position into account, as it is deciding on the deployment of additional armaments in Romania and Bulgaria, he added.

Strange that the United States would rather risk its relationship with a bona-fide nuclear power that has a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons in the name of protecting itself from an avowed enemy that does not and may never will.

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