

U.S. Missile Shield Destined for the Dustbin?

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The U.S.' planned European missile defence shield, a principal feature of the Bush administration's foreign policy, appears destined for the dustbin after Barack Obama's recent presidential election victory.

Friday, at a summit with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, France's President Nicolas Sarkozy warned Washington that deployment of the planned missile defence shield would not only fail to bring security to Europe, but heighten tensions, complicate international relations and, inevitably, cause greater insecurity for the continent. France is a European power, major American ally and currently holds the European Union presidency. Thus its newly declared opposition to the missile defence plan is a major blow to President Bush's foreign policy legacy.

Interestingly, President Sarkozy is much more closely aligned to President Bush than his predecessor Jacques Chirac, and until now, had publicly supported Bush's foreign policy while simultaneously forging France's own independent foreign policy initiatives. Thus, the direct challenge to Bush's most ambitious foreign policy agenda for Europe from his close ally Sarkozy is best explained by the recent triumph of President-elect Barack Obama, who, although not opposed to the missile shield, has expressed scepticism about its technical feasibility while endorsing the intent to "explore the possibility".

In fact, it was just hours after Obama's presidential victory that Sarkozy's partner at Friday's Franco-Russian summit announced his response to the U.S. missile defence shield proposal: President Medvedev declared Russia's intent to deploy its own Iskander missiles in the Baltic Sea region of Kalinigrad close to Poland's border as a countermeasure. Russia's intention of breaking the U.S. missile defence shield (thereby maintaining its nuclear deterrent capacity) reverses decades of European demilitarization, a prospect that will certainly cause further estrangement within the Euro-American alliance.

Indeed, Sarkozy has already intimated that he intends to discuss the matter with his NATO allies and, thereafter, hold a pan-European security conference under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which includes Russia as a member. Surely the latter group will oppose the remilitarization of Europe through the U.S. missile defence shield, and it is increasingly likely that NATO allies in Europe, particularly Western Europe (those derisively referred to as "old Europe" by past US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld), will also split the Euro-American defence alliance.

And Obama cannot further his foreign policy agenda, particularly in Europe, without increased NATO cooperation. More than likely, NATO members from Western Europe will propose a quid pro quo arrangement to Obama: reverse Bush's course on remilitarizing

Europe and we will slow down our troop withdrawals from Afghanistan.

Russia, for its part, has already conceded it will reciprocate if Obama abandon's Bush's plan to remilitarize Europe by cancelling its own plans to deploy missiles in Kalinigrad.

Yet it may be economic concerns that determine the outcome of this crisis. Russia and Europe conducted 100 billion Euros in trade last year, and it is doubtful that European powers are willing to threaten that trade, especially in light of the recent global recession. The EU is Russia's number one client and investor, while Russia remains Europe's primary energy source. No doubt anxieties over funding a renewed cold war military build-up in Europe is also a deterrent to most European nations.

Beyond economics, Russia is playing other cards as well. With its Security Council veto, it has announced that it would oppose any fresh sanctions against Iran. Meanwhile, Medvedev is scheduled to visit later this month, two other states at loggerheads with the US: Cuba and Venezuela (Russia having recently agreed to upgrade Venezuela's military).

Almost certainly, Russia will continue to play its confrontation cards, compelling Obama to accept a reciprocal agreement to retain the current demilitarization status quo in Europe in exchange for cooperation with Obama's professed internationalist agenda.

Feels eerily similar to the Cuban missile crisis half-a-century ago, just this time, it looks like the dénouement will precede the climax.

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