

U.S. Redeploys Missile Shield: The Geopolitical Encirclement of Russia

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Global Research, September 19, 2009

[Stop NATO](#) 19 September 2009

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Since the surprise news from the White House and the Pentagon on September 17 that the United States was relinquishing plans to deploy ground-based interceptor missiles to Poland and a missile radar installation to the Czech Republic speculation has been rife on two scores.

First, was this move a sincere effort to “reset” relations with Russia, possibly part of a trade-off for Russian transit and logistical support for the American and NATO war in South Asia and for Moscow agreeing to tougher measures – sanctions at any rate – against Iran?

Deutsche Welle ran a feature shortly after U.S. President Barack Obama’s and Defense Secretary Robert Gates’ announcements on Thursday which included an interview with Dr. Karl-Heinz Kamp, the research director at the NATO Defense College in Rome, in which he described the seeming U.S. about-face as follows:

“This is not a withdrawal from the idea of missile defense...as the US even has a law that obliges each president to pursue missile defense as long as the technical capabilities exist and the US can absorb the bearable costs.” [1]

In expressing a suspicion that many of his readers must have shared concerning simultaneous American claims that Iranian missile capabilities were less and not more developed than reported earlier and that the nation yet represented a growing threat, Kamp added:

“This decision will be very hard for some to understand. On the one hand, you have the Obama administration saying that Iran is not as much of a threat as before, and therefore there is no need for the defense shield. On the other, the official White House line is that Iran is still actively pursuing its nuclear program and is not willing to abandon this....[T]he US hopes that by removing the shield, it can persuade Russia to take a stronger anti-Iran stance. But there are risks here. No one is sure that Russia will respond by supporting US pressure on Iran and secondly, whether Iran would take any notice even if it did.” [2]

The conclusion one has to draw is the simple truth – that Iran never presented a threat of launching long-range missiles at the United States, Washington’s rationale for the Polish and Czech deployments.

Yet President Obama began his statement on Thursday by endorsing George W. Bush’s characterization of Iran as the very danger that supposedly necessitated the third position missile shield deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic negotiated by the Bush administration while he, Obama, went on to abrogate those very agreements.

The second question that began to surface after Obama's and Gates' comments was one to the effect of "And now what trick does Washington have up its sleeve?"

The first issue is the easier to contend with: Either the U.S. was compelled to – backhandedly – admit the falsity of its Iranian threat claim or it still intends to escalate pressure against Iran, including direct military measures.

The latter is closer to the truth and leads quickly to the second issue. What is Washington planning to do with the western flank of its global interceptor missile system?

Pentagon chief Gates immediately revealed part of the new picture in prefacing his comments with "Those who say we are scrapping missile defense in Europe are either misinformed or misrepresenting the reality of what we are doing." He then laid out a three-phase strategy which included:

1. Deploying advanced sensors and interceptor missiles in both northern and southern Europe. Gates didn't specify which nations would host them, but Scandinavian and Balkans states seem likely candidates. The stationing of missile surveillance facilities and interceptor missiles on both ends of the European continent would represent a qualitative escalation of his earlier plans for ten missiles in Poland and one X-band radar in the Czech Republic even if the missiles in question are of shorter range.

2. Enhanced use of Aegis class warships with SM-3 [Standard Missile-3] interceptor missiles which the U.S. Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has in recent months advanced considerably. Next month the MDA plans the first test of an SM-3 against a ballistic missile.

Reports are that the Pentagon is to begin the deployment of missile-killing warships in the Mediterranean and North Seas. The Norwegian, Barents, Baltic and Black Seas may not be far behind.

3. The adaptation of SM-3s for ground use. In Gates' words, "fielded, upgraded, land-based SM-3s." He mentioned that the Czech Republic and Poland were possible sites for such deployments.

A major Polish daily newspaper revealed late last month that possible locations for U.S. missile shield components would be Israel, Turkey and the Balkans.

Associated Press on September 18 delivered a confirmation of the Polish report by linking it with the previous day's development in two successive sentences:

"Turkey's military says it is planning to spend \$1 billion (euro680 million) on four long-range missile defense systems.

"Friday's announcement comes a day after U.S. President Barack Obama canceled a long-planned missile shield for Eastern Europe, replacing a Bush-era project that was opposed by Russia with a plan he contended would better defend against Iranian missiles." [3]

A news agency in Azerbaijan quoted a political expert, Zardusht Alizade, "commenting on media reports that the U.S. will deploy a new missile defense system in the Caucasus," as saying "The United States may consider the joint use of the Gabala radar station" in his nation. [4]

The radar base is currently operated by Russia and that nation offered its joint use to the U.S. two years ago only to have the invitation spurned. Washington may plan to gain sole use of the Gabala base as Azerbaijan has been transformed into little better than a U.S. and NATO military client state since the break-up of the Soviet Union and more so with each passing year.

An American news source wrote on September 18 that “the new plan might include deploying an X-band radar to the Caucasus – the region sandwiched between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea....

“It’s easy to speculate about which countries in the region could potentially host an X-band radar. The United States has close military ties with Georgia. And neighboring Azerbaijan, which shares a border with Iran, has received U.S. funding for the construction of radar installations.” [5]

The author of the article, Nathan Hodge, said that he had been told by U.S. Missile Defense Agency spokesman Rick Lehner three years ago that the South Caucasus would prove a “good location for a small X-band radar to provide tracking and discrimination of missiles launched from Iran.”

He added that the probable model would be “an AN/TPY-2, the transportable X-band radar developed for the Army’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system.” An AN/TPY-2 [Army Navy/Transportable Radar Surveillance] installation was deployed by the Pentagon to Israel last autumn, one which has a range of 2,900 miles. A comparable capacity in Azerbaijan, Georgia or both could conduct missile and other forms of surveillance far beyond Iran.

EurasiaNet, a news source operated by the Open Society Institute concentrating on the Caucasus and Central Asia, featured a report called “Eurasia Security: New US Anti-Missile Vision Has Heavy Emphasis On The Caucasus.”

It stated that “Moscow’s muted contentment over the about-face in US missile defense plans in Europe may not last long. The Pentagon...is considering moving anti-missile radar systems from Russia’s European front yard to its backyard, the Caucasus.” [6]

General James Cartwright, vice-chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, was quoted in the feature on a proposed missile surveillance deployment, saying “It’s probably more likely to be in the Caucasus that we would base [the radar], because it’s to get the early tracks.” [7]

The article offered more specifics: “US defense officials have not specified the radar’s new proposed location, but some Georgian and Russian officials and commentators have been quick to suggest that the Pentagon has Georgia in mind. These analysts said that if the United States is thinking about the South Caucasus, Georgia would be the best place for the radar deployment.”

On the day before the piece appeared Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karassin expressed concerns about the U.S. and its NATO allies remilitarizing Georgia, a provocation pregnant with “developing a dynamic of its own because a temptation to make a blitzkrieg appears when the military biceps are being pumped and drilling goes on in the units of the Armed Forces and special assignment troops.”

He added, “Russia will insist on radical international measures to stop supplies of weaponry to Georgia and to make sure that the exercising of crack troops there, which is allegedly

aimed at enabling them to join the international security forces in Afghanistan, becomes predictable and limited.” [8]

The reference to crack troops relates to U.S. Marines recently dispatched to the nation, combat veterans of the Afghan and Iraqi wars, to train Georgian soldiers.

The EurasiaNet report also quoted Georgian member of parliament Davit Darchiashvili: “The US decision dovetails with our [security] needs. So long as the radar is stationed in the Caucasus, Georgian security needs would likely be met.

“This is the most important thing....[I]t is not of crucial significance as to where and how these defense systems will be deployed.” [9]

It also cites Russian military analyst Vladislav Shurygin remarking the self-evident fact that such radar in Georgia would be used against Russia, with him stating “We should not have any illusions about the US plans.”

Also on September 18 a Bulgarian news site wrote that “Bulgaria is one of the possible locations for the deployment of America’s new interceptor missiles in Europe.”

In regard to THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) and other missile shield elements, the same source quotes former chief of staff of the Russian Strategic Missile Force Viktor Esin as warning “Since Poland was willing to host the larger interceptor missiles as part of the Bush plan, it presumably might accept the smaller ones. And even if Poland and the Czech Republic do not, other former Warsaw Pact countries, such as Romania or Bulgaria, might.” [10]

The Czech Republic is two nations removed from Russia. Poland also doesn’t border mainland Russia. But Azerbaijan does. And so does Georgia. Other nations abutting Russia are already incorporated into the global interceptor missile shield (Norway), have been mentioned by the Missile Defense Agency as a future partner (Ukraine) and are probable participants in the making (Estonia, Latvia and Finland.) Bulgaria and Romania are across the Black Sea from Russia and Turkey is too. The containment of Iran is increasingly looking like the encirclement of Russia.

The quote “Moscow’s muted contentment over the about-face in US missile defense plans in Europe may not last long” may be a grave understatement.

Notes

- 1) Deutsche Welle, September 17, 2009
- 2) Ibid
- 3) Associated Press, September 18, 2009
- 4) Today.AZ, September 18, 2009
- 5) Wired, September 18, 2009
- 6) EurasiaNet, September 18, 2009
- 7) Ibid
- 8) Itar-Tass, September 18, 2009
- 9) EurasiaNet, September 18, 2009
- 10) Standart News, September 18, 2009

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