

## Obama Shifts Gears on Missile Defense

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The Obama administration announced Sept. 17 that it will not develop a planned missile interceptor field in Poland and radar facility in the Czech Republic, as envisioned by the Bush administration. Instead, the United States will implement a new missile defense program, designed around the Navy's Standard Missile-3 (SM-3), to counter short- and medium-range Iranian missiles, according to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. In announcing the change, President Barack Obama said that the new missile defense architecture in Europe "will provide stronger, smarter, and swifter defenses of American forces and America's allies" than the Bush-era plan.

The decision comes as a wider review of U.S. ballistic missile defense policy is nearing completion. According to Obama, it was the unanimous recommendation of Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Their recommendation was driven in part by a new analysis of the threat posed by Iranian missile capabilities. "The intelligence community now assesses that the threat from Iran's short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, such as the Shahab-3, is developing more rapidly than previously projected," Gates said at a Sept. 17 press conference. At the same time, Gates said, "the threat of potential Iranian intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities has been slower to develop than was estimated in 2006." The new system is designed to focus on quickly addressing threats to Europe and U.S. military personnel deployed in the region, rather than on longer-term threats to the United States, he said.

Gates also said advances in missile defense technology enable the United States to rely on a distributed system of sensors, rather than the single radar site slated for the Czech Republic, to detect incoming missiles. Similarly, Gates cited the flexibility and proven test record of the SM-3 as a replacement for the ground-based interceptors planned for Poland.

The United States expects to deploy sea-based SM-3 Block IA interceptors to the region in 2011, six or seven years before the Polish and Czech sites would have been completed, according to Gates. The system would be upgraded in phases, with the SM-3 Block IB being deployed on land as well as at sea in 2015. The land-based interceptors would be stationed at two bases, one in northern Europe and another in the south, a senior administration official said at a Sept. 21 briefing for nongovernmental organizations.

In 2018 the United States would deploy the more advanced SM-3 Block IIA to the European land bases and partially replace the older interceptors at sea, the administration official said. The IIA model will be capable of defending the entire landmass of Europe from short- and intermediate-range missiles, according to Gen. James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who joined Gates at the Sept. 17 press conference. In 2020 the Block IIB version of the SM-3 interceptor, currently in development, would be installed. Unlike the other SM-3 versions, the Block IIB is intended to be capable of intercepting ICBMs that could threaten the United States.

Cartwright elaborated on the changed U.S. perception of the Iranian missile threat, saying, "We built the original system on the idea of a rogue-nation threat: three to five missiles that could come from either North Korea or Iran. The reality is, we're dealing with hundreds of missiles in the [intermediate-] and medium-range capabilities.... What you can do with an SM-3 in affordability and in deployment and dispersal is substantially greater for larger numbers of missiles than what we have with a ground-based interceptor." Under the new plan, two or three Aegis ships armed with

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missile interceptors would normally patrol the Mediterranean and North Sea, Cartwright said, and additional ships could be added as necessary. Each vessel can carry approximately 100 SM-3 interceptors, according to Cartwright.

The Obama administration intends the new missile defense effort to be a multinational one. "We will work with our Allies to integrate this architecture with NATO members' missile defense capabilities," a White House press release states. "We plan to deploy elements in northern and southern Europe and will be consulting closely at NATO with Allies on the specific deployment options."

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen praised the shift, calling it a "positive step" in remarks quoted by Reuters. "I think it is in full accordance with the principle of solidarity within the alliance and the indivisibility of security in Europe," he said. In a Sept. 18 speech, Rasmussen argued for greater cooperation between NATO and Russia, including in the field of missile defense. The alliance and Russia "have a wealth of experience in missile defense," Rasmussen said. "We should now work to combine this experience to our mutual benefit."

The original plan for Polish and Czech missile defense sites, first announced in 2007, drew frequent and vociferous Russian objections on the grounds that it would damage the strategic equilibrium between the two nuclear superpowers. According to Gates, the Russian leadership was concerned that the United States might covertly arm the European interceptors with nuclear warheads. If launched, such missiles could arrive at Russian targets with virtually no warning time, Gates said. Moscow was also concerned that the Czech radar installation would be able to see deep into Russia, he said. The new arrangement will not have these theoretical capabilities, the senior administration official said at the Sept. 21 briefing. In his statement, Obama denied that the previous plan had been aimed at Russia but welcomed Russian cooperation in the new missile defense architecture.

Gates denied that the change in policy had been made in order to allay Russian concerns or to secure Moscow's cooperation on other issues. "The decisions on this were driven...almost exclusively by the changed intelligence assessment and the enhanced technology," Gates said.

In Moscow, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev issued a restrained statement noting the change in U.S. policy. "I hope that we'll be able to...intensify cooperation, including with European countries and other concerned states," Medvedev said. "We will work together to develop effective measures against the risks of missile proliferation. Measures that take into account the interests and concerns of all parties, and ensure equal security for all countries in European territory."

Obama took pains in his address to reassure the Czech and Polish governments that the United States remains committed to their defense. The United States, he said, is "bound by the solemn commitment of NATO's Article V that an attack on one is an attack on all."

The United States will still deploy a Patriot missile battery to Poland, according to Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, in accordance with a bilateral agreement signed Aug. 20, 2008. Sikorski, quoted by Reuters Sept. 17, said that "the American side has assured us that the Patriots will be armed and capable of being linked to our defense system." Patriot interceptors are used to defend small areas from incoming missiles and airborne attacks. The battery is slated to be deployed in Poland permanently in 2012, according to the bilateral framework. A Sept. 17 Polish Foreign Ministry statement welcomed the U.S. pledge to fulfill the August agreement and said that Washington's commitment to "the indivisibility of security of the entire North Atlantic Alliance and credibility of collective defense guarantees" should enhance Poland's security.

Czech Prime Minister Jan Fischer, in announcing the change in policy Sept. 17, said that the broader U.S.-Czech relationship would remain unchanged. Czech President Václav Klaus echoed that sentiment in remarks to the Czech News Agency. "I am one hundred percent convinced that this step by the American government does not mean any cooling of relations between the United States and the Czech Republic," Klaus said.

Although the official reaction in Prague and Warsaw was positive, other leading politicians in those countries were critical of the move. Former Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, who negotiated the radar agreement with the United States despite public opposition in his country, called the

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decision “not good news for the Czech state,” according to the Associated Press. Similarly, the president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, wrote in a newspaper article that the new strategy placed Poland in a “gray zone of security” between NATO and Russia. The Polish presidency is mainly a ceremonial position.

Some critics of the new policy have warned that existing interceptor bases in Alaska and California are insufficient to defend the eastern U.S. coast against a long-range missile attack. Riki Ellison, chairman of the nonprofit Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, charged that the two western U.S. interceptor bases cannot protect the eastern United States with “high confidence.” Asked to address this point at the Sept. 21 briefing, the senior administration official said that the existing strategic missile defense sites are capable of defending the United States, including the East Coast.

In Washington, congressional Republicans roundly criticized Obama for what they characterized as capitulation to Russia and the abandonment of two eastern European allies. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) issued a press release calling the decision to cancel the Polish and Czech sites “shortsighted and harmful to our long-term security interests.” His counterpart in the House, Minority Leader John Boehner (Ohio), said that the decision “does little more than empower Russia and Iran at the expense our allies in Europe.” In a statement on the floor of the Senate, Sen. John McCain (Ariz.) said that the change in policy will generate “a distinct lack and loss of confidence on the part of our friends and allies in the word of the United States” and will “encourage further belligerence on the part of the Russians.”

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton responded to such charges during a Sept. 18 address at the Brookings Institution in Washington. “Much of that criticism is not yet connected to the facts,” Clinton said. “We are deploying missile defense sooner than the Bush administration planned to do so, and we are deploying a more comprehensive system.”

Gates likewise defended the decision, saying that the new approach “provides a better missile defense capability for our forces in Europe, for our European allies, and eventually for our homeland” than the previous program. “Those who say we are scrapping missile defense in Europe are either misinformed or misrepresenting the reality of what we are doing,” he said.

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