

Obama's Missile U-Turn

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After years of intense negotiations between the United States, Poland and the Czech Republic, the new US administration has decided to scrap the controversial Bush-era plans for a missile defence shield in Central Europe. Foreign policy experts already saw the writing on the wall: President Barack Obama launched an in-depth review of the threat posed by Iran's ballistic missile programme soon after his inauguration, and the Kremlin leaked information back in February that the new US administration was approaching Moscow with an offer to scrap missile defence in return for greater Russian cooperation on Iran.

Abandoning the initial plan of ten ground-based missile interceptors in Poland and one radar site in the Czech Republic, Washington is instead opting for a new comprehensive missile defence system employing cruisers and destroyers equipped with sophisticated Aegis radars and anti-missile interceptors in the North Sea and eastern Mediterranean in order to take down short- and medium-range Iranian missiles. According to official sources, this new system will be more advantageous as it will be deployed sooner, consist of more interceptors in more places, and will employ proven technology.

But these are not the only drivers behind this sudden volte-face. First, this fundamental shift in American foreign policy is in harmony with the US desire to 'reset' its relationship with Russia. It removes a significant bone of contention that stood in the way of an agreement on nuclear disarmament, which is of particular relevance in the context of the upcoming expiration of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) this December. Second, it can potentially increase diplomatic pressure on Iran by compelling Moscow to close ranks with the West. This is particularly important now given the fact that a second uranium enrichment site has been exposed in an underground tunnel complex near the city of Qom. Forcing Moscow's hand on Iran in favour of Washington could also potentially weaken Beijing's opposition as it might be averse to remaining isolated on the UN Security Council. Third, the US decision brings to a close deep NATO divisions over this issue, allowing the alliance to move forward and explore a new basis for its relationship with Moscow under its new Secretary-General. Lastly, it should not be forgotten that the new anti-missile system would also save resources at a time when the pressures of the financial and economic crisis are catapulting the US national debt to historic proportions (over \$11 trillion).

Whether Washington's policy reversal will indeed bring political dividends from Moscow that will ultimately lead to progress on Iran remains to be seen. Not only might the Kremlin's influence on Iranian policy-making be over-estimated, it is also unclear to what extent Russia would be prepared to cooperate; the Kremlin continues to see world politics as a Manichean contest in which a concession by one state is considered a weakness and a demonstration of one's own strength. Russia's willingness to move and contribute to a resetting of relations has yet to be demonstrated.

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In the meantime, while Obama's missile U-turn might alleviate Western Europe's anxieties over the initial proposal, it has left Warsaw and Prague out in the cold. Obama's announcement on 17 September, 60 years after the invasion of Poland by the Soviet Union, has even been labelled by some Czech media as a second 'Munich agreement', in reference to the 1938 pact that led to the annexation of the Czech Republic by Nazi Germany. While such comparisons are evidently absurd, they do, to some extent, reflect Central and Eastern European security concerns. In the wake of the Georgia war and the European gas crisis, there has been a growing sense of uneasiness in the region. As Russian assertiveness has increased, Central and Eastern European (CEE) governments' faith in NATO security guarantees and European solidarity has steadily eroded. A long list of former CEE statesmen, including Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, brought home this point last summer with an open letter to US President Barack Obama, in which they declared that NATO seems weaker and less relevant than ever before. Ten years after joining NATO, the region still lacks any proper Article 5 defence planning or any significant NATO infrastructure, aside from the Joint Force Training Centre (JFTC) located in Poland. According to Ron Asmus, Executive Director of the Brussels-based Transatlantic Center at the German Marshall Fund, Washington also promised Poland a NATO corps-size reinforcement capability in the 1990s, but this has yet to materialise. The fact that the European Union has shown little support for Central and Eastern European disputes with Russia has further diminished their confidence in the EU.

Faced with an incomplete NATO military infrastructure in their region and an EU common foreign and security policy still in its infancy, it is not surprising that Central and Eastern European countries have sought to strengthen their own safety by tying the US closer into their security structure. Hosting a tracking radar or interceptors would have done the job, providing Poland and the Czech Republic with a permanent presence of American ground troops.

US disengagement from the original missile defence shield has thrown these plans into disarray, exacerbating Central and Eastern Europeans' existing security concerns and giving the impression that Washington's desire to improve its relations with Russia comes at the expense of their own security. In the eyes of many, Poland and the Czech Republic have been cast aside as expendable pawns on the Eurasian grand chessboard. Their unfortunate status as collateral damage is decreasing confidence – not only amongst their foreign policy-makers but also the general public – in the United States. Ministries of Foreign Affairs in particular must feel especially demoralised, having hedged their bets on the US as their primary security anchor.

Increasing the NATO or indeed a US presence would go a long way towards addressing these questions. Having been promised a Patriot Missile Defence System, Poland could also receive rotating Europe-bound American Patriot Units for month-long training tours as is currently discussed. This could at some point lead towards a more permanent presence.

Simultaneously, the Central and Eastern European countries' current disillusionment with the United States could lead to a return to Europe. Some of these seeds might ironically have been sown during the tumultuous Czech EU Presidency. While Prague's six-month stint at the helm was anything but smooth, it did provide the Czech Republic with a greater appreciation of the European Union illustrated by the simple fact that former Prime Minister Topolánek changed tack on the Lisbon Treaty, which he initially vigorously opposed.

Whether such a genuine return to Europe takes place, however, also depends on Western European governments that have traditionally tended to belittle Central and Eastern Europe. Germany has a particularly important role to play in this context, due to its close relationship with Russia. With the end of the grand coalition and a new conservative-liberal administration, Chancellor Angela Merkel can refocus her efforts on Central and Eastern European concerns as promised in the last federal electoral campaign in 2005.

Obama's new missile defence system not only engages Russia but to some extent also recommitments the United States to Europe, marking a sharp departure from the Bush strategy of dividing the continent into 'old' and 'new' blocs. Central and Eastern European governments must use this window to strengthen their commitment to the European Union and the Lisbon Treaty. In turn, Western Europe, particularly Germany, must learn to better take into account their fellow member states' concerns and apprehensions rather than dismissing their unease as outdated historical paranoia.