

Planned US missile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic intensify European tensions

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The announcement by the US government of plans to station a missile defence system in Poland and a radar facility in the Czech Republic has led not only to an increasingly hostile atmosphere between Russia and the US, but also to considerable tensions inside the European Union as a result of an increasingly aggressive US foreign policy.

According to the plans of the US government, a military base with up to 10 ballistic missiles is to be established in Poland as part of the satellite-based anti-missile defence system NMD (National Missile Defence). An associated radar system is to be erected in the Czech Republic. The official justification for this project is the alleged threat to the US from long-range nuclear missiles fired from the Middle East—i.e., Iran—and/or from North Korea.

Since both states are far removed from possessing the technological means for such missile systems, it quickly became clear that the real aim of the project was two immediate competitors of US imperialism—Russia and China.

Poland and the Czech Republic are close allies of the US and belong to the “coalition of the willing,” which supported the US in its invasion and occupation of Iraq. At present, Poland has 900 soldiers stationed in Iraq, and the Czech Republic 100. Both nations are currently increasing their commitment in Afghanistan in order to relieve US troops in the country. Poland has recently sent an additional 1,000 troops, and the Czech Republic is currently preparing to supply helicopters and weapons for the occupation troops.

As is the case with regard to participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the overwhelming majority of the population in both countries also reject the planned stationing of the anti-missile defence system. A recent poll by the agency STEM revealed that 70 percent of Czechs are strongly opposed to the planned US military base. The poll also made clear that the issue is closely followed with interest by the population. Similar polls give figures of between 60 and 80 percent of Poles who are also opposed to the stationing of US missiles on their soil.

Widespread popular opposition to the aggressive policies of the Bush government has been completely ignored by the political elites ruling the two former Eastern bloc countries. After a meeting, the two heads of government, Mirek Topolánek, chairman of the conservative Czech Citizen's Party (ODS), and Jarosław Kaczyński, chairman of the right-conservative PiS in Poland, stressed their agreement with stationing the bases. After

the meeting, Kaczyński declared: “We are both deeply convinced that one must make a decision in principle over Europe's security, including the stationing of a US anti-missile defence base.” Czech Vice-Prime Minister Alexandr Vondra (independent) announced that Prague would officially respond to the official US request this March.

Noteworthy is the way in which the Czech Greens have vehemently supported the US military plans. Green Party chief Martin Bursík and the independent foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg, who assumed his post with the support of the Greens, have expressed their unconditional support for the US proposals. A motion calling for a referendum on the issue was turned down at a Green party congress in mid-February without even going to a vote.

To obtain the necessary majority in parliament for the new radar installation, the Czech government, consisting of a coalition between Topolánek's conservative ODS, the Christian Democrats and the Greens, needs the support of at least two Social Democrat (CSSD) deputies. Officially, the CSSD is the party of opposition, but the party leadership has ensured that the party backs the right-wing government. In response, Topolánek has promised the social-democratic party chief, Jiri Paroubek, a certain influence in policymaking.

The public declarations of opposition to the bases by the CSSD are hypocritical to the core. It was the CSSD-led government that first held conversations with US representatives over the issue last year and signalled their agreement.

In Poland, the very limited opposition in the country's ruling elite to the US bases arises from fears that blind mere obedience to Washington could strip the political clique in Warsaw of its last remaining popular support. From this standpoint, former Polish defence secretary Radosław Sikorski told the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*: “The anti-missile defence system proposed for Poland is an American system for the defence of the US. I am not a supporter of the regime in Teheran, but Poland maintains diplomatic relations with Iran, and we do not expect any Iranian missile attacks here in Warsaw.”

Sikorski was forced to resign at the beginning of February following his criticism of the political course followed by the Kaczyński brothers. Sikorski is not opposed to US plans in principle, but favours a tougher line of negotiation with the US together with the integration of NATO. The new Polish defence secretary, Alexander Szczygło, who is firmly in the pocket of the

Kaczynski brothers, has announced he will travel soon to Washington and give his government's reply to the American proposals.

The Kaczynskis and their ruling PiS party are quite prepared to risk a further cabinet crisis in order to serve the interests of the US government. Andrzej Lepper, the vice-prime minister and head of the hard-line right-wing coalition partner Samoobrona, has demanded a referendum on the issue of the US bases—in opposition to the government's official line.

The US plans have predictably met with considerable criticism in Moscow. At the Munich security conference in February, Russian President Vladimir Putin bluntly condemned US foreign policy. After it became clear that both the Polish and Czech governments were amenable to the US plans, Moscow reacted with an open threat. Russian general Nikolai Solovtsov explained that it would now be necessary to regard the sites for the proposed new missile system as a potential target for Russian missiles.

Tensions rose further when it was announced that there were plans for the establishment of a further missile site in the Caucasus, possibly in Georgia, already the scene of the recent US-sponsored "Orange Revolution." This would be another major step towards an encirclement of Russia.

The increasing conflict between the US and Russia poses European Union powers with enormous problems. In 2003, Donald Rumsfeld, defence secretary at the time, sought to divide Europe into "new" and "old" Europe, based on which nations were prepared to side with America. Now, a similar line of division has emerged in Europe in response to the planned anti-missile defence system.

Up until now, all discussions over the stationing of the weapons system between the US, the Czech Republic and Poland have taken place outside of NATO, and most European politicians have reacted by stating that the missile system should be subordinated to the responsibility of NATO—a step that the US has so far rejected.

Most European politicians are opposed to the US plans. The foreign minister of Luxembourg, Jean Asselborn (LSAP), expressed his hope that the European Union would be able to persuade Poland and the Czech Republic not to establish the bases. "We will not have stability in Europe," Asselborn warned, "if we force the Russians into a corner."

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party—SPD) expressed cautious criticism of the US plans: "Bearing in mind that the planned bases move ever closer to Russia, this means that one should also have talked beforehand with Russia." The chairman of the SPD, Kurt Beck, was more to the point: "We must talk with one another and not just stick missiles in front of noses." The chairman of the German free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), Guido Westerwelle, appealed to the German presidency of the European Union council: "Europe must not allow itself to be split." Gernot Erler, minister of state in the Foreign Office (SPD), warned of the possible arms race that could result.

The Czech Vice-Prime Minister Vondra swept aside such doubts: "Germany is obviously somewhat jealous that the US, when it wants to speak with Europe, calls Prague and Warsaw

instead of Berlin." Vondra spent some time in the US and has close contact with neo-conservative elements in Washington.

Other European states have declared their support for the project—in particular, those eastern European states that participated in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Recently, the Slovak government in Bratislava, led by Prime Minister Robert Fico (SMER), agreed to the setting up of a US radar and missile defence system in Slovakia. This option is being held open by US representatives in the event that problems arise in the negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic. Great Britain, which is also currently taking part in discussions with the US over participation in the defence system, has also welcomed the project.

As is the case with regard to the current US plans for war against Iran, the German and French governments are hesitant to take an open stand against the US. German Chancellor Angela Merkel avoided raising the issue of the missile system at the recent European Union summit in Brussels, although some EU members, including France, had raised such a demand at the meeting of the EU foreign ministers held at the start of the week in Brussels.

The political course being pursued by the US is quite capable of further disrupting international relations. The American missile defence system undermines the existing regulations governing medium-range nuclear disarmament and will inevitably provoke a new arms race.

European attempts to integrate the American plans into the mechanism of NATO are aimed at preventing any further divisions in Europe. In addition, the European powers are very concerned that a US defence system set up on Moscow's doorstep could poison the relationship with Russia, with consequences for the supply of Russian raw materials, including oil and gas, to a number of European countries.

Ulrich Weisser, former director of the planning staff in the German Defence Ministry, made just this point in the latest edition of the magazine *International Policy*. He describes good relations with Moscow as "political-strategic and also economic capital, which cannot possibly be overestimated in terms of its value for Europe and the world." Using the example of the US missile system, he expresses his regret that the "Russia policy developed effectively over decades" by Germany and France is now coming "under the fatal influence of the new member states in central Eastern Europe."

With regard to the catastrophic policy of the US, the chaos in Iraq and US preparations for war against Iran, Weisser calls upon the "axis Paris-Berlin-Moscow" to recognise and implement its joint strategic interests in the Middle and Far East—a move that would undoubtedly lead to a further souring of the transatlantic relationship.



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