

US suspends eastern European missile shield plan

Niall Green
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President Barack Obama has announced the suspension of plans to develop two bases in Poland and the Czech Republic that were to be part of a proposed United States missile defense shield.

In 2002, the Bush administration announced plans to extend the missile shield system into Eastern Europe with the establishment of an anti-ballistic missile silo in Poland and a radar base in the Czech Republic. In August 2008, the US signed agreements with both countries—in exchange for large-scale US financial support—that would have seen the new facilities opened by 2012.

Purportedly designed to counter the threat of a missile attack on European NATO members from a “rogue state” such as Iran, the proposed system was the continuation of a long-standing US military plan to use a missile shield to neutralize the nuclear capabilities of the Soviet Union and then, since 1991, Russia. The Russian elite met the eastward expansion of the US system into former Warsaw Pact countries with utmost hostility. Moscow correctly saw the missile shield as an arms race that threatened the strike capabilities of its long-range ballistic missile arsenal, further tipping the balance of nuclear power in Eurasia in favor of the US.

Obama stated that the US would continue to pursue a “proven, cost-effective” missile system using existing bases and sea-based interceptors. In a live television address Thursday, the US president said that it was necessary to “deploy a defense system that best responds to the threats we face,” that would take the form of “a stronger, smarter and swifter defense” of US and allied European countries.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated that the move did not mark an abandonment of the plans to develop a missile defense system in Europe, adding that the Pentagon was in negotiations with Warsaw and Prague about deploying upgraded SM-3 missile interceptors on their territory from 2015. Gates pointed out that the US would continue to deploy “current and proven missile defense systems” in Europe.

Obama stressed that he had spoken to the leaders of both

Poland and the Czech Republic and promised to continue to develop the US commitment to their defense. He also claimed that the Kremlin’s fear about the missile defense system was “entirely unfounded.” In a subsequent news conference, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs stressed the overhaul was “not about Russia.”

Obama’s announcement on missile defense quickly came under fire from the Republican right. John Bolton, who was undersecretary of state for arms control and international security under President Bush, said the move was “unambiguously a bad decision” and that the US was offering a concession to Moscow when Russia could offer nothing in return.

Eric Cantor, the second-ranking Republican in the House of Representatives, said his party would “work to overturn this wrong-headed policy.”

“Scrapping our missile defense effort in Europe has severe consequences for our diplomatic relations and weakens our national security. Our allies, especially Poland and the Czech Republic, deserve better,” Cantor said in a statement.

Seeking to deflect criticism that the administration had given in to demands from the Kremlin and compromised national security, the White House stated that the review of missile defense was conducted by the military and was based on new intelligence that the Iranian ballistic missile program did not pose a threat to the United States, but could threaten Europe, requiring a shift towards alternative missile defense systems.

There are real concerns within the military that the defensive shield system pushed under Bush—dubbed the “son of Star Wars”—after the Reagan-era plan for space-based anti-ballistic weapons—would not be able to function for many years to come, and that resources would be better spent developing more conventional systems. The US is cooperating with Israel in developing a new anti-ballistic missile system known as David’s Sling, while the Pentagon will place more emphasis on using its Aegis naval anti-missile system, already deployed off Japan.

In addition to the military issues, the Obama

administration is making a geopolitical move regarding the Czech and Polish bases. Washington has sought improved relations with Moscow this year, in an attempt to “reset” hostile positions developed during the Bush presidency. During talks with his Russian counterpart, Dmitri Medvedev, and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Obama reportedly recognized Moscow’s concerns over the planned missile shield bases in Eastern Europe. The US president, according to one Kremlin source, also acknowledged the “peculiarities” of Russian relations with the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia, in which Washington had organized pro-Western “color revolutions.”

These limited concessions were made in exchange for the Kremlin’s cooperation with the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Shortly before Obama arrived for the summit in Moscow in July, Medvedev announced that Russia would permit the US Air Force to fly over Russian airspace en route to Afghanistan.

Washington also hopes to gain Moscow’s cooperation in placing new international sanctions on Iran, supposedly as punishment for Tehran’s refusal to end the enrichment of uranium, which the Islamic Republic states is intended for lawful civilian energy purposes. The US hopes that new sanctions against Iran will further its aim of replacing the regime in Tehran with one more favorable to US interests, something that Washington sought to achieve through its backing of the campaign of defeated Iranian presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi.

The shelving of the Polish and Czech bases will also appease Washington’s NATO allies in Europe, especially Germany, who were opposed to the serious deterioration of relations between the US-led alliance and Russia under the Bush administration. Berlin has particularly close ties to Moscow, especially in the energy sector, with Russia providing much of Germany’s natural gas needs.

Rather than the suspension of the planned eastern European bases representing a major change in US strategy, the Obama administration is making a tactical shift in order to meet the same basic strategic goals of American imperialism pursued during the Bush years: US domination of the Middle East and Central Asia, home of the world’s greatest reserves of oil and gas.

That Obama is adopting what BBC world affairs correspondent Paul Reynolds characterized as “a far more cautious and flexible foreign policy” than that of President Bush is a product of recognition among the majority of the Washington military and security apparatus that the recklessness of the previous administration was yielding disastrous results.

In order to win the war in Afghanistan, while maintaining

its occupation of Iraq, Washington has concluded that it needs to temporarily curtail its aggression in other parts of the world while reengaging its European allies and regional powers such as Russia.

This shift in US foreign policy was expressed earlier this month by one of the most consistent defenders of American imperialism, former Carter-era national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, now a leading adviser to the Obama presidency.

One of the architects of the policy of rolling back the power of the Soviet Union by lending US support in 1979 to the Mujahedin in Afghanistan—the forerunners of the Taliban and Al Qaeda—Brzezinski addressed a conference of military and foreign policy figures in Geneva, Switzerland last week. In his speech Brzezinski backed British and German calls for a United Nations conference on Afghanistan, through which the European powers are seeking to establish a greater role for themselves in the carve-up of Central Asia in exchange for extending their support for the US-led occupation.

Brzezinski warned that despite the presence of around 100,000 US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, the occupation is faced with defeat by an increasingly hostile population who view them as unwelcome invaders, as had happened to the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

He said that Washington’s policy in Afghanistan was the foreign policy issue with “perhaps the greatest need for strategic review,” including engaging other powers in the occupation of the country. If the United States could not secure the cooperation of its European allies in Afghanistan, Brzezinski said, “that would probably spell the end of the Alliance [NATO].”

These comments echoed an August 20 op-ed piece Brzezinski had written for the *New York Times*, in which he stated that the “dispersal of global power”—i.e., the relative decline of US imperialism and the rise of major rivals in Europe and Asia—necessitated a new strategy for NATO. In particular Brzezinski advocated renewing NATO’s role in Afghanistan, while reaching out to Russia and China.



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