

US sells Poland Patriot anti-missile system amid continued campaign against Russia

Bill Van Auken
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The Pentagon and Poland Wednesday signed a \$4.75 billion deal to sell the eastern European country the Patriot anti-missile system.

While Poland's extreme right-wing government hailed the arms deal, the largest in the country's history, it will undoubtedly further stoke tensions between the West and Moscow, which has viewed the deployment of such systems as part of a concerted effort by Washington and its allies to undermine Russia's ability to defend itself against a nuclear attack.

"It is an extraordinary, historic moment; it is Poland's introduction into a whole new world of state-of-the-art technology, modern weaponry, and defensive means," Polish President Andrzej Duda said during the signing ceremony, which was held at an armaments factory before a column of Polish troops.

"It's a lot of money, but we also know from our historical experience that security has no price," said Duda, whose authoritarian regime will no doubt extract the money to pay for the missiles through redoubled attacks on the living standards of Polish workers.

The Polish arms deal has been inked in the midst of a coordinated international campaign led by London and Washington to indict Moscow for the poisoning of the ex-Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the southern English city of Salisbury on March 4.

Russia has denied any involvement in the poisoning, which the British authorities have claimed was carried out with a nerve agent "of a type" (Novichok) that had once been manufactured in the Soviet Union and that it was "highly likely" that the attack was the work of Russia.

Without presenting any evidence to substantiate these accusations—much less any conceivable motive for Moscow to carry out such an action on the eve of the presidential election in Russia—the British Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May expelled 23 Russian diplomats.

London has refused Moscow's requests to supply a sample of the alleged nerve agent used in the attack, as is required by international chemical weapons treaties. The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement Wednesday charging that the attitude of the May government shows that "UK authorities are not interested in finding out the motives and those responsible for the crime in Salisbury and suggests that the British intelligence services are involved in it."

Washington joined this anti-Russian crusade, ordering the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomatic personnel and the closing of the Russian consulate in Seattle, while joining with London in pressuring other countries to follow suit. More than 20 other countries responded with expulsions. Most of these countries took only token actions, however, involving one or two Russian diplomats. Nine members of the EU took no action. The only expulsion of more than four diplomats in Europe came from the rabidly anti-Russian government of Ukraine, which ordered 13 Russian diplomats to leave the country.

Poland, which along with Germany, France and Canada was one of the countries expelling four Russians, has long served as a pillar of the military buildup by the US and NATO against Russia.

Since the coming to office of the Trump administration, Washington has openly promoted the forging of closer ties to Warsaw and other eastern European governments, reviving the so-called Intermarium project of the 1920s, in which the US sought an alliance with fascistic and right-wing regimes in the region directed against both the Soviet Union and the rise of Germany as a continental hegemon.

The turn toward Eastern Europe is in large part a response to mounting tensions between Washington and Germany, which is increasingly seeking its own great power interests, including through commercial and other ties with Russia. While Berlin joined with the UK, France

and the US in signing a joint declaration blaming Russia for the Skripal poisoning, there exist sharp divisions within the German ruling establishment and Chancellor Angela Merkel's grand coalition government over the issue.

"We must do everything possible to prevent a new Cold War with Russia," Social Democrat Gernot Erler, the government coordinator for Russia, told the *Passauer Neue Presse*.

Other prominent Social Democrats went further. Former European Commissioner Guenter Verheugen questioned the objective basis for the sanctions. "The view that if in doubt, 'Putin and the Russians are responsible for everything', is one that poisons thought and must stop," he told the *Augsburger Allgemeine*.

Such views reflect the concerns of major German corporate and financial interests, whose profits are tied up with the Russian market.

The German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations, whose members include some 200 German companies, warned against "over-hasty conclusions" over the Skripal affair leading to a "spiral of escalation."

Just one day after it expelled a handful of Russian diplomats, the German government on Tuesday announced final approval for the construction and operation of the Russia-led Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which will pipe Russian natural gas to Germany under the Baltic Sea. The project has been bitterly opposed by both Washington and its Eastern European allies.

It is no doubt such tensions that the US defense secretary, Gen. James Mattis, had in mind when he told reporters at the Pentagon that Russia was "trying to break the unity of the Western alliance." Mattis claimed that it was "pretty obvious" that Russia was responsible for the attack on Skripal and charged Moscow with having "chosen to be a strategic competitor, even to the point of reckless activity."

The sharp divisions that have emerged among the NATO powers notwithstanding, there are continuous signs that active preparations are underway for war with Russia.

Senior US military officers speaking at the Association of the United States Army's Global Force Symposium on Monday issued warnings that the Pentagon must "dramatically increase the range of the service's artillery and missile systems to counter a Russian threat that would leave ground forces without air support in the 'first few weeks' of a war in Europe," the website military.com reported. The American military, the officers revealed, is

working on a number of new weapons systems designed to counteract superior Russian air defense systems that would preclude the operation of fixed-wing aircraft.

"We've got to push the maximum range of all systems under development for close, deep and strategic, and we have got to outgun the enemy," Gen. Robert Brown, commanding general of United States Army Pacific Command, told an audience of military officers and defense contractors.

Meanwhile, the European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union, announced Wednesday that it has launched an initiative to create a "military Schengen zone," allowing NATO military forces to freely cross European borders. The military project is being unveiled even as right-wing nationalist and anti-immigrant European politicians, including Germany's new Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, are openly rejecting the original Schengen Agreement, in effect for over two decades, which allows border-control-free travel between the 26 European countries that signed on to it.

EU transport commissioner Violeta Bulc told reporters that the aim was to ensure "quick and seamless mobility across the continent. This is a matter of collective security."

In addition to removing border controls, she said that investments would be made to assure that key corridors would be capable of handling tanks and heavy military vehicles. "We must be able to quickly deploy troops either within the EU or rapidly launch military operations abroad and to do so we need infrastructure that is fit for the purpose."

Russian Deputy Defense Minister Col. Gen. Alexander Fomin responded to the announcement by stating that the real goal was to "fast-track to the maximum extent ... deployment towards Russia's borders."

He also told the Russian Defense Ministry's official newspaper that the US and NATO were creating arsenals of weapons, ammunition and food supplies in various countries, including Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, to prepare for war with Russia.



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