

## European missile defence: the America-Russia-Iran knot

By Tom Sauer, David Webb,  
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At the Nato summit of heads of state in Bucharest on 2-4 April 2008 [1], the issue of missile defence will figure high on the agenda. The odds are that, without any meaningful parliamentary debate within or between European states, Europe will quietly go along with the United States proposal to instal missile-defence interceptors [2] in Poland and a powerful radar system [3] in the Czech Republic. Moreover, but it appears that further steps will then be taken to integrate this strategic US "national missile defence" system with "theatre missile defence [4]", currently being developed by Nato countries at an annual cost of €1 billion euro (\$1.58 bn).

So, what's the problem with protecting European territory from the threat of attack from nuclear missiles? Well, to start with, it is a solution that technically does not work being applied to a problem that actually does not exist. The current generation of missile interceptors is just not capable of intercepting long-range missiles. The deployment of a large number of decoy warheads in the missile can easily overwhelm the limited number of interceptors available. Some tests have succeeded in the past because the target missile carried a homing device that guided the interceptor to it; and because it was known when the target missile would be launched, in what direction and at what speed. Would a real-world enemy announce in advance when an attack will take place, with what kind of rocket and using which ballistic track - never mind have the decency to include a homing device in the warhead?

The question answers itself. In addition, earlier experience - such as the failure of the United States and Israel [8] to knock out the crude Scud missiles [9] of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the war of 1991 - does not inspire hopes of the effectiveness of strategic missile defence.

The US legitimises this project by referring to the threat from Iran. But if Iran is really the problem, then the interceptors should in principle be stationed in Turkey rather than in east-central Europe - a location that understandably causes great concern in Russia. There are, in any case, problems surrounding the identification of a danger from Iran. The nature and extent of any such threat is far from established despite extensive inspection, discussion and controversy over several years (see Jan De Pauw, "Iran, the United States and Europe: the nuclear complex [9]", 5 December 2007). The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA [10]) visits Iran's facilities on a regular basis and has not confirmed that Iran is working on a nuclear-weapons programme. Furthermore, Washington's most recent US national-intelligence estimate (NIE), published on 3 December 2007 - Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities [11] - concluded that Iran had probably halted its nuclear-weapons programme in 2003, and that it

**Tom Sauer** is assistant professor [5] in international politics at the University of Antwerp, Belgium

**David Webb** is professor [6] in engineering in the Praxis Centre [7] at Leeds Metropolitan University, England

Also by Tom Sauer in **openDemocracy**:

"Iran's nuclear-escalation ladder [7]" (30 January 2006)

would not be technically able to have enough enriched uranium to resume it until 2010-15; an assessment of Iran's nuclear plans that sharply differed from the alarmist [11] one claimed by leading figures in and supporters of the George W Bush administration.

Even if Iran *is* still operating a secret nuclear-weapons programme [12], however, the technological hurdles of fitting a long-range missile (which it also does not currently possess) with a nuclear warhead are simply too complex for a state that cannot smoothly and continuously operate thousands of centrifuges. And in the unlikely event that Iran *is* capable of producing the imagined threat, why would it decide to launch such a missile knowing that it would be answered by a similar (or probably much larger) counterattack? After all, if the regime in Tehran really wanted to attack the west, it has "better" means available which no missile-defence system could prevent: an anonymous nuclear terrorist attack by truck, ship or small aircraft, for example. In these circumstances, missile defence can at most create a false sense of security.

### **A costly militarism**

The choice of Poland and the Czech Republic as the sites for Nato's missile-defence deployment appears to convince Russia that it is their missile silos - not Iran's - that the US is targeting. The Pentagon denies this, stating that the interceptors could not catch missiles fired from Russian silos. However, calculations by Theodore Postol [13] of MIT dispute the US military's calculations: he suggests that the Pentagon has overestimated the velocity of Russian missiles and underestimated the velocity of US interceptors, thus demonstrating [14] that Russian arguments were well-founded. This, together with Russian fears that many more interceptors will follow, underlines their worries about the strategic balance of nuclear weapons between the two major states.

It is not surprising therefore that Vladimir Putin [15] (who will hand over the presidency to Dmitri Medvedev [15] on 7 May 2008) has consistently criticised the US's moves. Russia has demonstrated its concern over the missile-defence issue by refusing to implement the strategic arms reduction talks (Start II [16]) and by suspending [17] (with effect from 12 December 2007) its participation in the conventional forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. If the US (and its European hosts) persist in installing these missile-defence systems, it is likely that Russia will take further retaliatory steps. The costs and dangers of such an escalating cycle of mistrust surely outweigh the (non-existent) benefits of proceeding with the missile-defence plan.

A new cold war and accompanying arms race is in the making. States which come to perceive each other as adversaries will build more offensive missiles to circumvent new defensive systems, and vice versa. The only advantage will belong to defence firms such as Boeing, Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.

Why do Poland and the Czech Republic agree? These countries are being promised big contracts and help to modernise their ageing military infrastructure. The Polish [18] and Czech [19] peoples themselves are not in favour (opinion polls indicate that a clear majority expressing a view are against in both countries), but they have as much say in the matter as the people in some western European states in the early 1980s with respect to the installation of US cruise missiles.

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Daniel Korski, "Europe's Afghan test [11]" (22 January 2008)

Paul Rogers, "A New Atlantic Century? [11]" (24 January 2008)

The American economy is officially in recession, yet the Bush administration continues to spend billions of dollars every year on defence projects that amount to no more than pie-in-the-sky. At the Nato summit in Romania's capital, European governments should refuse to help co-finance this unreliable, unnecessary and threat-provoking system.

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