

# TRANSATLANTIC MISSILE DEFENSE

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## NATO and Territorial Missile Defense: A “No Brainer” or More Questions than Answers?

At the upcoming NATO summit in Lisbon, it is expected that member states will endorse the protection of Alliance territory and populations against attack by ballistic missiles as a NATO mission. The implementation of this decision will involve the linking of two projects: NATO’s already-agreed plan to protect deploying forces against ballistic missiles known as ALTBMD; and a U.S. initiative known as the Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA). The latter will protect European and U.S. territory and populations against the threat of attack by ballistic missiles from the Middle East. Linking and integrating the NATO and U.S. projects will mean that assets deployed and funded by the U.S. – including radars, sensors and sea and land-based interceptors – will be available for the defense of European territory as a core Alliance mission. The resulting territorial missile defense (TMD) capability would complement NATO’s integrated air defense system.

The decision to develop a NATO TMD capability has a compelling logic. Ballistic missiles pose a known and growing threat as they are acquired by more and more countries. At the same time advances in technology are making defense against them more feasible. Why not take advantage of U.S. plans to deploy this technology through the PAA as part of its missile defenses; harness these plans to NATO’s more limited goal of protecting military forces, and in so doing create a defense system for Europe? The initiative would create – in the words of NATO Secretary General Rasmussen – “a common security roof,” ideally including Russia, at what he believes would be a bearable cost for Alliance members.

Taking these elements together the proposal would appear to fall into that well known category, the “no brainer.” It is not surprising therefore that the project appears to enjoy widespread support within NATO and to be on a glide path

to a consensus decision at the Lisbon summit. However while there is considerable support there are also questions, concerns, and a residue of skepticism and hesitation.

The basic questions are those asked of any form of defense – what is the level of threat and risk, what is the likely cost of

### Transatlantic Missile Defense

In October 2010, the Atlantic Council hosted a conference on missile defense entitled “Transatlantic Missile Defense: Looking to Lisbon.” The conference featured senior U.S. policymakers and experts from across the transatlantic community in a conversation about the political, technical, and budgetary issues relating to transatlantic missile defense in the weeks before the November 2010 Lisbon NATO summit. These issue briefs, written by discussants at the conference, provide a European perspective to the transatlantic debate on the future of missile defense within the NATO Alliance.

These briefs and the recent conference continue the work of the Atlantic Council on transatlantic missile defense. Previous activities include a workshop on NATO-Russia missile defense cooperation in November 2010, a conference on the implications of the Obama administration’s Phased Adaptive Approach missile defense policy in October 2009, as well as a conference on the Bush administration’s ‘Third Site’ missile defense architecture in 2007.

The Atlantic Council’s work on transatlantic missile defense is sponsored by Raytheon.

defending against it, and will the defense be effective? However, for all the disarming simplicity of the proposal itself, these are not simple calculations as they depend on assumptions that are highly variable and open to interpretation. Moreover, the decision also brings into play a variety of other elements of what can loosely be called the bigger picture of Alliance politics.

A decision by NATO to develop a TMD system should therefore take into account a range of factors and consequences, both direct and indirect. These include:

- The nature and scale of the threat
- The direct costs now and in the future
- The opportunity costs in terms of things not purchased
- The implications for Alliance cohesion
- The effects on the role of nuclear weapons on NATO strategy
- Technical feasibility
- Effectiveness and availability
- Command and control
- Industrial opportunities
- The impact on NATO – Russia relations

## **The Threat: What is the Origin of the Threat?**

As with any defense policy, the nature and scale of the threat is a crucial determinant. While the proliferation of ballistic missiles is recognized as a serious potential threat to NATO members, the likelihood of use by a state or non-state actor is impossible to measure. The normal approach, of course, is to assess capability and intent together. In this respect, Iran is singled out as a potential threat. However some allies, Turkey in particular, are not comfortable with this singular focus on Iran. It is frequently suggested that member states closer to the Middle East have a heightened sense of the threat. However, Turkish officials offer a more nuanced response stressing that while they are fully aware of Iranian capabilities, they would like NATO in defining its strategic requirements to demonstrate a better understanding of the Turkish regional perspective. They also insist that a NATO TMD system should provide complete coverage of Turkish territory.

In view of the focus on Iran, the obvious question is what would happen to the U.S. proposals if Iran changes its current orientation? Some U.S. officials have suggested that

if this occurred the U.S. PAA would be reassessed. Others, however, have said that the need will remain because proliferation of missile technology is the real adversary. In other words, the existence of the capability itself is enough irrespective of intent. Moreover, they point out that the mobility of the PAA's key assets provides an important degree of flexibility in terms of response.

All things being equal the universality of the ballistic missile threat would point to the need for investment in protection. However, in the world of expenditure all things are certainly not equal and the cost of providing defense has to be measured against other demands.

## **Costs: What Will it Cost Now and Later?**

Cost is a central element in this discussion, particularly because of the current pressure on defense budgets. NATO is already committed to devoting resources to ALTBMD for the protection of its forces at a current estimate of approximately 800 million Euros. According to Secretary General Rasmussen the cost of expanding the existing NATO project to cover territory would be an additional 200 million Euros. Apportioned between the 28 members, this represents a relatively modest sum. However, this additional money covers only the integration of the NATO software for command, control, and communications with the U.S. PAA. What else could be required farther down the line for the further three phases of development of the U.S. PAA?

As a general assessment, it can be said that European members can contribute software in the form of sensors, radars and communications. However, the hardware required to intercept the missiles once identified is a different story. Allies have such capabilities for short range or point protection but not for the longer range or higher altitudes. Procuring systems for this purpose would mean substantial outlays and new priorities. Some permanent U.S. intercept capacity is planned for deployment in Romania and Poland. However, unless new investments were forthcoming Europe would be dependent on the availability of mobile U.S. assets for comprehensive coverage. In view of U.S. global commitments and the relative scarcity and expense of these systems this cannot be guaranteed. In other words, would the required assets be there on the day? Would this lack of certainty concerning the availability of assets affect the credibility and the deterrent value of the system?

## **Opportunity Costs: What Priority?**

Costs are not only measured in terms of the direct investments in the project. There are the so-called opportunity

costs or the cost of not buying things because of the investments needed for missile defense, however small. In this age of declining defense budgets any expenditure has to be set against other competing demands. This highlights the central issue – what priority is accorded to missile defense as against other things? Where in NATO’s list of essential capabilities does missile defense sit?

## **Alliance Cohesion: The New Transatlantic Glue?**

The idea of a common missile defense for NATO is also seen as an important element in strengthening the transatlantic link and the U.S. commitment to the defense of Europe. For some new members the U.S. plans for missile defense and particularly the deployment of U.S. assets – or “boots on the ground” – represents above all new transatlantic glue. For these members, missile defense is less important for its own merits than for what it represents – a new way of cementing Alliance “collectivity” – doing things together involving by necessity increased cooperation, common funding, and the pooling of assets.

However, the effect of collective missile defense on transatlantic relations and Alliance cohesion could be a double-edged sword. Much of the attraction for NATO allies is that the United States will be shouldering the bulk of the burden in terms of capabilities and expenditure. But for how long will this remain true or will the United States look to Europeans for a greater contribution, particularly with a view to demonstrating to the Congress that there is effective Alliance burden sharing?

## **The Role of Nuclear Weapons: Replace, Reduce, or Complement?**

For several countries the impact of TMD on NATO’s strategy of deterrence and on the role of nuclear weapons is an important consideration. Not surprisingly there are divergent views on whether missile defense replaces or reduces reliance on or complements the role of nuclear weapons. France has traditionally had a negative view of missile defense, although French opposition to NATO TMD has softened.<sup>1</sup> France will not participate but will not block the decision. However, France resists any linkage to NATO’s nuclear policy. Several new members also see no consequence for NATO’s nuclear strategy and no lessening of the need for the deployment of U.S. nuclear warheads in Europe. Other countries, however, including Germany, assert that missile defense should facilitate a reduction of

the reliance on nuclear weapons, and as a consequence, bolster NATO’s role in disarmament. Reaching agreement on the role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy and the related question of disarmament has proved to be one of the most difficult issues in the development of the new Strategic Concept.

## **Feasibility and Effectiveness: Will MD Actually Work?**

There is inevitably a substantial degree of skepticism concerning the technology and the ability of sensors and interceptors to perform reliably – reactions that are often a hang over from the days of Star Wars. Critics frequently charge that tests are rigged and note that counter-measures are readily available. However, today there is a general acknowledgement that tests have achieved a sufficient degree of success – enough to persuade many if not most previous doubters of the ability to defend, degrade, and therefore deter ballistic missile attacks. Critics also point out that defenses against ballistic missiles can be circumvented by other means of delivery, including air breathing vehicles such as cruise missiles. The existence of NATO’s integrated air defense system partly answers this vulnerability. Doubts over effectiveness and on the availability of assets when needed inevitably lead to a more general questioning of expenditure for a system that is not one hundred percent reliable.

## **Operational Challenges: Who Controls and Who Decides?**

Questions remain on the issue of command and control emanating from the dualism of the system as a U.S. and NATO system. The division of responsibility between the U.S. national and the NATO multinational command authority needs to be clarified, as do the roles of SACEUR and the North Atlantic Council (NAC) respectively. In simple terms, who would have command responsibility and who would decide on an intercept?

## **Industrial Interests: Opportunities for European Industry?**

Involvement by NATO in TMD and the integration with the U.S. PAA should be beneficial to European industry. Indeed there are those who suggest that much of the impetus for the current projects originates from industrial interests. Integration of the NATO and U.S. projects should involve the closest possible transatlantic cooperation and sharing.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on French attitudes toward missile defense, please see Bruno Gruselle’s brief ‘Missile Defense in NATO: A French Perspective.’

European industry is already well advanced in certain areas and well placed for such cooperation. However, the history of transatlantic defense cooperation and of technology transfer where sensitive material is involved is not encouraging and usually flatters to deceive. Nevertheless, European industry will be looking for maximum benefits.

## **TMD: A Catalyst or Obstacle to NATO-Russia Cooperation?**

It is not clear whether TMD is the route or the obstacle to more constructive relations between NATO and Russia. On the one hand cooperation on theatre missile defense was said to have been one of the few success stories of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). On the other hand, Russian reactions to the first United States Third Site proposals were hostile. Despite extensive reassurance efforts by the United States, Russia claimed that the project posed a threat to their own strategic forces and to global strategic stability. Their reaction to the latest plan has been more muted, and it would appear they are seeking more detail, particularly concerning the last phase of the PAA.

For some NATO members, Russian reactions to ballistic missile defense have been an important element in their own considerations. The NATO Secretary General has emphasized the need for NATO to cooperate closely with Russia in the development of the system, and that offer will almost certainly feature in NATO's adoption of TMD. However, it remains to be seen what approach President Medvedev will take when he attends the meeting of the NRC during the Lisbon Summit, although his presence in Lisbon is seen as a promising sign. It is reasonable to expect that that he will use the NRC to seek greater clarification and reassurance before deciding how Russia will respond to the invitation to cooperate.

## **Lisbon and TMD: Decide Now, Details Later?**

Many of the concerns and doubts raised above have already been voiced in the discussions and consultations that have been underway for the past eight years. They cannot by their very nature be completely resolved. However, despite these concerns it is highly likely that NATO leaders in Lisbon will agree to the adoption of the TMD mission while leaving many of these uncertainties to be worked out later. In assessing this outcome it is important not to underestimate the pressures of collective decision making and the need to

achieve consensus. There is always pressure for countries to join, or at least not to block, agreement unless the national interest is at stake, or alternatively, for countries to give way in one area in order to achieve a goal in another. These are the realities of Alliance decision making, which will certainly play a role in the adoption of TMD.

## **Conclusion**

For many, defense against ballistic missiles is a growing reality made possible by the progress of technology, an inevitable development that will now be a permanent feature of our security calculus. However, both for those who support NATO TMD and those who have reservations, the decision is about more than the provision of protection against ballistic missiles. It brings into play factors that go to the heart of NATO politics – the cohesion of NATO and the transatlantic relationship; its strategy of deterrence, defense, and disarmament; the challenge of managing and prioritizing defense expenditure in an era of austerity; and inevitably, the need to develop effective relations with Russia. The “no brainer” is not so straightforward after all.

*November 2010*

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To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft, and Fred Kempe, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

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