

# European Missile Defense— Issues and Options

by RICHARD D. SOKOLSKY



Secretary of Defense  
at Nordic talks in  
Torku, Finland.

DOD (R.D. Ward)

**T**he NATO reaction to the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States underscores the heightened European recognition of threats to Western security originating from beyond the borders of member nations. Nonetheless, the European Allies remain wary of plans to extend missile defenses to their continent. In trying to change attitudes toward missile defense within NATO, the administration will need to consider European interests and

political and economic realities. The United States should not try to force missile defense on Europe. Nor should this issue be viewed as an exclusively NATO project or a test of Allied fealty. At the same time, the Allies need to face the potentially damaging consequences of remaining vulnerable to ballistic missile attack while the United States builds defenses against such a threat.

Hammering out a responsible NATO missile defense policy will be far more difficult if the transatlantic debate becomes polarized between those who believe Europe will never agree to missile defenses and those who argue that the continent must be protected regardless of its own wishes.

---

**Richard D. Sokolsky is a visiting senior fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University and the coauthor of *Persian Gulf Security: Improving Allied Military Contributions*.**

The real choice is not between a comprehensive defense or none. Rather it is between a region that remains totally vulnerable to ballistic missile attack and one that follows a strategy of differentiation, wherein some Allies pursue varying levels of protection against missile threats of different ranges on different timetables. The United States and its Alliance partners should agree on a division of labor for constructing a European missile defense system. America should take primary responsibility for intercepting longer-range missiles in the boost and midcourse phases, relying on sea-based systems and limited ground and air-based capabilities. Europeans should accept primary responsibility for terminal defense, particularly against shorter-range missiles.

### Making the Case

The administration of President George Bush has pledged that its missile defense program will protect Allies and friends. As a result, senior officials no longer talk about national missile defense but about systems for Allied and global protection. The logic of including European Allies is compelling. Allied participation in dealing with regional crises is critical to sustaining domestic and international support for the use of force by the United States. A Europe vulnerable to attack could be deterred from dealing with regional crises that threaten vital Western security interests. A deterred Europe could inhibit the United States from responding to aggression, or NATO countries exposed to missile attack might sit on the sidelines while the United States bears the brunt of defending European interests.

Yet if the strategic logic is compelling, the political and economic realities across the Atlantic work the other way. Most Europeans continue to harbor serious reservations about U.S. missile defense policy and would prefer to replace the Antiballistic Missile Treaty with a new regime regulating the deployment of missile defenses. They do not want the United States to withdraw from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty, as the President recently announced it



Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Gloria J. Barry)

will, and unilaterally build its own missile defense system. In addition, they are hardly likely to make missile defense a high priority for themselves primarily because they do not feel particularly threatened by ballistic missiles in the hands of rogue states. Nor do they see missile defense as an effective response to terrorist organizations that might someday threaten European soil with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. For the foreseeable future, few

### **few governments will be prepared to devote scarce resources to a European missile defense system**

governments will be prepared to devote scarce resources to a European missile defense system in order to help preserve freedom of action to conduct military interventions outside Europe.

### The Options

In the long run, America's strategic logic may trump European misgivings. Indeed, while European wariness about missile defenses has not disappeared as a result of the events of September 11,

there is growing awareness within the Alliance that threats emanating from beyond Europe, such as terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, can endanger Western security, and that new defense capabilities are required. Thus it is worth evaluating the three available options.

*Theater missile defense system.* One alternative is relying on current NATO plans for missile defense systems to defend limited areas against ballistic missiles with less than intercontinental range. This approach offers several advantages. While still contentious, it is less controversial than a more comprehensive global system that would shield the continental United States and potentially Europe as well. A more modest system could cause fewer diplomatic problems with Russia and China. Moreover, some systems currently under development could shield ports and cities in border areas against shorter-range missile attacks and under certain circumstances could guard against strategic ballistic missiles.



*USS Cape Saint George underway.*

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Atlantic (James F. Slaughtenhaupt)

**Launching target track vehicle, Hawaii.**



U.S. Navy (Nick Galante)

Few Allies have shown much interest in comprehensive theater missile defense. The United States has sought to persuade a skeptical NATO to acquire such a capability since the mid-1990s. Despite endorsing cooperation and reaching an agreement to share theater missile defense early warning information in 1996, scant progress was made in developing and deploying an Alliance-wide capability for the protection of forward deployed forces, let alone European home territory.

Recently, however, the program has received a shot in the arm. In June 2001, two teams of defense industrial companies were selected to design a system for protecting deployed forces

from missile attack. This put the Alliance on a track to make a decision on program development in 2004. American cooperation with Germany and The Netherlands continues to grow. The U.S.-German-Italian medium extended air defense system program, which has faltered over the years, appears to be back on track. Germany, Italy, and The Netherlands are considering collaborative research, development, and procurement of ship-based tactical ballistic missile defense systems. Italy and Turkey are pursuing lower-tier programs. These and other



initiatives could provide terminal defense against shorter-range systems and form one tier of a multilayered system.

Nonetheless, the prospect for cooperation on more capable defenses remains uncertain at best. Most member countries have long avoided difficult policy, program, and funding decisions and face a host of competing military and nonmilitary demands. As a result, current activities are focused on programs to provide lower-tier protection of troops operating outside NATO territory. No ally has a missile shielding capability beyond basic point defense, and all rely on the United States to provide upper-tier protection of forward deployed multinational forces. Furthermore, the systems under consideration are limited to a missile threat range of 3,500 km, rendering

### ground-based sites on European territory could raise Moscow's hackles

them significantly less capable against intercontinental ballistic missiles, and are not optimally designed for a continent-wide shield. Portions of Northern Europe can be reached by Iranian or Iraqi missiles of greater than 3,500 km range and would therefore require strategic interceptors.

*Ground-based midcourse system.* An architecture including ground-based interceptors and radars located in Europe for midcourse interception of long-range missiles aimed at the United States could also provide some defense for U.S. Allies. To provide maximum protection of both American and European territory against Middle East threats, one site would need to be located in Central Europe, perhaps in the Czech Republic, Germany, or Poland. This integrated transatlantic architecture would offer equal protection to all NATO members. The United States would own and operate the system but depend on a host country for basing facilities.

This option has serious drawbacks. Ground-based interceptors would employ existing midcourse technologies and thus share the same vulnerabilities to countermeasures as U.S.-based interceptors.

The political acceptability of ground-based deployments in Europe would be highly uncertain and far more problematic than sea-based alternatives. Additionally, ground-based sites on European territory could raise Moscow's hackles since they could threaten Russian strategic forces. Some of these political and diplomatic risks could be mitigated by placing x-band radars, which are required for warhead tracking and discrimination, aboard

ships deployed in the Mediterranean or Atlantic or in a less controversial location such as Turkey.

*Sea-based midcourse system.* The United States and NATO could also deploy a sea-based system for midcourse interception. For instance, as a first line of defense in a multilayered system, the United States, with the participation of selected Allies, could deploy Navy theater-wide defense on Aegis platforms in the far eastern Mediterranean. The second tier could be a littoral defense of Allied territory deployed in the Baltic Sea, English Channel, or North Atlantic. This midcourse intercept would fill the gap between forward deployed systems and U.S.-based midcourse systems for homeland security.

This approach offers several advantages. It avoids the more politically charged step of deploying missile interceptors on European soil. A sea-based system might be easier to justify domestically insofar as it could be portrayed as a logical extension of the current NATO program, designed to defend forward deployed forces. Deployment at sea offers relatively inexpensive opportunities for European participation. NATO countries could pool their naval assets to form a standing sea-based force in the Mediterranean or the North Atlantic. Finally, this option would provide operational flexibility because sea-based assets in the Mediterranean and elsewhere around Europe could, with adequate strategic warning, swing relatively easily into position to counter missile threats.

Benefits would have to be weighed against the fact that sea-based systems will pose a greater threat to Russia the further north they are deployed because they will have a significantly increased capacity to intercept Russian missiles. In addition, unless the location of potential threats allowed the United States to deploy sea-based platforms that could intercept missiles launched at both it and its Allies, European countries would need to build dedicated sea-based assets to defend their own territory.

*Boost-phase intercept system.* Boost-phase systems intercept ballistic missiles shortly after they are launched.

An architecture using ground-, sea-, and air-based boost-phase interceptors offers several significant advantages in overcoming political, technical, and operational challenges. Their overwhelming benefit is their ability to defend both the United States and Europe against missile threats of any range. They could also be deployed in locations that would not threaten Chinese and Russian strategic capabilities. Based outside national territories, they offer greater potential for multinational cooperation. Because missiles would be intercepted in the early part of their trajectories, an effective system could prevent the deployment of decoys, countermeasures, and other penetration aids. Finally, mobile boost-phase systems can be moved forward to deal with specific threats, providing greater operational flexibility.

One approach combining ground-, sea-, and air-based boost-phase interceptors could be described as the southern or Turkish option. Under this scheme, which could also serve as the first line of defense for the ground- and sea-based midcourse options, ground-based boost-phase interceptors and x-band radars could be deployed in southeastern Turkey to deal with an Iraqi ballistic missile threat to NATO and U.S. territory. It could be supplemented with sea-based interceptors in the Black Sea to defend against ballistic missiles flying trajectories out of northern Iran. The Air Force airborne laser system operating from Turkish air bases could also be a component of this plan.

A major benefit of the Turkish option is the opportunity for cooperation. For example, those members who plan to field theater systems now or later, including Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Turkey, could deploy these capabilities to defend Turkish missile defense sites and other facilities. NATO countries could also deploy combat aircraft or naval assets to protect sea- and air-based systems operating from the Black Sea and Turkish airfields. These deployments could be made on a rotational basis as part of a multinational unit, and some of the development and operation costs could be met out of the NATO infrastructure account. In addition, the option would avoid the politically sensitive question of land-based



U.S. and Russian officials discussing ballistic missile defenses.

DOD (R.D. Ward)

missile defense sites elsewhere in Central Europe. Given Turkey's threat perceptions and extensive participation in European missile defense, this approach should be broadly acceptable to the public, particularly since it would boost the country's influence and stature within the Alliance. Finally, for both technical and operational reasons, Turkish-based systems founded on boost-phase intercept technologies should be less threatening to Russia.

There are operational challenges. Most significantly, because of the short time available for launch detection and tracking, command and control of these systems would almost certainly need to be automated, rendering operational command and control problematic. Also, systems would need to be deployed within hundreds of kilometers of the launch site; thus ships operating in the eastern Mediterranean could not intercept Iraqi or Iranian launches.

### The Way Ahead

It remains to be seen whether Europe will ever embrace the American strategic rationale for European missile defense. Certainly the events of September 11, and particularly the NATO decision to invoke its collective defense obligations under Article 5 of

the Washington Treaty, raised the Alliance's collective consciousness about threats to Western security in the emerging strategic environment arising from outside Europe. Moreover, a terrorist attack on European soil comparable to those on the United States could create a sea change in attitudes toward homeland security against asymmetric threats. But whether this change, if it does occur, will be translated into specific funding and programmatic commitments on missile defense remains an open question. In fact, most experts believe that it would take a ballistic missile attack on European territory with weapons of mass destruction—a scenario most governments on the continent still regard as highly unlikely—to bring about a cataclysmic shift in attitude. Consequently, the challenge remains for the United States and its Allies to design a transatlantic system that is politically logical, operationally effective, technically feasible, diplomatically sensible, and fiscally affordable. Finding a responsible policy for the Alliance will be far more difficult if the debate becomes polarized between those who assert that Europe would never accept missile defenses and those who blithely assume that the Allies will march in lock-step with an American vision.

It should be possible to steer a middle course. Ground-, sea-, or air-based boost-phase intercept systems deployed in Turkey and the Black Sea could be the first line of transatlantic defense. The second layer would be sea-based midcourse systems operating in the easternmost corner of the Mediterranean and in waters around the periphery of NATO countries. The last tier in this layered system could be land-based and/or ship-borne platforms for close-in terminal defense of ports and cities.

In addition to maximizing operational effectiveness, a mix of mobile systems for interception of missiles in all three phases of flight offers flexibility in dealing with the full range of Middle Eastern missile threats. Such a broad architecture can be easily adapted as technologies and threats change. Additionally, it offers ample opportunities for different forms of burdensharing and for NATO participation to evolve naturally. The most effective architecture will meet operational requirements while allowing individual Allies to choose among a mix of moderately low-cost defense systems.

The Allies need to decide for themselves whether they require a missile defense system and are willing to pay for it. Absent a catastrophic

### the Allies need to decide for themselves whether they require a missile defense system

event that shocks European governments into action, such a consensus is likely to evolve slowly in most countries if at all, and will be driven as much by internal political and economic conditions as by geopolitical developments. At the same time, NATO probably needn't make a deployment decision for several years. First, the Alliance contribution is most likely to evolve out of theater missile defense developments, and the systems under consideration will not be deployable until later in the decade. Second, and equally important, it will take several years of development and testing before Washington can commit to a specific architecture. In view of these factors, the natural instinct of



most members will be to temporize until the technological feasibility of missile defense systems, especially the more politically palatable sea-based options, has been demonstrated and other more immediate priorities have been met.

If a multilayered system is ever to be constructed, compromises will be required on both sides of the Atlantic. The United States will have to be prepared to develop a flexible design that allows Allies to plug into it in varying ways, depending on the evolution of threat perceptions, advances in ballistic missile defense technologies, and changes in domestic political and economic circumstances. For their part, European Allies will need to choose among a broad range of options, with each country deciding what it wants based on its requirements and resources.

Moreover, if the Allies decide they need an extra missile defense insurance policy, a transatlantic division of labor and burdensharing will be needed for the architecture that meets the threat, minimizes political and financial costs, and assuages Russian concerns. Taking these considerations into account, the United States and its NATO Allies should consider a high-low division of labor. Specifically, the United States

would take primary responsibility for intercepting missiles in the boost and midcourse phases as the first line of defense in a multilayered architecture while the Allies accept primary responsibility for terminal defense, particularly against shorter-range missiles.

Even if Europeans were to accept a minimalist but realistic role in developing a missile defense system for their territory, consensus on building it is likely to prove elusive unless the United States is ready to accept some degree of free riding. Moderating U.S. ambitions for Allied contributions, while a bitter pill to swallow, might be a price worth paying to realize the strategic benefits of extending the missile defense deterrent to Europe while avoiding another divisive issue in the transatlantic relationship.

Most Europeans still feel safer today than at any time in fifty years. Prior to September 11, European missile defense was virtually unimaginable. But in the future, America's Allies may be more sensitive to threats to their territory arising from an arc of instability stretching through the greater Middle East and Persian Gulf and along the entire Asian littoral. Whether or not these dangers loom larger in the European strategic calculus, the impediments to missile defense should not be understated. Nevertheless, the road map laid out here could lead to the future deployment of effective Allied protection and help coax reluctant NATO governments down the path the United States has chosen at a price they and their publics are willing to pay. **JFQ**

**The International Institute for Strategic Studies published an earlier version of this article under the title "Imagining European Missile Defence" in *Survival*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 111-28.**