

NMD: Allied fears in focus – NATO takes first look at US missile defense

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When allied foreign ministers meet in Florence later this month, NATO for the first time is set to discuss formally US plans for a National Missile Defense (NMD) system — an issue that one NATO official predicted could dominate the May 24-25 meetings.

European governments only belatedly are scrambling to develop official positions on US NMD plans. Despite a number of informal US lobbying efforts over the past year, including presentations at NATO headquarters by US Defense Secretary William Cohen and others, one NATO official said allied leaders simply had been wishing that the entire issue would somehow disappear of its own accord.

While many European officials privately express worries about Washington's plans, articulation of those concerns by European leaders up to now also has been muted due to political sensitivities about dividing the alliance.

Speaking at a May 8 news conference in Washington, DC, with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said the 15 European Union countries should try to come up with a common position on NMD. "Obviously, this national decision of the United States will have a strong impact on the security interests of all Europeans, and we are working very hard to coordinate, not only within the discussion across the Atlantic with the United States to bring our concerns into the discussion, but also together with the Europeans in the framework of NATO. ... [W]e are looking forward to unifying a position. But interests are not homogenous within Europe, so we will need some time for discussion."

Another German official has said that the idea is to establish a common view by the time of the EU summit in Portugal June 19-20.

But with President Bill Clinton's self-imposed deadline for a deployment decision looming ever nearer, a number of European arguments against the NMD effort now are coming to the foreground.

A crucial concern among European government officials and politicians is that US development of even a partial missile shield could break down ties across the Atlantic, by providing the United States with a form of strategic protection not available to the allies. This concern about so-called decoupling is worrisome to many allies, a NATO official said.

In a Dec. 6 interview with French television network TV 5, French Defense Minister Alain Richard stressed that the NMD program "creates an imbalance in the situation between the two poles of the Atlantic alliance, destabilizing our strategic system. French reticence is widely shared by the other European countries."

While the United States argues that NMD is needed to counter the threat of missile attack from so-called rogue states, many European governments are not comfortable with this view. From Europe's perspective, the risk to the United States from strategic missiles simply is not as pressing, nor even as well developed, as Washington assumes. Further, Europeans fear that NMD could accentuate, rather than mitigate, the problem.

Even a partial missile shield could make the current US threat perception a self-fulfilling prophecy, some European analysts worry, with an increasing number of countries seeking to develop longer-range or strategic missiles, which they would target against unprotected US allies and overseas interests. Europe thus could face a more robust missile threat sooner than now projected due to US moves.

European analysts note that the intense US concern about the potential for nuclear missile attack is at odds with NATO's current strategic doctrine, which states that the threat from nuclear weapons is extremely remote.

The United States further may feel emboldened to act internationally more often, and more stridently, if it manages to create a missile shield that works — in fact that is one of the arguments in favor of NMD used by Clinton administration officials. However, the logical consequence would be that the United States' European partners would become more attractive as targets for those who oppose those US actions.

According to Charles Grant, director of the London-based Centre for European Reform,

European officials worry that if Europe has no NMD-equivalent system, then, “rogue states might try to blackmail Europe rather than the United States.”

As two of the five radar facilities used to track incoming missiles for the NMD system are in Europe — one in Britain at Fylingdales in Yorkshire, and one in Greenland at the US base in Thule — this is a legitimate concern.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government has been informally debating for months a US proposal to upgrade the Fylingdales radar facility to make it capable of playing an NMD role, and the issue remains controversial.

Blair is not expected to make a decision about Fylingdales until after Clinton makes his own choice about NMD deployment, as officially Washington will not ask to use the facility until after a formal decision.

Still, parliamentary opposition to the facility’s use for NMD already has surfaced. Martin O’Neill, a senior Labour Party member of Parliament and former party defense spokesman, has introduced an Early Day Motion — the equivalent of a so-called Sense of the Congress Resolution in the United States — stating that the House of Commons “is concerned that the United States is considering abandoning the strategy of mutual deterrence in favor of combining offensive and defensive missiles, thereby creating a recipe for a new arms race (China-Russia); and urges the government to state clearly that no British bases may be used by the United States for purposes of missile defenses outside the context” of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty.

Similar concerns are being expressed in Greenland’s home-rule parliament, and in Denmark, which is formally responsible for Greenland’s foreign policy.

“It would be dangerous for Greenland to permit an upgrade of the Thule radar,” Johan Lund Olsen, an influential member of the leftist Inuit party, said in a debate in the Greenland local parliament Feb. 29. “Enemies of the United States would try to destroy it. This means that Greenland will be bombed,” he said.

The potential impact of the US NMD plan on the ABM Treaty, and the entire international arms control regime, is another key concern for European officials. Most European governments regard the ABM treaty as a cornerstone of international disarmament efforts. There is widespread fear among America’s allies that NMD could bring down the whole fragile structure of multinational arms control and non-proliferation accords.

Hubert de La Fortelle, French representative to the April 24-May 19 U.N. conference to review the multinational nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), told conferees in his opening speech: “France attaches the utmost importance to maintaining strategic stability, of which the ABM treaty is an essential element. It is anxious to avoid any challenges to the treaty liable to bring about a breakdown of strategic equilibrium and to restart the arms race.”

French President Jacques Chirac, in a Dec. 17 interview with the New York Times, said bluntly, “If you look at world history, ever since men began waging war, you will see that there’s a permanent race between sword and shield. The sword always wins. The more improvements that are made to the shield, the more improvements are made to the sword. We think that with these systems, we are just going to spur sword-makers to intensify their efforts.”

Even Britain, traditionally America’s closest and most reliable ally on defense, has been attempting diplomatically to voice its concerns about the potential for negative spillover from an NMD deployment decision.

For example, Blair told the Washington Post April 16 that he understands America’s NMD interest is “well intentioned, and reasonable.” At the same time, he said, Europe is “very anxious to see the ABM treaty maintained. ... [T]here are obviously concerns that European countries and Russia have for what are the consequences of [NMD] for the whole issue of nuclear disarmament, nuclear deterrence and the prevention of nuclear

conflict.”

Some in the British Parliament have been less diplomatic. In another Early Day Motion in the House of Commons, John McWilliam, Labour Party member and deputy speaker of the House, stated that “[T]he reduction and elimination of any threat is a far better strategy than investing in the doubtful effectiveness of missile defenses, which would, by their nature, undermine progress on arms control and international stability.”

Other European officials have echoed McWilliam’s concerns. There is concern that NMD instead will spur proliferation, as the small nuclear powers feel threatened and therefore obliged to keep up. Beijing, in particular, might feel compelled to drastically step up its nuclear program to prevent its nuclear deterrent from becoming obsolete. Any Chinese increase would, in turn, cause great concern in India, and any resulting Indian increase would have the same affect on Pakistan.

“China, which was already working harder than we realized on both nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles for them, would of course be encouraged to intensify those efforts, and it has the resources to do so,” Chirac was quoted by the New York Times. “India would be encouraged to do the same thing, and it, too, has the resources.”

Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh similarly told the NPT conference that the US NMD system “could run counter to efforts to halt proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”

Furthermore, the more effective any NMD system is, the more difficult it will be to make further reductions in the numbers of nuclear warheads around the world. Many European Non-Nuclear Weapon States are keenly supportive of nuclear disarmament, and see NMD as an obstacle to that goal.

“What if, for instance, some countries come to the conclusion that an arsenal of less than 1,000 nuclear warheads could someday become ineffective because of advanced NMD systems?” asks Otfried Nassauer, director of the Berlin Information-centre for Transatlantic Security (BITS). “They could thus conclude that treaties limiting their arsenals to 1,000 or fewer warheads would not be in their national interest. This, in turn, could result in Nuclear Weapon States deciding it was not in their interest to fulfill their obligations to eventually eliminate nuclear weapons according to Article VI of the NPT.”

In fact, Nassauer explained, there already has been a debate within the NPT context about whether Nuclear Weapon States should agree not to increase their nuclear posture in the future. However, China can no longer be expected to sign such an agreement, since the planned US NMD system would be able to counter China’s entire strategic arsenal.

The British and French militaries, with their small nuclear arsenals, also might feel themselves in a very uncomfortable position. Grant, in the April-May issue of the Centre for European Reform Bulletin, noted that “if NMD prompted Russia and China to improve their ABM systems, the British and French deterrents could be devalued.”

Obviously, relations with Russia continue to be a European worry. German leaders, in particular, have voiced concerns that an NMD — even a limited system deployed with the grudging acquiescence of Moscow — will make dealing with Russia more difficult.

Javier Solana, the new EU foreign and security policy chief, was quoted by Reuters May 11 as saying that if NMD is deployed, the European Union “would like to see it done in such a manner that it does not strain the transatlantic link. And we would like to see it done in such a manner that the basic agreements, like the ABM, are not disturbed to the effect that we have a crisis with Russia.”

Finally, the lack of US attention to European views also is troubling to many in Europe. There is a feeling among many allied governments, according to one NATO official, that the United States has not given Europeans enough time, nor enough information, to consider the ramifications of NMD. For example, some allies, led by Canada, have argued that the US instead should leave the NMD issue to be discussed as part of NATO’s ongoing review of its wider role in future multinational arms control and non-proliferation

efforts. That review is unlikely to finish until year-end at the earliest.

When NATO foreign ministers gather in Italy, NMD will be on the agenda along with the Balkans and EU plans to create a so-called European Security and Defense Policy that includes a future military crisis management role for the European Union based on indigenous intervention capabilities. On all these issues there now exists a clear transatlantic divide.

Some in Europe worry that NMD itself will harm the effort to craft a more robust common European security policy, especially the effort to build a new crisis management capability. If European governments are forced by a US NMD decision to consider a role in the network, or even a European counterpart, that could serve to drain scarce resources away from building crisis competencies. At a time when European defense budgets are under pressure, spending money on expensive, high-tech NMD technologies to counter what is seen as a rather remote threat likely would prove difficult.

Still, there is a feeling in many European governments, expressed privately by British, German, French and NATO officials, that no matter what problems Europe may have with NMD, Clinton is set on making a deployment decision.

It would be interesting to consider what the US reaction would be if the tables were turned. Imagine that the European Union were to push ahead with its own version of an assertive and independent security and defense policy, backed by an independent military force without any tie to NATO — while waving off legitimate US security concerns as unwarranted. The response from Washington likely would be pyrotechnic.

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