

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF MISSILE DEFENCE. RUSSIA'S OBJECTIONS AND ITS THREAT SITUATION

Hans Martin Sieg

US plans to deploy strategic missile defence components in Poland and the Czech Republic are meeting with criticism not only in Russia but also within NATO and in Germany. The objects of this criticism are not only Russia's warnings against a new arms race but also the possible impact of the plans on the negotiations about Iran's nuclear programme. The latter argument was usually fielded in the political discourse to demonstrate the discrepancy between setting up a missile defence system and the policy of disarmament.

The engagement of those who support disarmament brings to mind certain experiences the Europeans made during and after the Cold War when trying to establish a cooperative security and arms control system. However, it remains obscure whether such approaches can be transplanted to other threat scenarios. The debate about missile defence was dominated less by an analysis of new threats and more by Germany's foreign and security policy and its objectives. While the debate lost some of its intensity, it did not become less relevant. The endpoint marked by the Bucharest Summit which calls the US plans a 'substantial contribution to the protection of Allies from long-range ballistic missiles' is temporary at best. The question remains open whether the final decision will favour a NATO solution.

Now, what are the points for and against missile defence? First of all, it is worth our while to take a look at Moscow's security concerns. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Russia's President, Mr Putin, depicted the planned shield as a threat to the security of his country, probably moved by both irrelevant and relevant motives. Basically, Russia worries about two things: First, it fears that the defence system might diminish Russia's deterrent capacity, and second, it is concerned that, after a modification of the warheads, the Ground Based Interceptors (GBI) destined for Poland might be turned to offensive purposes. While the latter argument probably is purely tactical, the first must be taken seriously. Given the level to which the USA's nuclear primacy developed after the end of the Cold War, it is questionable whether Russia would be capable of retaliation. Whether Washington would seriously consider launching a preemptive strike is less of a question. The real question is whether Moscow will continue to regard strategic deterrence as necessary in the future. Not only must this question be answered by yes; Russia even sees its strategic deterrence jeopardized. The technological limitations of the anti-missile system certainly do not allow us to assume that it will seriously threaten Russia's deterrence; however, that still is no guarantee for Moscow: The Americans will not reveal the capacities of the planned shield, and the Russians cannot predict its upgradeability.

What is more, Russia is alarmed by the radar units of the system. If critics in the West are voicing concerns, Russia may do the same. It should not be surprising that Russia is protesting. However, this protest results from the fact that the country has regained some of its strength, not from any new threat. In fact, the reasons for Russia's concern are less the installations planned in Poland and the Czech Republic than, rather, its own general situation vis-a-vis the USA and NATO. Moscow is protesting mainly because the US plans constitute a precedent for establishing American and/or NATO facilities on the territory of the former Warsaw Pact. As Moscow is not in a position to meet the USA eye to eye in matters of defence, the West's missile defence plans appear both symbolic and provocative. After all, they mark the end of Russia's nuclear parity.

And yet – it is wrong to assume that Moscow is following a purely defensive impulse with its criticism. To be sure, the concerns voiced are spurious, but they also constitute one step in an overall strategy which aims at revising the existing spheres of power and influence. It seems that Russia is pursuing four objectives: First, the Kremlin leaders intend to score at home by making their people believe that the West and the USA are hostile towards Russia. Second, this gives them a reason to step up new armament projects. Third, Moscow sees an opportunity to improve its position at the periphery, i.e. in the regions of frozen conflicts. And fourth, it endeavours to weaken the transatlantic front by criticizing the missile defence system.

Probably, Moscow is especially interested in influencing public opinion in Europe, as it knows that the US armament plans are controversial among the Europeans. Its continual references to the Cold War and its warnings against an arms race are designed to fuel fears of war in Europe.

Moscow's motives are complex and deserve a complex response. One response to Russia's need for security, for example, would be to consult the country extensively and involve it in the plans of the West. On the other hand, Russia cannot seriously be interested in excessive criticism as it would have no effect and demonstrate the country's weakness instead of its strength.

As the main argument for the necessity of protecting not only its own territory, bases, and armed forces but also its allies, the USA names the danger arising from Iran and North Korea. In this context, the base in Poland is only one component of an ambitious programme which had already been developed under President Bush sr. in the form of a three-tier defence system. However, the plan was and still is controversial, and Russia is not the only country to call a concrete threat to the Europeans into question. Even Germany's foreign minister, Mr Steinmeier, is voicing doubts.

To judge the actual presence of a potential threat to Europe we should take a look at Iran. With its variants of the Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile, Teheran today is in a position to reach Israel and Turkey, a member of NATO. The development of new missiles might make Central Europe a target for Iran, especially as inspections by the IAEA have yielded clear indications, although no evidence, of an Iranian nuclear-weapons programme. Moreover, we should take a look at Saudi Arabia, which received CSS-2 missiles from China even in the late '90s. A sensitive country due to its central position in the Middle East, Syria also has Scud-C and Scud-D missiles with a limited range. All these developments could definitely threaten Europe in the medium term, even though there is no immediate danger.

The weight of a combination of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic launcher systems lies in their amalgam of destructive potential, range, and annihilation capacity. Thus, having a missile defence shield makes sense as it alters the expectations and calculations of the actors. States endeavouring to develop weapons of mass destruction would not only have the desired political advantage of owning these weapons; in view of the potential reactions of other countries, they would also have to expect considerable political and economic drawbacks.

Not least because military options are limited, it is justifiable to establish a missile defence shield to prevent and avert risks that are associated with proliferation. Conventional deterrence concepts alone no longer offer reliable protection. The objective is not so much to 'consolidate strategic stability' as to safeguard political and military action potentials. To keep up their deterrent potential, the states of the West should not rely exclusively on the threat of retaliation but maintain their capacity to intervene in and/or reverse an aggression. In this context, a defence system would be an effective contribution.

The US plans for the defence shield at least met with approval in Bucharest. Being a defence system, missile defence is a task of NATO, which is aware of its obligation to protect the territory of the alliance. If the system were realized outside NATO, the alliance would be weakened, as bilateral security relations would then come to the fore. If realized internally, on the other hand, the alliance would be strengthened, as its role as the central guarantor of security for all members would be emphasized. However, not only would the alliance be consolidated in the latter case; this scenario would also offer an opportunity to increase Europe's security. Russia, in turn, would not only be less open to attack; it would also have less reason for concern. In view of all this, a convincing alternative to an anti-missile system is nowhere in sight, neither from a security-policy nor from an alliance-policy point of view.

IN: Overseas Information 6/2008, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.,
Berlin, p.124-128