

# US Missile Defence in Central Europe: A Comment

**Petr Kučera**

Three different missile defence systems are currently operational or under construction within the European theatre. These are: 1) NATO Missile Defence, 2) NATO Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence and, 3) an American Missile Defence initiative (achieved bilaterally). Recently, the American system caused fervour among security experts of the European Union and NATO, particularly as Central European states competed for inclusion in the American initiative. The participation of newly acceded Central European states to the American initiative causes an acute problem for the EU which is trying to construct its own security and defence culture.

Nearly two decades have elapsed since the fall of the Warsaw Pact and Eastern Bloc, The Czech Republic (together with Poland), as Central European states, have grown in importance for geo-strategic reasons, particularly because of their positive disposition towards the US and other western powers. In comparison to the early 1990's, when Soviet military forces were redeploying out of Central Europe, the current situation is based on extensive security cooperation between the US and the newly acceded EU states. The focus of such cooperation is strategically hypothetical, based more on potential rather than actual challenges, however it aims at establishing a wide aerial defensive shield over the US and Europe. This Missile Defence system is meant to deter regular (i.e. Russia) and rogue (terrorist groups, Iran, North Korea, etc.) military challenges against US, NATO and (ultimately) EU interests.

## **Missile Defence: Announcement and Reactions**

In January 2007, the Bush (Jr.) administration officially addressed the Czech Republic and Poland regarding the possibility of cooperation in the Missile Defence programme. This entailed the utilization of Czech and Polish territories to house the early warning and target identification systems required for the success of Missile Defence to ensure protection of the US and especially their allies. The first proposals arranged to place American Missile Defence (USA MD) in a single Central European location. However after much intra-European and bilateral negotiation with the US, final negotiations set out to divide the project into two parts: a surface to air missile (SAM) base in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic.

The US Missile Defense has instigated much political and social level debates not only in the Czech Republic (and Poland), but throughout Europe, the US and Russia. Why has this US military initiative caused such heated debates? After all, the Czech Republic (and Poland) is an independent state which decided to assist its Atlantic ally to provide security for it and its neighbours in Europe. Also, the US missile defence system is hardly an offensive weapon system. Rather it is purely defensive. Its aim is to destroy or divert incoming WMD tipped missiles originating from traditional or rogue-state adversaries.

The deployment of such a missile defence system triggered debate because it is essentially a political affirmation of two important trends: 1) Czech (and Polish) independence from the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, 2) an expression of Czech (and Polish) independence from Russian interference in Central Europe. Both of these trends weigh heavy on the citizens of the Czech Republic (and Poland). While the Czech Republic has largely embraced the EU, there is a strong desire to maintain some independence over its foreign policy. Throughout its history, the Czech Republic has been squeezed between the larger empires to its East, West and South. Its geographic location was a liability much more than a strategic asset. Since the birth of the second Republic (1989) the Czechs have felt able to exert their foreign relation preferences instead of representing the interests of its larger power-brokers. With time, the Czechs will have to make important decisions over their role in European security – for now they, and other Europeans, should take comfort in the Czech Republic's confidence as an independent state who has willingly embraced the idea of Europe. Eventually, a common security agenda will be formed and applicable (without the option of dissent) to all EU members. However, the time has not yet come and should not begin with the Central European powers, which have only recently been able to realise their national self-determination. If the EU wants to lead by example, then it is up to the E3 (UK, France and Germany) to provide a collective alternative to NATO and other US supported security organisations in Europe, and not bemoan EU members which exercise their inherent right to pursue their own security priorities.

This is not to say that there is parity of opinion among Czech political decision makers over the present and future role of the Czech Republic as a security provider in the EU. As in any democratic society, debate sprinkles even the most mundane policy initiatives in the Czech Republic. Missile Defence is not mundane. It has been centred in political discourse as early as November 2006 and continues to inspire pundits, analysts and political party personalities to discuss the issues (costs and benefits) associated to Czech participation in the US-led initiative.

## **Attitudes and Comments**

Czech opposition to the US missile defence system is concentrated more to the left of the political spectrum, with the Social Democrats and Communists presenting the most vocal elements in Czech parliamentary debates. Their main objection is that missile defence will not protect Western states from threats emanating from within their own territory. The 2003 Madrid terrorist attacks acts as a good example for missile defence opponents because of the increased risks that will be faced by Czech security forces (and citizens) by those who may seek to destroy or damage the missile defence system by launching terrorist operations. In other words, some argue that the Czech Republic will become more of a target for those seeking to force a change in its behaviour vis-à-vis the US. Prevention of these attacks is indeed very difficult. Alternatively, the pro-missile defence side claims that the geographic position of the Czech Republic (and Poland) is strategically sound, and to ensure that a possible attack could be thwarted is better than being caught by surprise and unable to respond to a missile attack.

Ultimately, the Czech Republic will play only a small role in the US missile defence project and despite striking the ire of Russia (which believes that the missile defence system is meant as a new deterrent force against it) it has made the right choice in supporting its allies,

maintaining its right to define and defend its own foreign policy priorities and assisted in strengthening European stakes in international society.