

Missile shield in central Europe becoming a reality

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On 28 October, work started at the former airbase at Deveselu in southern Romania on installing elements of the US missile defence system, specifically an Aegis system with SM-3 interceptors. This means that the missile defence project is being implemented on schedule. The move confirms the close, fast-growing military cooperation between Romania and the United States, and means Bucharest is now one of Washington's main security partners, not just in the region, but increasingly on the European scale. From the Russian perspective, the start of work on the missile shield in Central Europe represents a failure of its policy of preventing the deployment of strategic US military facilities within the former Soviet sphere of influence. However, it is unlikely that Moscow will soften its position and become more flexible with regard to the planned location of anti-missile launchers in Poland.

The shield in central Europe

After a pause in implementing the original plan for the missile defence system during the presidency of George W Bush in 2009, which assumed the construction of a global system capable of capturing and neutralising all categories of ballistic missiles, the Obama administration has put forward a new plan for a 'shield' for the region. This provides for the suspension (at least until 2020) of the so-called fourth phase of the system, involving the deployment of missiles in Europe which could neutralise intercontinental ballistic missiles, while implementing the so-called third phase, based on installing Aegis anti-missile launchers in Poland and Romania, and on activating a radar station in Turkey (radar stations in the Czech Republic were also a proposed element of the Bush plan). Negotiations are in progress on constructing a future missile defence system for NATO based on elements of the American shield in Europe, a plan which was approved at the NATO summit in Chicago in 2012.

The Deveselu base represents the second stage of the project to create a regional anti-missile shield (the first included the launch of the radar system in Turkey, and the deployment in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea of US Navy ships with Aegis systems). The anti-missile launchers (3 SM-3 batteries, with a total of 24 missiles) is expected to be operational by the end of 2015. The third stage involves installing the same system in Poland by the end of 2018.

Romania: an 'aircraft carrier' for the US

The base in Deveselu is one element reinforcing the bilateral military cooperation between Romania and the United States. Besides the construction of the shield, this includes cooperation in modernising the Romanian armed forces and on foreign missions, as well as close collaboration in the fields of intelligence, special forces and logistics. American troops had already used Romanian bases for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in 1999, and since 2005 four small Romanian bases have been leased by the US military. In accordance with an agreement signed in mid-October, the Romanian port of Constanța and the Mihail Kogălniceanu airbase will become the main points for transferring troops and equipment to Afghanistan, and as such will replace the Manas logistic centre in Kyrgyzstan which the US had previously used. This decision must still be approved by NATO, but it seems to be a foregone conclusion in the light of the US's decision this October not to use the Russian logistics base in Ulyanovsk.

The close cooperation between the two countries derives from the US strategy of building outposts of its military presence in the countries of south-eastern Europe, together with a significant reduction of its military involvement in western Europe. America's efforts in this field well suit Romania's consistent strategy of building a political and military alliance with it, a policy which is dictated by Romania's desire to increase its security in the context of threats from the Middle East and Russia. This policy has met with a broad consensus among the Romanian political class on a pro-American orientation in foreign policy.

The consequence of the rapidly developing military relationship between the two countries is a legitimisation of Romania's position as one of the United States' main partners, not only in central Europe, but also throughout the continent. This strengthens Romania's position in the region and within NATO. However, such close cooperation with the United States may have a negative result; Bucharest's determination to modernise its armed forces may be weakened. Indeed, the Romanian government may even see the shield as the pinnacle of achievement in its security policy. In conjunction with the country's budgetary difficulties, this may result in Romania neglecting to reinforce its regular military capabilities.

Failure of Russian security policy

Russia has always contested the deployment of elements of a missile defence system within the former Soviet sphere of influence. It has stated that the anti-missile programme poses a threat to its national security, although to a substantial degree its opposition actually derives from geopolitical causes. Russia made its cooperation with the United States and NATO on the missile defence system conditional on having the right of joint decision over what form the system takes (either by a joint decision-making process, or by imposing technical parameters that limit the system's activity), as well as international legal guarantees that the system will not undermine Russia's nuclear potential. Russia has also put forward its own initiatives, including so-called sectoral missile defence, in which the Russian army would take responsibility for the defence of NATO's eastern region.

During President Barack Obama's first term in office, it seemed that the United States was likely to make concessions to Russia in exchange for Moscow's support on other issues, most notably the Iranian nuclear programme (the suspension of the system's fourth phase demonstrates this). However, Washington has consistently rejected Russian proposals to construct a joint system and give Moscow the legal guarantees it demanded; nor has the US

abandoned plans to install elements of the shield in Poland and Romania. The work in Deveselu started a few days after the meeting of the NATO/Russia Council at the defence ministers' level (held on 23 October in Brussels), during which the plans to deploy anti-missile rockets in Central Europe were a major point of contention.

So far, Russia's policy to prevent the deployment of the missile shield in Central Europe has been limited to diplomatic activity and periodic threats to take military measures (mainly by deploying Iskander missiles, which can destroy anti-missile installations, in the Kaliningrad region). But after the work in Romanian Deveselu started, Russia decided just to maintain its current position; on 28 October, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Moscow is open to "constructive dialogue" on the construction of the system. It is unlikely that Moscow will opt to make more demonstrative expressions of dissatisfaction in the near future; instead it will probably seek to silence (at least temporarily) any discussion on the shield. The military projects Russia has initiated over the last few months (such as the activation of the radar station in the Kaliningrad region, the deployment of Russian combat aircraft in Belarus, and the delivery of more S-300 missiles) are part of the accepted trend of modernising its armed forces, and have no direct connection with the American system. Retaliatory measures by Russia (such as the deployment of Iskanders in the Kaliningrad region, possibly in Belarus, or – least likely of all – in Transnistria) will be postponed, and will ultimately depend on whether the US anti-missile systems are deployed in Poland. It must be regarded as doubtful that Moscow would treat the installation of the SM-3 rocket system in Romania as a signal to moderate its position (as NATO expects), or to show greater flexibility regarding NATO's deployment of shield elements in Poland, especially as it regards a US military presence on its borders as one of the main threats to its security. An agreement to limit Iran's nuclear program, as was hoped for after the election of that country's new president, would undoubtedly serve as an argument against the US deploying its anti-missile units in Poland.