

The Long Term Implications of Obama's Missile Defense Decision May Undermine Stability

Written by Greg R. Lawson

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GREG R. LAWSON, OCT 20 2009

There are many arguments as to why placing a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system in Poland and the Czech Republic is a “bad idea.” Some are legitimate, however, none are compelling enough to justify the recent decision by the Obama Administration to drop the plans laid out by the Bush Administration to proceed with the deployment of a long range BMD in those two nations.

Many arms control advocates have long argued that ballistic missile defense is “destabilizing” and runs the risk of inciting arms build ups by nations that will fear missile defense as a subversive method of guaranteeing a first strike capability and thus eliminating mutual deterrence. This concern is particularly acute in the case of Russia which has been the starkest critic of the planned deployment of BMD in Europe since the Bush Administration began discussing it years ago. There are also arguments of the system’s expense as well as over the system’s technological capacity to be effective.

A combination of these criticisms appears to have led the Obama Administration to shelve the ground based system in Poland and the Czech Republic and replace it with what the White House is deeming a more appropriate sea based system. This push for a “regional defense” for Europe against the threats posed by the short and medium range missiles of “rogue states” like Iran is intended to more accurately reflect the threats that are contemporary while also offering more flexibility.

The timing of this decision, despite its technological merits is suspect and lays the foundation for a serious challenge to underlying global stability.

Considering that President Obama is seeking a successor to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) by the end of this year as well as seeking Russian assistance in dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue, this decision looks like an attempt at a quid pro quo. However, Russia has already stated that it does not see this move as a reason to offer concessions on the START successor, has waffled on imposing any meaningful sanctions on Iran, and has recently even laid the groundwork for a dramatic change in its military doctrine regarding “First Use” of nuclear weapons within potential regional conflicts.

Though the Administration denies that the missile defense decision represented such an attempt at trade offs with Russia, the question of why President Obama would back out of significant commitments to two key allies remains. Those who know history understand that both the Czech Republic and Poland have been cast aside by “Great Powers” on any number of past occasions as part of balance of power thinking.

In 1939 alone, both nations were overrun by powerful neighbors while the “Great Powers” dithered. It was after the famous “Munich Agreement” that former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain notoriously said there would be “Peace in Our Times” even as he gave Hitler the green light to take back the Sudetenland in then Czechoslovakia. Of course Hitler did much more than take that region, he took over the entire state after he knew the “Great Powers” wouldn’t stop him. Poland also faced dismemberment at the hands of the Nazis and the Soviets simultaneously after the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939. We should also not forget the multiple partitions of Poland going

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back to the 1700s as the Austrians, Prussians, and Russians gobbled up different pieces of the Polish pie while other nations watched.

Obviously, the likelihood of analogous situations happening in the near term is small. Yet, a commitment by the United States to place missile defense on the soil of two such historically abused nations speaks to an effort to insure that those types of aggressions will be made permanently intolerable. This is especially important as petroleum fueled Russia continues to flex its muscles in its own near abroad and fights to continue controlling European access to energy from Central Asia.

Keeping the missile defense in those two nations speaks volumes about how far the U.S. is willing to allow Russia to go. All experts, and the Russians themselves, well understand that the system being installed could not be used in an offensive way against the scope of the Russian nuclear arsenal. Rather, it is intended to confront dangerous new actors on the stage like Iran while offering needed political support to newly emerging economic players in Europe. Though it would provide legitimate restraint on any possible future revanchism by Russia, it is not offensive in any way shape or form.

Ultimately, the long-term outcome of this decision could reverberate much further than anticipated. One of the keys to relative world stability since the end of World War II has been the U.S. commitment to allies around the world as a defense partner. Our relationships, not merely in Europe, but in Asia as well have helped keep a lid on the revival of "Great Power" competition in its traditional form. Though the security competition of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was intense and frightening, the reality is, there have been no direct "Great Power" wars since 1945. The conflicts of this era, while by no means insignificant, have been relatively small, regional, or intrastate.

However, should the US make many decisions similar to this missile defense decision, credibility will erode and its reliability as a defense partner across the world will decline. How long before other partners begin wondering whether the U.S. will stick with our commitments to them? What of South Korea? What, especially, of Japan?

This decision establishes a political precedent that will make it very difficult for this Administration, and future Administrations, to argue believably for the kind of defense relationships that are the guarantors of fundamental global stability. It won't happen over night, but many nations that have long relied on the U.S. for their defense may begin to calculate that it is now necessary to re-evaluate that reliance. Paradoxically, this could yield the same kind of arms build ups so many arms control advocates claim BMDs lead to.

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