



The abandonment of the land-based component of the missile defence shield in Poland, ins and outs

military-Earth thinking notebook

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On 17 September 2009, Barack Obama officially announced the abandonment of the project to deploy long-range anti-missile missiles [1] on Polish territory [2] and a radar to be associated with them in the Czech Republic.

This decision reflects the pragmatic vision of the American President and his willingness to pursue a more flexible foreign policy than before. However, it seems premature in many respects to speak of a real "American strategic turnaround" [3].

3] This partly explains why Poland continues to rely on the United States as a guarantor of its security.

1] Or GBI (Ground Based Interceptors).

2] Agreement reached on 20 August 2008, in the midst of the Georgian crisis.

3] Expression taken from Le Monde of 19 September 2009. The title of the article announces that "The United States renounces the anti-missile shield" (sic).

The US President's decision was predictable because it was relevant.

It was, moreover, very positively received by the majority of Western countries and - as might be expected - by Russia. It does not, **however, represent a real "strategic turnaround", but rather a pragmatic adaptation of the strategy to realities.**

Indeed, the **cost-effectiveness of the system was questionable from the outset**. The planned number of interceptors (10) could not have countered a hypothetical massive attack and 100% interception reliability was not guaranteed. Moreover, it can be assumed that a country possessing intercontinental weapons also has sufficient technology to develop ad hoc decoy and stealth systems. In a context of global economic crisis, in which cost control has become a major concern, it is understandable that this programme was not considered a priority.

Moreover, **this system did not seem to be really adapted to the threat.**

While the possession of intercontinental missiles by the Islamic Republic of Iran was considered unlikely in the short and medium term, the United States **still** considered that **country to be a potential threat**. Indeed, the country has short- and medium-range delivery systems (upgraded Shahab-3) capable of reaching, for example, Israel or certain Arab countries. It is therefore conceivable that a deployment of interceptors in Poland would not seem very appropriate[1], but that the continuation of an Iranian nuclear programme, with possible military applications, remains a source of concern[2].

2] However, this latter dossier currently seems to be at an impasse. The United States is aware that it needs Russian support to revive it. Russia has been able to reaffirm its position as an essential partner[3], especially since it maintains significant strategic and economic relations with Iran[4]. If Moscow has welcomed the American decision and announced the abandonment of the deployment of missiles in the Kaliningrad enclave [5], it seems unlikely that it will align itself unconditionally with Washington.

Finally, it should be recalled that these interceptors were only one element of the US missile shield [6]. The **concept of** National Missile Defense is maintained, as Defence Secretary Robert Gates recalled [7], but with a more flexible, mobile and therefore reactive approach. The deployment of intermediate-range SM-3 anti-missile missiles remains envisaged in Central and Southern Europe by 2015 [8].

8] In summary,

Barack Obama's decision bears witness to pragmatism, to a real desire to relax relations with Russia, but does not reflect the United States' renunciation of its strategic ambitions as a major power.

His announcement came as little surprise in Poland However, the political leaders were disappointed, as they were informed about it through the press and no prior consultation, if only for form's sake, took place.

On the other hand, it happened by chance that it took place on the very day that the 70th anniversary of the ^{Soviet} invasion was being commemorated. It is seemingly trivial on the surface, but it becomes much less so when one considers that **Poland's major security concern is not Iran's nuclear programme but what it calls "Russian hegemonic policy".**

Although the new Democratic administration seems less favourable to Poland, it will **therefore continue to "play the American card"**. Maintaining privileged bilateral cooperation with the United States[9] could enable it to consolidate its influence within NATO vis-à-vis the Western countries of the "Old Europe".

Moreover, it openly hopes that the renunciation of the GBI deployment will encourage the United States to zealously respect the other agreements concluded in the framework of the "extended strategic partnership" [10]: delivery of upgraded Patriot PAC-3 missile batteries, the eventual deployment of intermediate-range SM-3s, management training and, above all, a significant US contribution to the modernisation of the equipment of the Polish armed forces.

For the **current situation of the Polish army is worrying and American support is still**

considered vital for its sustainability. The professionalization of its personnel has not yet fully borne fruit, particularly as regards the recruitment of non-commissioned soldiers, and its material situation is poor, including that of the elements currently engaged in Afghanistan^[11]. ^{11]} In addition, there are scandals related to the mismanagement of the defence budget, inconsistencies in procurement policies and the incompetence and corruption of some senior civilian officials in the Polish Ministry of Defence. ^{12]} These elements play an amplifying role in an otherwise deleterious domestic political context, marked by a stormy governmental cohabitation.

Finally, it should be stressed that the American support that Poland is hoping for, mainly against Russia, goes beyond the strict framework of defence issues The already tense relations between Russia and Poland have been aggravated by the conclusion of the 2008 agreement, even though Poland is largely dependent on Russian energy supplies.

As can be seen, the abandonment of the ground component of the missile defence shield in Poland does not really call into question the guidelines of the US defence strategy. **Although the United States currently appears to favour soft power in form , in substance it retains the means necessary for hard power.**

Similarly, **Poland remains strongly attached to the transatlantic link** It may, however, have realised that it will be easier for it to demonstrate this commitment in the future through the NATO, alongside its European partners, sometimes less critical of some of them than on a purely bilateral basis.

1] A deployment to NATO member Turkey would be technically more rational. However, Ankara's current policy of regional rapprochement with Syria and Iran is worrying to say the least.

2] Although it is inconceivable that Iran would decide to expose itself to massive and disproportionate retaliation by the United States by striking first against them or against any other country linked to them by defence agreements, it is also inconceivable that Iran would decide to expose itself to massive and disproportionate retaliation by the United States by striking first against them or against any other country linked to them by defence agreements. The Israeli State, however, takes this threat very seriously and does not rule out the possibility of a pre-emptive strike. This option would probably be more destabilising, even catastrophic, for the region than fully effective, as senior American and French military officials recently reaffirmed to the Israeli CEMA, General Gaby Ashkenazy .

3] while the START (December 2009) and Non-Proliferation (2010) treaties are also coming to an end.

4] The ground-to-air missiles protecting Iran's nuclear infrastructure are, moreover, Russian-made.

5] SS-26 ISKANDER intermediate-range missiles.

6] The interceptor bases at Fort Greely in Alaska and Vandenberg AFB in California remain operational, as do the radars deployed in Britain and Greenland.

7] In a September 19 interview with the New York Times

8] The deployment of a naval platform, equipped with the AEGIS-SM3 interception system, for the benefit of Europe, could take place even more rapidly. In contrast to the GBI, the SM 3 missile has already demonstrated its reliability in a successful launch on a decommissioned satellite.

9] Reaffirmed by the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski, on 22 September 2009 in an interview with the daily Rzeczpospolita.

10] Statements made on 19 September 2009 by Defence Minister Bogdan Klich in Rzeczpospolita.

11] This does not only concern heavy equipment. As an example, and until recently, Polish soldiers who were to be engaged in Afghanistan had to purchase individual ballistic protection equipment at their own expense!

12] The polemics were largely triggered in the summer of 2009 by the Chief of Staff of the Polish Army itself, by means of statements to the Polish press with little reserve. General Skrzypczak subsequently tendered his resignation.

13] The "cordial disagreement" between Conservative President Lech Kaczynski and Liberal Prime Minister Donald Tusk is well known.

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