

Dangerous Crossroads: U.S. Black Sea Military Buildup Could Trigger Missile War

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Last month news reports confirmed that the United States is to station interceptor missiles in Bulgaria and Romania as an extension of the Pentagon's European (and international) missile shield project. Details are still forthcoming, but what is all but certain is that the missiles are to be land-based versions of the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System with Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) medium-range anti-ballistic missiles, though there is already speculation that even more advanced deployments are planned.

Until last month discussions of U.S. missile shield plans to replace the earlier one of basing ground-based midcourse missiles in Poland and an accompanying X-band missile radar facility in the Czech Republic centered on the Baltic and Eastern Mediterranean Seas and on Israel and the Persian Gulf, with Turkey and the South Caucasus (Georgia and Azerbaijan) expected to be the next links.

Now it is evident that the main focus of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization interceptor missile deployments will be in the Black Sea region. The announcement that Romania will host American missiles was made on February 4; the news that Bulgaria would follow suit was disclosed on February 12.

The Pentagon has acquired the use of seven military bases in Bulgaria and Romania since 2005 (though it used air bases in both nations for the 2003 war against Iraq and for the ongoing war in Afghanistan), immediately after both countries were formally inducted into NATO the year before.

Washington has also transformed Georgia on the eastern shore of the Black Sea into a military outpost on Russia's southern border and has similar designs on Ukraine.

In the words of a Moldovan political analyst, "the United States is turning the Black Sea into an American lake." [1]

In recent days the Romanian press has shed more light on the details of planned U.S. interceptor missile deployments. Preliminary discussions "have suggested the implementation of around 20 interceptors in an 'appropriate' location in Romania."

In addition, "Negotiations between Romania and the United States on the ballistic missile defence [were] on the agenda of the talks the [Romanian] foreign minister had with his Bulgarian counterpart" on February 26. [2]

That is, the United States presented its demands to both countries almost simultaneously. The initiative began when U.S. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International

Security Affairs Ellen Tauscher recruited Romania for inclusion in Washington's missile shield system in early February and the Romanian Supreme Defense Council "approved the proposal of hosting SM-3 land-based interceptors as part of the Barack Obama Administration's plans for 'a gradual-adaptive approach to the ballistic missile defence in Europe.'" [3]

Another Romanian news source cited a higher figure for U.S. missiles to be deployed in the nation, 24, and, moreover, lamented that there had been no open discussion or debate on the topic. "There is no public poll or consultation, nor is there a demand for a referendum....In Poland and the Czech Republic there was an active and popular campaign against the Bush proposal for a missile shield and a radar in their countries. Here there is silence.

"Maybe even the USA is shocked at the ease at which the Romanian public has accepted the prospect of their country giving its land to Americans to launch missiles against potential nuclear weapons." [4]

A Russian analyst wrote that the stationing of Standard Missile-3 interceptors, whether in the dozens or the scores, is only the beginning of U.S. plans for the region. Or a ploy to disguise more dangerous designs.

"[I]t is reasonable to assume that the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) mobile ground-based radar system will be deployed in Romania instead of the SM-3 missile system, which hasn't been created yet. This system includes a radar station with a direction range of 1,000 kilometers, which could be deployed in Bulgaria, for example, as well as anti-ballistic missiles that can intercept targets within a radius of 200 kilometers at an altitude of 100-150 kilometers...."

The author, Vladimir Yevseyev, senior research fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, added "the U.S. plans to deploy more powerful anti-ballistic missiles in Europe by 2018-2020. These will probably be silo-based missiles, for example upgraded SM-3 missiles with high runway speeds and interception altitudes exceeding 1,000 kilometers, making it possible to destroy not only ICBM warheads but also ballistic missiles launched by Russia." [5]

The forward-based X-band missile radar facility the Pentagon set up in Israel in late 2008 has a range of 2,900 miles and in conjunction with land- and ship-based interceptor missiles in Poland and the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Turkish mainland, the South Caucasus and elsewhere could track and neutralize the bulk of Russia's nuclear forces, both land-based missiles and strategic bombers.

Regarding the potential and the possible consequences of a U.S. military buildup in the Black Sea Alexander Khranchikhin, deputy director of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis in Russia, recently wrote that "each U.S. cruiser or destroyer has two Mk-41 vertical missile launchers with 90-122 compartments for storing Tomahawk cruise missiles, a family of surface-to-air Standard missiles or RUR-5 ASROC anti-submarine rockets" and "the U.S. Navy...can launch Tomahawks from the Black Sea's southeastern sector to hit six divisions of the Russian Strategic Missile Force accounting for 60% of the country's intercontinental ballistic missiles."

He also warned that Russia's air defense system is substantially downgraded from what it was in Soviet times and its current state of disrepair is such that "Washington can voluntarily or unilaterally reduce its strategic nuclear forces because it can use high-precision non-nuclear weapons to suppress Russian nuclear arsenals....A missile defense system now would create...a headache for Moscow and would finish off the surviving individual ground-based or submarine-launched ballistic missiles." [6]

American interceptor missiles – whether of the Patriot Advanced Capability-3, Standard Missile-3, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense or Ground-Based Midcourse Defense variants – do not carry a warhead, conventional or nuclear, but are instead kinetic energy "hit-to-kill" vehicles that destroy other missiles on impact. The missiles they collide with and fragment, however, could contain conventional and nuclear warheads, leading to devastating fallout over the nation where they are intercepted.

There currently is concern in Russian military circles that if the stalled START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) talks do not address U.S. and NATO missile shield plans for Europe and its environs – as Russia insists they do and the U.S. that they don't – then parity between the two nations' nuclear arms and delivery systems would leave Russia at a decided strategic disadvantage if the U.S. and its allies could destroy the bulk of Russian nuclear missiles and bombers with non-nuclear interceptors.

Pavel Zolotaryov, deputy director of the Moscow-based Institute of USA-Canada Studies, warned that with the deployment of U.S. Patriot Advanced Capability-3 anti-ballistic missiles in Poland only 35 miles from Russia's Kaliningrad district and longer-range missiles elsewhere in Eastern Europe "we are witnessing the 'creeping process' of establishing a European missile defense system within the NATO defensive perimeter under U.S. supervision and without Russian involvement...." [7]

The nominal purpose for stationing medium-range ground-based interceptor missiles in nations like Bulgaria and Romania remains that of the previous Polish-Czech system advocated by the George W. Bush administration in Washington: Alleged protection against Iranian missile threats.

On February 26 Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko "signaled Moscow's skepticism about Washington's explanation that the interceptors were needed to protect US troops and NATO allies against the Iranian missile threat, saying...that Russia has 'serious questions' regarding its true purpose." [8]

In his own words, "We are witnessing again rushed decisions being made in the ballistic missile defence field in Europe....We keep having serious questions about the real objective of the US ballistic missile defence system. We will continue to oppose all questionable and unilateral acts that could have a negative impact on international security." [9]

In a February 21 column, Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Affairs Konstantin Kosachev voiced similar misgivings in writing: "Russia is not a member of NATO, and we have to remember, that we are talking about armaments of a military bloc that Russia is not a part of. When security is at stake, no sensible politician or army officer is going to find spoken affirmations, especially those claiming that no weapon is aimed at his or her country sufficient."

He further posed the rhetorical query "who are these systems going to protect?" and

answered: "Israel? The American fleet in the Persian Gulf? These are the two principal targets for future Iranian missiles.

"The quite limited range of Iranian missiles is not going to take them anywhere near Romania in the nearest future (and it's doubtful that anyone in Tehran has had such intentions before....)" [15]

In asking and answering the question he did he exposed the self-serving and circular reasoning behind U.S. and NATO interceptor missile plans. Iran does not have the capacity to launch missiles against sites in Bulgaria and Romania – not to mention Poland. Surely not at any target beyond those three nations. Neither does it have any reason to do so even if it could.

Perhaps the West is hoping to provoke an attack – or the contrived threat of an attack – as a pretext for "preemptive" attacks of its own. And not just against Iran.

In relation to talks on START, in limbo now for three months, the above-cited Russian parliamentarian added, "It is regrettable that all of this is happening during the course of intricate talks between USA and Russia on the new START....[A]ll of a sudden, as if it were orchestrated on the higher level, this Romano-Bulgarian missile issue emerges, creating an impression that someone was looking for a way to impede the negotiation process." [11]

Nuclear arms limitation and reduction may be another intentional target of U.S. missile shield plans.

The day before Kosachev's article appeared, General Nikolai Makarov, the chief of the General Staff of Russia's armed forces, was paraphrased as asserting "the missile shield was designed to defend illusory air strikes from Russia," and quoted as follows: "There are concerns that this missile defense system is directed against Russia....If we say that we should tackle possible threats together, we should respect each other and trust each other instead of strengthening military blocs near the Russian border....This means we have to take appropriate measures in response." [12]

On the eastern end of the Black Sea, on February 25 the USS John L. Hall guided-missile frigate arrived at the Georgian port of Poti, "about 30 kilometres (19 miles) from the de facto border with the Russian-backed breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia," [13] where eight days earlier an agreement was signed with Russia to build a new military base.

The arrival of the U.S. warship marked the eighth such visit since immediately after the five-day war between Georgia and Russia in August of 2008. The first was by USS Mount Whitney, the flagship of the Sixth Fleet and the command and control ship for the Commander Joint Command Lisbon and the Commander Strike Force NATO. It arrived in Poti on September 5, 2008 in an act of open defiance to Russia.

USS John L. Hall and its crew engaged in joint exercises with Georgian counterparts, which prompted Abkhazian Deputy Defense Minister Garry Kupalba to announce "A joint action plan for Abkhaz armed forces and Russian troops stationed in the republic has been developed in case Georgia launches military actions against Abkhazia." [14]

In the summer of 2009 the USS Stout, an Aegis class Anti-Ballistic Missile destroyer, paid visits to the Romanian port of Constanta, the Bulgarian one of Varna, the Georgian ports of

Batumi and Poti and to Israel and Turkey.

The Pentagon has just completed the latest of four radar installations on Georgia's Black Sea coast.

In recent days NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, U.S. ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder, and former U.S. envoy to NATO and current Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Alexander Vershbow among others have reiterated plans for Black Sea nations Georgia and Ukraine to become full NATO members. (Another former American NATO envoy, Kurt Volker, recently included Azerbaijan in the same category.)

On February 26 the U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy was in the capital of Estonia, Russia's neighbor and fellow Baltic Sea nation, and said: "We've made it very clear that even as we seek to find new ways of working with Russia we also are very clear that we don't accept certain of their policies, the assertion of their sphere of influence, particularly in this [Baltic] region." [15]

According to the Pentagon Russia will not be permitted a "sphere of influence" anywhere on its borders or off its coasts. Instead the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and if Washington can manage it the Caspian Sea will be transformed into American lakes. With interceptor missiles and radar bases on and off its shores.

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Notes

- 1) The Messenger (Georgia), February 15, 2010
- 2) Nine O'Clock News (Romania), February 28, 2010
- 3) Ibid

- 4) The Diplomat, March 2010
5) Vladimir Yevseyev, The U.S. anti-missile project in Romania: New administration, same old policy
Russian Information Agency Novosti, February 24, 2010

<http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100224/157995687.html>

- 6) Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, February 19, 2010
Posted by Russian Information Agency Novosti

<http://en.rian.ru/papers/20100219/157942011.html>

- 7) Nezavisimaya Gazeta, March 1, 2010
8) Associated Press, February 26, 2010
9) Nine O'Clock News, February 28, 2010
10) New Europe, February 21, 2010
11) Ibid
12) Xinhua News Agency, February 25, 2010
13) Agence France-Presse, February 25, 2010
14) Interfax-Ukraine, February 26, 2010
15) Russian Information Agency Novosti, February 26, 2010

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