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U.S. to Advance European Missile Shield With Radar Base Deal

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The United States is close to moving forward with the initial component of its planned European antimissile system as it looks to close a deal to locate a radar installation in Turkey or Bulgaria, the Washington Post reported yesterday (see GSN, July 30).

Defense Department sources said establishment of the powerful X-band radar site would allow the initial segment of the missile shield to go live next year in southern Europe.

The United States is also collaborating with Israel and friendly Persian Gulf nations to establish and improve their antimissile abilities. Two years ago, the U.S. military established a radar facility in Israel and plans to do the same in a nearby Arab nation. It is expected the radar facilities would sound the vital early alarm of any potential missile firings from Iran, increasing the chances of intercepting the weapons.

Antimissile operations in Israel, the Persian Gulf and Europe are technically independent and in varying phases of preparation. However, they are each designed to interact with command-and-control programs run by the U.S. armed forces.

The U.S. Navy last year began fielding Aegis-class cruisers and destroyers outfitted with ballistic missile interceptors in the Mediterranean Sea. These warships are anticipated to serve as a first and essential component of the Obama administration's "phased adapted approach" to Europe-based missile defenses.

While the installation of 10 fixed long-range interceptors in Poland formed the core of a now-scrapped Bush administration antimissile plan, sea-based Standard Missile 3 interceptors can be relocated to defend against evolving threats. The Aegis-equipped vessels can also be used for other efforts such as chasing pirates or submarines.

"It's very easily absorbed," Capt. Mark Young, senior officer of the Mediterranean-deployed Vella Gulf, said of his cruiser's additional antimissile responsibilities. "We're very capable, and we'll find a way to advance the mission."

Navy officers said there are no more than two Aegis-equipped warships deployed in the eastern Mediterranean in any given period. Defense Department officials said those ship numbers could increase threefold in the future, with three vessels on patrol duty and three more held as backup.

There is concern in Washington that international requests for Aegis deployments could burden the U.S. Navy. Along with Europe, Aegis vessels are also needed in the Middle East

and Pacific to counter possible missiles launched from Iran and North Korea. Roughly half of the Navy's Aegis ships can be deployed at a time. Given this situation, the Obama administration intends over the next five years to expand the U.S. Aegis antiballistic missile fleet numbers to 38 ships.

U.S. Vice Adm. Henry Harris Jr., who commands the Naples, Italy-based 6th fleet, said some Aegis vessels might be given home ports in Europe so they no longer have to travel to and from the Unite States.

"It's certainly something that's on the table," Harris said in June. Another option would be to transport fresh ship personnel by plane so Aegis warships could almost always remain on patrol.

The second phase of the Obama missile defense plan involves deployment around 2015 of improved land-and sea-based SM-3 systems. Romania has consented to the installation on its territory of ground-based interceptors, which would be aimed at countering short- and medium-range missiles (see GSN, June 18).

Three years later, the missile shield would grow to include more sophisticated SM-3 interceptors in Poland, which would provide defense against short-, medium- and intermediate-range missiles, the Post reported. Work on the European missile defense system is slated to be finished by 2020 with the arrival of the latest generation of SM-3s capable of taking on medium-, intermediate- and ICBM-range threats.

The Obama administration could deploy 436 SM-3 interceptors around the world within five years.

The European missile shield "will help us more effectively defend the country, more effectively defend our forces in Europe, and with our allies more effectively defend both their forces and populations and ultimately their territory of Europe as the system expands," Principal Deputy Defense Undersecretary James Miller said.

While the United States is carrying the brunt of the cost of the shield, the Defense Department said nations hosting the land-based interceptors and radar facilities are likely to share some of the financial costs as agreements are completed with Washington.

Total building and operating cost estimates of the missile shield are difficult to come by, Pentagon officials said, as some Aegis ships are already deployed or would have been constructed either way by the United States. New SM-3 interceptors for the shield individually range in price from $10 million to $15 million.

At a November summit in Portugal, NATO allies are expected to decide whether to make continental missile defense a central mission of the alliance. Should they approve the expanded mission, NATO nations would be expected to plug in their individual antimissile systems — based primarily on Patriot interceptors and other land-based interceptors — to the greater missile shield. A single comprehensive command-and-control program would also have to be hammered out between the United States and the alliance, officials said (Craig Whitlock, Washington Post, Aug. 1).

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