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NATO Backs Washington's Missile Defense Plans: A Victory for U.S. Diplomacy

Sally McNamara

At their summit in Bucharest this week, NATO leaders endorsed U.S. plans for a missile defense system to be based in Poland and the Czech Republic. This represents a major success both for American diplomacy and the transatlantic alliance.¹

NATO support for America's plan to install 10 long-range, ground-based missile defense interceptors in Poland and a mid-course radar in the Czech Republic—the “third site”—paves the way for a final agreement on a security deal between Washington, Warsaw, and Prague that will strengthen transatlantic security, counter the evolving Middle Eastern ballistic missile threat, and allow the United States to extend its own security umbrella to that of its European allies.

With the Czech Republic's ensuing announcement at Bucharest that it has reached a final agreement with Washington on the radar and will sign the deal in early May, it now looks increasingly likely that full agreement on the third site will be reached before the end of President George W. Bush's Administration.² NATO's endorsement was a major step forward and stands as testimony to the Alliance's strategic relevance in the 21st century and its enduring commitment to the principle of mutual defense.

The Bucharest Summit. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called the statement at Bucharest a “breakthrough agreement.”³ The communiqué issued by the NATO Alliance states:

Ballistic missile proliferation poses an increasing threat to Allies' forces, territory and popu-

lations. Missile defence forms part of a broader response to counter this threat. We therefore recognise the substantial contribution to the protection of Allies from long range ballistic missiles to be provided by the planned deployment of European based United States missile defence assets.⁴

The Alliance's message could not be more unequivocal that it recognizes the threat of ballistic missile attack and supports Washington's bilateral negotiations with Warsaw and Prague over third-site installations. The communiqué specifically notes the Alliance's “deep concern” over the proliferation activities of both Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.⁵

The communiqué also lays to bed the myth that third-site installations are incompatible with NATO's growing role in missile defense:

We are exploring ways to link this capability with current NATO missile defence efforts as a way to ensure that it would be an integral part of any future NATO wide missile defence architecture. Bearing in mind the principle of the indivisibility of Allied security as well as NATO solidarity, we task the Council in Per-

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manent Session to develop options for a comprehensive missile defence architecture to extend coverage to all Allied territory and populations not otherwise covered by the United States system for review at our 2009 Summit, to inform any future political decision.⁶

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stated in 2007 that all NATO members share a mutual threat perception of ballistic missile attack.⁷ He has also previously indicated that NATO plans for a short-range missile defense system to protect southern European nations will not be covered by the U.S. initiative and will complement the U.S. missile defense system.⁸

Speaking before the Summit, Polish Defense Minister Bogdan Klich called on the Alliance to “pursue work on a NATO missile shield” and to ensure complete complementarity and cooperation between the two systems.⁹ The NATO communiqué takes forward this approach by simultaneously accepting that the talks between Washington, Warsaw, and Prague over the third site are bilateral while also leaving the door open for future integration with Alliance efforts in this field.

This communiqué represents a major victory for American diplomacy. President Bush managed to outmaneuver Russian President Vladimir Putin by rallying support for the statement before Putin’s arrival, but the statement cleverly allows for future Russian participation and cooperation.¹⁰ The United States can claim a diplomatic victory for this success, and if, as looks likely, final agreement on

the third site is reached before the end of this Administration, it will represent a major legacy of the Bush presidency.

Next Steps. During the Summit, Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg announced that Washington and Prague had completed their negotiations for the stationing of a radar in the Czech Republic. The negotiations between America and the Czech Republic have been long and tough, but their successful conclusion cements the growing closeness between the two nations and puts the Czechs in a privileged defense relationship with the United States. President Bush must now seize the initiative to finalize a deal with Warsaw to station the interceptors in Poland.

Getting final agreement with Warsaw is by no means a done deal, although NATO’s endorsement represents a massive boost toward one. Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski has dismissed the possibility of permanently stationing Russian observers at the proposed site, which has been touted as a possible counter-offer by Washington to Moscow.

These thorny issues may now be easier to resolve, with Washington wielding such significant leverage over Moscow. Although much will depend on the outcome of President Bush’s summit with President Putin this weekend, it is vital that American negotiators invest the time and resources necessary to secure a deal that Warsaw can live with and that takes advantage of the prevailing momentum.

Russia. As President Bush embarks on a final meeting with President Putin at the Black Sea resort

1. Peter Baker, “NATO to Endorse U.S. Missile-Defense Plan,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2008.
2. Matthew Lee, “NATO Backs Bush’s Missile Defense System,” Associated Press, April 3, 2008.
3. Matthew Lee, “Bush Wins NATO Nod on Missile Defense,” Associated Press, April 3, 2008.
4. Bucharest Summit Declaration, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on April 3, 2008, at www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-049e.html.
5. *Ibid.*, item 41.
6. *Ibid.*
7. “NATO United on Missile Defence Approach,” NATO Web site, April 19, 2007, at www.nato.int/docu/update/2007/04-april/e0419a.html.
8. Al Pessin, “NATO Accepts US Missile Defense System,” GlobalSecurity.org, June 14, 2007, at www.globalsecurity.org/space/library/news/2007/space-070614-voa02.htm.
9. “Poland Slams NATO Foot-dragging on Continental Missile Defense,” Agence France-Presse, April 2, 2008.
10. Baker, “NATO to Endorse U.S. Missile-Defense Plan.”

of Sochi this weekend, many questions about Russian–American relations remain outstanding. The Bucharest Summit represents a mixed bag for Putin, who will undoubtedly be troubled by the prospect of final agreement on the third site, although he will claim to have won a victory of his own by successfully maneuvering against Georgia and Ukraine’s admission into NATO’s Membership Action Plan.

Overall, however, Washington will leave Bucharest in a significantly stronger position vis-à-vis Russia. NATO’s positive language on missile defense will send Moscow a powerful message that the United States is negotiating from a position of diplomatic strength while it shrewdly keeps the door open for Russia to ramp down its aggressive rhetoric.¹¹ There is even a small possibility that Bush and Putin will conclude cooperative language on missile defense in their Framework on Strategic Relations, which is set to be concluded at Sochi.¹² President Bush must keep his nerve in dealing with President

Putin and not give unreasonable concessions to Moscow, which would damage the possibility of agreement with Warsaw.

Conclusion. Despite a number of high-profile diplomatic failures in recent years, the Bush Administration has successfully navigated the third-site missile defense issue and exposed Russian intransigence and obstructionism while always being careful to leave a chair for Russia at the negotiating table. NATO’s endorsement of third-site installations and its recognition of the threat of proliferation give America and its allies a powerful incentive to move forward in the immediate term with a third-site deal. They also provide a platform for NATO to review its strategic concept for the 21st century, formalizing a new concept in time for its 60th birthday in 2009.

—Sally McNamara is Senior Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at The Heritage Foundation.

11. Bucharest Summit Declaration, item 38.

12. Susan Cornwell, “NATO Embraces Missile Shield, Czechs Pledge Radar,” Reuters, April 3, 2008.