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Polish–U.S. Missile Defense Deal Makes Sense

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It is widely reported in the world press that the United States and Poland have agreed on terms for deploying ballistic missile interceptors in the East European country. The interceptors would work in conjunction with radars that will be deployed in the Czech Republic (the result of another agreement announced earlier this year). Together, they will comprise a ground-based missile defense system that would be able to shoot-down a limited number of ballistic missiles launched from Iran at targets in Europe or North America. This latest agreement is in the best interest of all the members of NATO on both sides of the Atlantic. (In fact, NATO has already endorsed the concept.) Congress should fully support deployment of the Western European ballistic missile defense shield.

Just in Time. There are two reasons why the Polish–American deal is the right answer. The first is that it will serve to deter a nascent Iranian ballistic missile threat. While intelligence experts disagree on the full extent of Iranian capabilities, most do not think Iran can today field a missile that could reach deep into Europe or North America. Some estimate that Iran could achieve that goal (including a nuclear warhead to tip the missile) in a few years. For that reason alone, the U.S.–Poland deal comes none too soon. At best, it looks like the whole system might be in place by 2013. By some estimates, an Iranian threat might be well advanced by then.

Perhaps the deployment of land- and sea-based missile defenses that can protect Europe against limited attacks, coupled with economic and diplomatic isolation, will convince the Iranian government that even if they develop a missile threat, in

military terms it will offer them little of practical value. When this defense is coupled with the nuclear and conventional capabilities of NATO, the Iranians might realize that the ability of the West to protect and defend itself is not worth threatening. Perhaps they will, as other countries have done (including Brazil, South Africa, and Libya) abandon their nuclear ambitions. But even if they don't, Europe and the United States will have strategic and conventional forces that are equal to the task of preventing Iran from threatening anyone.

Sending a Message. The second reason why a deal between Washington and Warsaw is the right thing to do concerns Russia. Russia has adamantly opposed the land-based missile defense deployments in Europe and even hinted at retaliation for risking their displeasure. Moscow knows that the missile defense system that is planned is no threat to them; Russia has more than enough ballistic missiles to overwhelm any planned missile defenses. Still, they have done much to pressure European countries to back away from international cooperation on missile defense. The decisions by Poland and the Czech Republic show that they are willing to stand up to Russian intransigence. The Polish decision is particularly courageous in light of the Russian military incursion into Georgia last week. It

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would have been easy for Poland to back away from the deal, which had dragged on for an inordinate amount of time, leading many observers to predict the deployments would never happen. Poland giving into Russian demands, along with an apparently effortless military triumph in Georgia, would have left Moscow seeing itself as a new geostrategic force to be reckoned with across Europe and Asia.

By choosing to make a deal now, however, Poland is sending exactly the opposite signal—that it will not kowtow to Russian demands that make no sense. Likewise, in moving forward the United States and its NATO partners (including Poland) are sending a message that they take both the Iranian threat and Russian posturing seriously—and that they are prepared to take a stand against both.

Indeed, Poland's quick action to conclude the deal in the wake of the invasion of Georgia—as well as the strong support for Georgia shown by Poland and the other Eastern European countries who suffered for so long under the yoke of Soviet oppression—may help convince the Russians that their disproportionate military action was a serious miscalculation. Rather than the attack on Georgia raising Russia's stature as strategic power, Moscow might find itself more isolated than ever from the West—a high price to pay for its belligerent behavior.

Opportunity's Child. Congress now has an opportunity to strengthen the security of the NATO alliance and all its members by encouraging quick action on the plans to deploy land- and sea-based missile defenses in Europe. Congress should:

- Agree on a “sense of the Congress” endorsing the rapid deployment of missile defenses in Europe;
- Restore the cuts made to the Administration's annual appropriation request for missile defense programs.

The current deal with Poland may be only a child of fortune, made possible by the sudden turn of events in Georgia. Nevertheless, it has the opportunity to become something much more than just a reaction to Russia's egregious actions. Perhaps it will help serve as wake-up call for NATO. Freedom, safety, and prosperity can never be taken for granted. NATO must be revitalized and its military strength restored, leaving no uncertainty that the alliance can and will defend the sovereignty of its members against external threats.

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