

## "A Missile Defense Shield: Crazy Idea or Rational Objective?"

George W. Bush has been pushing hard to establish what he calls a missile defense shield in the Czech Republic and Poland. Very few people think this is a sane idea. While the two east European governments seem to support it enthusiastically, public opinion polls show that their own populations are against it. Russia has denounced it openly. Germany has been fighting it more quietly. Iran has shown total indifference. And Joseph Cirincione, who has devoted his professional career to fighting nuclear proliferation, says that Bush is pushing "a technology that doesn't work against a threat that does not exist."

So is this just a crazy idea, one more piece of evidence that the Bush regime is irrational and not very astute? Not really. There is a rational objective behind all of this, and it's hardly a secret. Start with the ostensible explanation. Bush says that the United States wants to protect against the deployment by a rogue state (read Iran) of a nuclear threat to Europe and ultimately even to the United States.

Russia says that these so-called defense shields are in fact aimed at Russia, to which Russia not only objects but against which Russia will counterdeploy missiles aimed at Europe. The Czech and Polish governments can't really get excited about the Iranian threat, but they do seem to think there is a Russian threat. So the reasons they are enthusiastic about the idea is that they agree with the Russians - that these are moves aimed at Russia. Actually, this is the German position in private as well. And in private again probably all other west European governments share this view.

George W. Bush insists that all this is untrue, that the Russians are friends, and that he is not intending to threaten them. He says that the Czechs and Poles don't have to choose between the United States and Russia. They can be (and should be) friends with both. He probably really believes all this, in the sense that neither Bush nor even the neo-cons are looking forward to taking on Russia as yet another enemy in the twenty-first century. So what is going on?

Donald Rumsfeld told us what is going on a long time ago. The policy of the present U.S. government is to use the so-called new Europe to constrain and limit the political role of the so-called old Europe - that is, use the east European governments against the west European governments. The United States, especially the Bush regime, does not want to see a strong Europe, one that would pursue a policy separate from that of the United States. And one could say that the Rumsfeld doctrine has been reasonably successful thus far. The point of erecting missile defense shields in east Europe is to protect the United States not against Iran and not against Russia but against west Europe, which explains the German attitude.

The period of Soviet domination of east Europe was a highly negative experience for the satellite countries as well as for the various ex-Soviet states that are now independent. They are all living through post-traumatic stress syndrome. Right-wing forces within each of these countries are exploiting this fear to push their internal agendas. These forces are not really afraid of direct Russian military or even political pressure. They are afraid that west Europe will make a political deal with Russia, and that they will not have very much say about the terms of this deal.

This is not entirely irrational on their part either. There have been such deals made several times over the last few centuries, and this is a serious possibility again. So the east European countries are proclaiming their undying love of the United States (displayed so incredibly effusively in Albania during George W. Bush's eight-hour visit on June 11).

The object of the gushing proclamations of friendship is twofold: to weaken the west Europeans, and to create a situation in which the United States is forced to support the east Europeans. This is a classic tactic of weaker countries relating to stronger countries that seem to be ideological allies. Cuba and Vietnam used it vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. North Korea used it vis-à-vis China.

It is a tactic that often works. But it has its limitations. The Achilles heel of such a tactic is that it depends on the continuing needs of the stronger country, in this case the United States government, to play the game. At the moment, the United States is quite ready to do so. But when the United States withdraws from Iraq and recalibrates its global stance to take account of its diminished geopolitical power, sustaining the Polish or Czech regimes may seem less useful, may even fade totally from importance. At that point, the east European governments would be on their own - dependent economically and militarily on the very west European powers they now disdain, even when, or especially when, there is a closer Paris-Berlin-Moscow rapprochement.

So, in the short run, construction of a missile defense shield in east Europe serves the needs of the United States and the needs of the east European governments. But in the longer run, it looks as though the east Europeans would be betting on a horse that is not likely to complete the race.

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