

Policy Brief

Europeans Skeptical but Disunited on Missile Defenses

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Washington, DC: On May 8-9, the Henry L. Stimson Center and the Research Institute of the German Council on Foreign Relations (Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Auswaertige Politik, DGAP), convened a conference in Berlin to explore the issues related to "Ballistic Missile Defense: American Plans and European Responses." Participants in the conference included governmental officials, parliamentarians, and nongovernmental experts from the United States and key European countries. Among the topics covered were the technical feasibility, costs, and implications of US plans to develop and deploy theater and national missile defenses for arms control, nonproliferation efforts, transatlantic cooperation and for political relations with Russia, China and the United States' European allies. Support for the conference came from the German Marshall Fund, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Highlights from the discussions are summarized below:

Europeans have many unresolved questions about US plans for missile defenses:

- **What is the threat?** While some participants acknowledged that a new threat is emerging, others questioned US assessments of the threat, particularly North Korea. European participants appeared puzzled by the growing sense of vulnerability in the United States at a time of unprecedented American power. Europeans, a number observed, have lived with vulnerability for most of their history.
- **How should we respond?** Views were divided on how much emphasis should be placed on missile defenses as opposed to other approaches. Some European participants urged more emphasis be placed on diplomacy and strengthened nonproliferation efforts; others accepted that ballistic missile defenses, in principle, could play a role in enhancing Western security. Theater missile defenses (TMD) are also appealing to some Europeans -- though most admitted that European governments would be hard pressed to foot the bill for TMD at a time of strained defense budgets.
- **How limited is limited?** Europeans focused on the Clinton Administration's efforts to deploy a limited national missile defense, but appeared to have less understanding of the political forces within the United States advocating a more extensive NMD system. A number of participants speculated that efforts to achieve agreement with the Russians to allow deployment of limited NMD might

lead to repeated revisions of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty to allow the United States to expand and extend its NMD capabilities.

- **Can the ABM treaty be preserved?** Although amendments to the ABM treaty to permit deployment of a limited national missile defense appear to be gaining acceptance, in general, Europeans expressed support for preservation of cooperative treaties. Many observed that the ABM treaty may be bilateral, but the stakes in its preservation are multilateral. Some expressed interest in a “grand bargain” that combined limited amendments to the ABM treaty with deeper cuts in offensive nuclear forces and increased transparency measures. Although NMD appears a political inevitability to many, Europeans voiced strong concerns that the transition be approached cooperatively – not unilaterally.
- **Is NMD feasible?** Cost is not viewed as a major barrier to deployment of NMD, while opinions were divided over the technological feasibility of NMD. Some Europeans were puzzled at reports questioning the likely effectiveness of the proposed system in real-world conditions, implying a faith in American technology prowess that US opponents to NMD do not share.

The NMD debate has heightened European fears that the United States increasingly will act unilaterally – even at the expense of its friends and allies.

A recurring theme in discussions of NMD was growing concern about a perceived drift in US foreign policy toward unilateral action at the expense of cooperative, multilateral solutions. The pending US decision on NMD deployment follows on the heels of a troubling series of unilateral decisions and actions, including the US refusal to join the global climate convention and the Senate rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Views were divided about whether NMD would be “coupling” or “decoupling,” however. Some argued that a secure United States would be more firmly committed to the security of its European allies; others suggested that US reliance on BMD would create unequal “zones of security.”

Europeans expect the NMD decision to have a major impact on arms control and nonproliferation efforts, transatlantic relations and global stability.

Regardless of their respective views on the desirability of NMD, most participants agreed that the deployment of missile defenses would signal a sea-change in thinking about nuclear weapons, the relationship between deterrence and defense, and the future of global nonproliferation and arms control. European countries, some noted, have been slow to articulate their interests in the NMD debate. Yet, Europe will be compelled to deal with the far-reaching consequences of the decision made in Washington. While many European participants warned of the potential negative consequences of a unilateral move on NMD -- a new arms race, international instability, and an erosion of cooperation on nonproliferation -- the discussion stopped short of direct policy prescriptions. All eyes are fixed firmly on Moscow and the outcome of US-Russian negotiations on amendments to the ABM treaty, although the potential effects on China, Sino-American, and Sino-Russian relations were noted.