

Europe's NMD Dilemma

By Clara Portela-Sais and Denise Groves

When European Union leaders meet on June 19 and 20 in Portugal for the European Council summit, they will have a full agenda. The most pressing issue facing the EU, however, is not on the formal program. US intentions to construct a National Missile Defense (NMD), although not directly related to the EU, is an issue they must deal with. The challenge will be whether the EU can form a Common Position expressing widely shared concerns over the effects such a system would have on the future of arms control, disarmament, and international security. Given the growing pressure on the EU to make clear its opposition, as well as the EU's desire to prove its credibility, it should declare a Common Position on this subject.

The Issue

US plans to build an NMD is causing concern among Europeans. They are worried about the future of the ABM Treaty, which they consider the cornerstone of arms control. They are also worried about Russia's reaction to deployment of NMD. To date, they have expressed their dissatisfaction, but have been careful to avoid seeming too energetic in their opposition because they recognize that the issue is primarily one between the US and Russia. Still, NMD will have consequences for European security because of the effects it may have on Russia and on international security. Furthermore, Russian President Vladimir Putin's surpris-

ing proposal to develop a joint NATO-Russia defense system pulled the Europeans directly into the debate. His proposal and recent travels through Europe were well-timed: it is likely that the issue of NMD will creep into conversations at the upcoming EU Summit. Putin may be trying to exploit European objections over the plans for an NMD, perhaps in the hopes that they might form a Common Position on the matter, a position he believes would be in his favor.

The Stakes

It is clear that the EU has real stakes in the question of NMD. First, and most important, Europeans believe there is a reasonable risk that deployment of NMD will spark a renewed nuclear arms race and destabilize international security. Russia has already made it clear that it will only consider further reductions of its nuclear forces if the ABM Treaty is preserved. If the US decides to abrogate the Treaty, Russia will then respond by withdrawing from all other existing nuclear arms control agreements, such as the START treaties. In addition, Russia has also threatened conventional arms control agreements such as the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. Attention should also be drawn to the fact that NMD would render China's nuclear arsenal irrelevant, possibly forcing that country to upgrade its nuclear program. This nuclear competition could spread to India and Paki-

stan, and may persuade other non-nuclear countries in the region to follow suit.

Second, given the close economic, political, and geographic links with Russia, Europe has strong interests in preserving stability and security there. Construction of the NMD system could undermine Russia's faith in its strategic deterrent and subsequently compel Russia to divert resources from its economic development programs towards its nuclear weapons programs. Moreover, as evidenced by the Common Strategy on Russia, the Europeans have been talking for years about the need for constructive engagement with Russia; ironically it seems Russia has taken the initiative and is engaging Europe. Now seems to be a suitable occasion for the EU to improve its relationship with Russia.

Third, an American NMD could actually increase the vulnerability of Europe. The location of some of the radar facilities that would be used for NMD in England and in Greenland, a Danish territory, directly involves the EU in the construction of the American system. This means that acquiescence to US plans would make these countries partly responsible for the operation of the system without actually benefiting from it. Putin made the stakes more clear, warning that if those governments allow the early warning radars located on their territory to be upgraded and linked into the NMD system, they would be injecting themselves into a process that will destabilize international security.¹ In addition, members of the local parliament in Greenland have noted that the radars there and in Britain could be attacked in an attempt to defeat the defense system.² Therefore, NMD presents a clear threat to the integrity of Europe and its security.

The Obstacles

Is it likely that the EU will actually take this chance to develop a Common Position?

The simple answer is no. First of all, the issue is not yet even on the agenda. There is substantial opposition from Britain to even consider using the EU as a forum in which to address it. Robin Cook, the British Foreign Minister, has said that it would be unwise to seek a specific EU policy on NMD

since "the EU should not be a place for territorial collective defence." He argued that the matter is best left to NATO.³ Other EU member states might defeat this argument by stressing that the EU should instead approach the matter with arms control issues in mind. Mr. Cook's assertion opposes that view, owing to the fact that the British place priority on their long-standing allegiance to the US. However, a transformation in strategic thinking is taking place in the UK. That is, they are now in the process of reconsidering whether the future of the European continent is more important to the future of Britain. Over time, and with some pressure from other EU member states, the British reluctance to openly oppose the US might be overcome.

The EU would probably still find itself unable to agree to a Common Position because the intensity of opposition varies among member states. Like Britain, some countries feel that that expressions of strident hostility would run contrary to the more fundamental interest of maintaining the transatlantic link. This is exemplified by statements issued by European leaders during President Clinton's recent visit through Europe. For example, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder balanced his criticism of the NMD by conceding that the US government's decision to deploy the defense system is a sovereign one. However, Europeans should not underestimate the influence they can have on the US. This is true especially considering that the United States relies on European support and cooperation in the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. This is clearly the case with regard to NMD because the US will need the permission of two EU members in order to use the radars in Greenland and England in the planned system.

The underdevelopment of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is an additional obstacle. In particular, the competence to deal with security matters has only been partly delegated to the EU and has not yet been tested. The capabilities to form a truly effective Common Position are weak and it remains to be seen whether the EU can be effective in this arena. The

record is not encouraging and this NMD challenge may prove to be too much too soon. However, by declaring their position, the EU could overcome a reputation they have stated they are uncomfortable with.

The Leverage

The time seem ripe for the EU to articulate a Common Position on this question. Individual members of the EU have already expressed dissatisfaction with the plans for an American missile defense in various venues. For example, during President Clinton's recent visit to Germany, Schröder expressed the wish that the President take into consideration the concerns of the European allies before he makes a decision on deployment. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer also suggested that the Europeans should adopt a joint position on this controversial subject, but recognized that "interests are not homogeneous within Europe, so we will need time for discussion."⁴ Europeans can find the common ground with regard to the ABM Treaty. For example, statements issued at the UN conference to review the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in April and May demonstrate French and British reservations. At the conference, the UK stated that the US position on NMD and amendment of the ABM Treaty "should be addressed bilaterally with the Russians...[W]e hope that they can reach an agreement. We have made clear to both sides that we continue to value the ABM [Treaty], and wish to see it preserved."⁵ For its part, France declared that it was "anxious to avoid any challenges to the treaty liable to bring about a breakdown of strategic equilibrium and to restart the arms race."⁶

Putin's surprising proposal to develop a joint defense system also served to place the onus on the Europeans to directly respond to missile defense questions. In other words, rather than merely echoing the opinion of US officials who assert that the proposed system will not be able to protect the whole of Europe, EU and NATO member states should grasp the opportunity to directly respond to the offer and make clear their own positions on the effect NMD can have on arms control and international security. Be-

sides, the integration of security and defense policies under the auspices of the CFSP will call for members to harmonize their views on crucial issues. By taking a decisive position, the EU can add credibility to its claims that it is striving for greater autonomy and responsibility in its external relations

The Choice

The EU has already officially stated its intentions to work with Russia and to deal with matters related to arms control and disarmament as well as international security. The Treaty on the European Union empowers the European Council to adopt Common Positions that "safeguard the common values, fundamental interests, independence and integrity of the Union...to preserve peace and strengthen international security...[and] promote international cooperation..."⁷ Common Positions "shall define the approach of the Union to a particular matter of a geographical or thematic nature."⁸ In addition, in June 1999, the EU agreed to a Common Strategy on Russia—its first Common Strategy—which stated that the EU would seek to cooperate with Russia to "identify common responses to the security challenges in Europe and beyond...by promoting arms control and disarmament and the implementation of existing agreements."⁹

If the EU decides to fulfill this express mandate, there are several options available to it. On one extreme, the EU could adopt a Common Position that declares its unconditional opposition to the deployment of NMD on the basis of the disruptive impact it would have on arms control and international security. Alternatively, the EU could call for the preservation of the ABM Treaty and suggest that the US delay its decision on deployment to allow enough time for negotiations with Russia to proceed. This might include consideration of working cooperatively with Russia on missile defense development and on non-proliferation initiatives. Or the EU could simply repeat the vague language already used to express a desire to see international security preserved, for arms control treaties to be respected, and for the concerns of the allies to be weighed in preparation for the decision on deployment.

This third choice is as good as not adopting a Common Position at all.

On the other hand, the framing of a more strongly worded Common Position such as the first or the second option can show that the EU is capable of acting effectively and in unison on security issues. In an even more concrete way, a Common Position would be a useful and unambiguous tool with which to influence the US or the timing of the decision for deployment. Specifically, the express opposition of Britain and Denmark to the NMD system would improve the EU's leverage over the US considerably.

The Prospects

Evidence suggests so far that at best, the EU might release a weak statement incorporated into its general declarations, with the varying degrees of opposition reducing any final statement down to the lowest common denominator. In general, the position will remain similar to current statements such as "The EU wishes to see the ABM Treaty preserved" or that the EU would like to see NMD deployed in such a manner that does not "strain the transatlantic links."¹⁰

However, the EU should not be content to adopt a feeble declaration. There is clearly a need for the EU to shift away from the usual practice of timid objections. It should respond persuasively and demonstrate its resolve. By doing so, the EU can prove the credibility of its CFSP and advance its security interests. The European Union should therefore agree to a decisively worded Common Position that makes its opposition to National Missile Defense clear.

¹ The comments were made during an interview with *Welt am Sonntag*, which appeared on 11 June 2000

² See the statement made by Member of Parliament Lund Olsen, cited in Theresa Hitchens and Stuart Samuels, 'NATO takes first look at US Missile Defence', Basic Paper No. 32, April 2000.

³ Testimony of Robin Cook before the House of Commons Committee on Foreign Affairs, 7 June 2000.

⁴ From a joint press conference with Secretary of State Albright, 8 May 2000. The text is available at <http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/>

⁵ See the comments by Peter Hain, Foreign Commonwealth Officer Minister of State, Representative

of the United Kingdom at the NPT Review Conference, 11 May 2000.

⁶ See the comments by Hubert De La Fortelle, Representative of France at the NPT Review Conference, 11 May 2000

⁷ Treaty on European Union, Title V, Article 11.

⁸ *Ibid*, Article 15.

⁹ Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia, 4 June 1999.

¹⁰ Jane Perlez, "US Missile Plan Could Hurt Security Ties, European Says." *The New York Times*, 2 May 2000.

This Policy Note was written by Clara Portela-Sais and Denise Groves. They are researchers at the Berlin Information-center for Transatlantic Security. BITS works on jointly with the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) on European aspects of the NMD debate.

BITS acknowledges the generous support received from the Ford Foundation for its work on NATO-Russia-EU relations.