

Obama's nuclear strategy

The anti-missile shield and the first strike

by Manlio Dinucci*, Tommaso di Francesco (14 March 2010)

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The U.S. anti-missile shield project raises a number of questions in terms of feasibility, cost and positioning. However, the main concern has more to do with the philosophy linked to the weapon itself. The denomination of "shield" gives it an exclusively defensive connotation, but in the context of the "balance of terror", defense implies impunity. And the impunity of one constitutes a threat for all the others.



The RIM-161 SM-3 missiles are manufactured by Raytheon and are already being used by the US Navy, the Japanese Maritime Defense Force and the Royal Netherlands Navy. They were designed to be launched from a warship stationed within close range of the target. Their function is to intercept ballistic missiles. In 2008, an SM-3 was successfully employed to destroy a failed U.S. spy satellite at an altitude of 240 km. In a war situation, SM-3's are combined with a combat system capable of detecting and tracking multiple missiles at once, exactly like the Lockheed-Martin "Aegis" model.

It's confirmed: the United States will deploy an anti-ballistic missile shield in Europe. This clarifies the ambiguity, wittingly entertained by the media, to the effect that Obama had backed out of the plan, originally proposed by President Bush, to which Russia was vehemently opposed. Having served in both Administrations, **U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates** related to The New York Times the unfolding of events. It was Gates who, in December 2006, had recommended that the United States deploy 10 interceptors in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic. It was again Gates who, in September 2009, prompted President Obama to scrap the plan in favour of a "more suitable" one. His conclusion is that "We are in the process of enhancing, not abandoning, our missile defense programme in Europe".

In the initial stage which will be completed by 2011, the United States will deploy SM-3 missile interceptors aboard war ships. In the following stage, to become operational around 2015, it will field an upgraded land-based version of these missiles in Central and Southern Europe. **Romania and Bulgaria have already agreed to play host. In Poland, the deployment of a Patriot missile battery is already underway. It is operated by a crew of 100 GI's in the Baltic town of Morag, roughly 50 km away from the Russian border. Next will be the arrival of the SM-3s aboard US vessels for deployment in the Baltic Sea, followed by the more powerful land-based missiles. The fixed radar, previously slated to be set up in the Czech Republic, will be replaced by an upgraded system combining planes, satellites and ground sensors. Italy, too, will most probably host missiles and other components of the U.S. "shield".** This was directly confirmed by Gates himself when he alluded to their deployment in Southern Europe. It should be recalled that Italy acceded to the "shield" plan through an agreement signed in February 2007 by the government of Romano Prodi.

Is the anti-ballistic missile "shield" system, that the United States intends to deploy in Europe, defensive or offensive? To answer that question, it is enough to visualize a confrontation between two ancient warriors: one is toting a spade while the other one has a spade plus a shield. The second one has the edge since he is in a position to attack and strike while protecting himself with his shield from the blows of his adversary. Should the United States ever succeed in developing a truly reliable anti-missile "shield", they would have power over an offensive, and not a defensive, system: they would be in a position to launch the first strike against another nuclear country, relying on the "shield"'s capability to counter possible reprisals. This explains why, in 1972, the USA and the USSR had stipulated the ABM Treaty which precluded such a system, but the Bush Administration unilaterally withdrew from it in 2002.

President Obama announced his intention to reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal by negotiating a new START treaty with Russia. At the same time, he reaffirmed that the United States will maintain a "secure and effective nuclear deterrent", thereby slighting the request by six European countries (including Belgium and Germany) that Washington withdraw its nuclear arms from Europe. But that's not all: according to The New York Times analysts, the strategy, which will be announced in the forthcoming issue of the Nuclear Posture Review, contemplates the launching of a

first strike even against non-nuclear countries, but which are in possession of chemical or biological weapons.

In Washington, the recurrent mantra is that in Europe the "shield" is not directed against Russia but against the threat of Iranian missiles. Moscow takes a different view, and perceives it as an attempt to gain a decisive strategic advantage over Russia. **It is a fact that the new plan foresees the deployment of a significantly higher number of missiles much closer to Russian territory than in the previous plan. Moreover, since they will be controlled by the United States, it will be impossible for any one to know whether they are interceptors or offensive nuclear missiles. Also, with the new airborne and satellite systems, the Pentagon will be able to monitor Russian territory more effectively than today.** The "shield", which Russia intends to counteract through the use of "appropriate and asymmetrical methods", will therefore not serve - as Gates himself has acknowledged - to protect the European space, where 80 000 GI's are deployed, by creating a "more secure" Europe. On the contrary, it will contribute to create new tensions which, in turn, will justify a further strengthening of the U.S. military presence in Europe.

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