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Ballistic Missile Defense: the new Cold War

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WASHINGTON — Over the past year we have repeatedly traced in these columns the growing polarization of the nations of Asia and the Pacific Rim, between major democracies like Japan, India, Australia and Taiwan that have enthusiastically embraced the U.S. ballistic missile defense program, and their strategic rivals, like North Korea, China and Pakistan that are racing to develop and expand their ballistic and cruise missile programs to overwhelm or outwit BMD defenses. A similar tense race already exists between Israel and Iran.

Now, for the first time, the high cost, high-tech arms race between missile defense and offense looks as if it is going to spread to Europe as well.

In a classic "chain reaction" effect — also similar to the idea of a line of dominoes knocking each other over in succession — the development of Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs has prompted at least two major European nations to sign on more enthusiastically than ever before to the U.S. BMD program. And this potentially far-reaching U.S. diplomatic and strategic breakthrough is in turn provoking Russia to moves that could target the democratic nations of Western and Central Europe with its own most advanced nuclear missiles. That could raise tensions in Europe to a level they have not reached since the last great showdown in the Cold War a quarter of a century ago.

The New York Times reported Monday that the Bush administration planned to deploy at least 10 ground-based anti-ballistic missile interceptors at a base in Eastern Europe by 2010 to defend European nations from an attack by a so-called "rogue nation."

The threatening nation in this case is clearly Iran, and the nation that most likely would host the deployment of the interceptors is Poland, traditionally the most pro-American and anti-Russian of the former Soviet Bloc satellites that are now in the 25-nation European Union and NATO. Poland is currently led by a conservative, strongly pro-American government and its Defense Minister Radek Sikorski is an outspoken and consistent champion of close ties with the United States.

Poland's western neighbor, Germany, is keeping a low profile on the controversy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel leads the conservative, traditionally pro-American Christian Democratic Union that a quarter century ago under then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl defied enormous Soviet pressure to host the deployment of U.S.-built, Pershing II intermediate range missiles that could target the major cities of the Soviet Union as a counterweight to Russia's formidable SS-20 build-up.

Today, Merkel's hands are tied by her need to retain the partnership of the Social Democratic Party, the SPD in Germany's governing Grand Coalition. But privately, the strongly pro-American Merkel is likely to welcome Poland's willingness to host the ABM interceptors that could defend German cities from the Iranian potential threat.

The Czech Republic has also been mentioned as a possible site for the interceptors, but senior officials in the Polish government have already publicly signaled they would welcome U.S. BMD systems being based in their territory. The Czechs appear very unlikely to be as enthusiastic.

"They asked us officially if we were still interested in discussing the issue. Of course we said yes, and we are

awaiting details," Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski told the Warsaw newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza this week.

However Russia, whose diplomatic relations with the Bush administration appear to be deteriorating almost by the day, has already reacted with speed and anger to the prospect of U.S. ABM systems being based in Poland.

Four star Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky, the Russian chief of staff, has warned that Russia could react in far-reaching and damaging ways against Poland, although he took care to emphasize that he was not threatening any kind of nuclear retaliation.

"Go ahead and build that shield. You have to think, though, what will fall on your heads afterwards. I do not foresee a nuclear conflict between Russia and the West. We do not have such plans," Baluyevsky said. And he pointedly added, "It is understandable that countries that are part of such a shield increase their risk."

New strategic weapons build ups that divide Europe between the democratic nations of the West and Russia with its allies to the east. Increasingly tough talk from Washington and Moscow. It is all too familiar of the grim strategic stand off that divided the continent for four-and-a-half tense decades.

Today, the line between East and West is drawn a lot further east than it was in the days of Eisenhower and Khrushchev or Reagan and Andropov. And the issues that divide the two sides are not as starkly ideological as they were in the days of the great global competition between capitalism and communism. But the dangers and the shields offered by 21st century military technology are more threatening than ever.