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A Decade of U.S.-Romanian Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Success

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Introduction

Ten years ago this year, the Romanian Parliament approved an agreement with the United States on the deployment of a missile defense system to Romania. The Aegis Ashore missile defense system became operational in Romania five years ago in 2016. The system has been a visible manifestation of a U.S. commitment to its allies. This *Information Series* provides an overview of U.S. missile defense efforts in Romania and presents them in the context of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) missile defense cooperation. It also discusses international obstacles to U.S.-Romania missile defense cooperation, including Russia's unfounded arms control concerns.

The Evolution of U.S. Missile Defense in Europe

On September 17, 2009, the United States announced a change in its ballistic missile defense plans for the U.S. homeland and allies. Instead of deploying a radar to the Czech Republic and a two-stage variant of the Ground-based Midcourse Defense interceptor to Poland, the Obama



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Administration announced it would pursue the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA).¹ The EPAA focused on addressing a regional ballistic missile threat to U.S. forward-deployed troops and European allies, particularly from Iran.

The EPAA was to consist of four phases:

- Phase One (in the 2011 timeframe) – Deploy the sea-based Aegis Weapon System with the SM-3 Block IA, and forward-deployed sensors such as the forward-based Army Navy/Transportable Radar Surveillance system (AN/TPY-2);
- Phase Two (in the 2015 timeframe) – Deploy a more capable version of the Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) Block IB in both sea- and land-based configurations, and more advanced sensors;
- Phase Three (in the 2018 timeframe) – Deploy the more advanced SM-3 Block IIA to counter short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missile threats; and
- Phase Four (in the 2020 timeframe) – Deploy the SM-3 Block IIB to help better cope with medium- and intermediate-range missiles and the potential future ICBM threat to the United States.²

The rationale for the change was the Obama Administration's reassessment of the ballistic missile threat – Iran reportedly slowed down its progress on long-range missiles and refocused its efforts on short- and intermediate-range ones.³ The latter threatened U.S. forward-deployed forces and European allies. The United States selected Poland to host the Aegis Ashore land-based EPAA component in 2009.⁴ Romania decided to participate in the EPAA in February 2010.⁵ Negotiations on the agreement with Romania commenced on June 17, 2010, and took seven rounds to complete.⁶

In May 2011, the United States and Romania selected the Deveselu Air Base in Romania as a suitable location to host the Aegis Ashore missile defense system.⁷ The site consists of a fire-control radar deckhouse; an associated Aegis command, control and communications suite; and launch modules that contain SM-3 interceptors.⁸ The United States and Romania signed an agreement on the deployment of a missile defense system to Romania in September 2011.⁹ The agreement emphasized the system's defensive non-nuclear character, its contribution to NATO missile defense efforts, specified that the United States would bear the cost of operating the site and share the cost of securing the site with Romania, and limited the number of U.S. military and civilian personnel to 500, with about 150-200 people deployed to the base on a day-to-day basis.¹⁰ The Romanian Parliament ratified the agreement on December 6, 2011.¹¹ The agreement entered into force on December 23, 2011.¹²

Additional details were agreed upon between the two countries during the negotiations on implementing arrangements between 2012 and 2013.¹³ Five implementing agreements were signed in July 2011.¹⁴ Six additional implementing agreements were signed between December



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2012 and July 2013.¹⁵ The approach of signing implementation agreements on separate issues rather than making them all a part of the initial ballistic missile defense agreement was clever – it likely allowed the agreement, which required the Romanian Parliament approval, to be negotiated faster than if it had included all the implementation details. Similarly, selected implementation issues could then be negotiated among government experts faster. The implementation agreements did not require the Romanian Parliament’s approval.

In March 2013, the United States cancelled the fourth phase of the EPAA and terminated development of the SM-3 Block IIB interceptor due to a lack of congressional support and technological problems.¹⁶ Phase Four engendered the most opposition by the Russian Federation and missile defense critics because of the SM-3 Block IIB’s capability to intercept longer-range missiles. But the construction of the Aegis Ashore site in Romania retained the U.S. government’s support and U.S. and Romanian officials broke ground on the site in October 2013.¹⁷ The site received its operational certification in May 2016.¹⁸ The relative speed of negotiations and the approval of the agreement in the Romanian Parliament were a testament to both countries’ commitment to the project and to the Romanian government’s across-the-board support for it.¹⁹

The Aegis Ashore site hosts 24 SM-3 Block IB interceptors that would be launched from the MK 41 Vertical Launching System.²⁰ While on ships, the MK 41 system can launch a Tomahawk cruise missile as well as other conventional missile types, but such capabilities are not included in the Aegis Ashore system.²¹ The missile defense agreement specifies that the system in Romania, which relies on a U.S. radar network, cannot be used for test launches and can only be used for defensive purposes.

In summer 2019, the Aegis Ashore facility in Romania stood down for a scheduled update.²² The update did not add any new capabilities to the system. An addition of capabilities would most likely have required a renegotiation of the missile defense basing agreement.

Russia’s Opposition to the Missile Defense Site

Russia has always opposed U.S. missile defense efforts. In February 2002, two months after the U.S. announcement of its intent to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty that prohibited any significant missile defense systems, Russian President Vladimir Putin accused the United States of initiating an arms race and undermining global stability.²³ (On the other hand, not even three months later, in May, Russia went on to sign the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, which mandated the largest strategic offensive arms reductions in history – demonstrating that missile defenses and arms control are not mutually incompatible). Once the United States started to deploy missile defense systems and discuss European participation in the program, Russian representatives issued numerous threats – including nuclear threats – to NATO allies interested in missile defense cooperation with the United States.²⁴



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Russia argued that U.S. missile defense systems in Europe are “capable of upsetting strategic stability.”²⁵ Following the activation of the Romanian site, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a veiled threat to Romania: “If yesterday in those areas of Romania people simply didn’t know what it means to be in the cross hairs, then today we will be forced to carry out certain measures to ensure our security.”²⁶ Russia called the defensive system a “direct threat” and some Russian commentators even stated that Romania could be reduced to smoking ruins due to their hosting of a U.S. missile defense system.²⁷ Russia is reportedly “extremely concerned” over NATO and U.S. missile defense systems in Europe.²⁸ In 2017, a Russian foreign ministry official called Romania “a clear threat” to Russia.²⁹ In August 2018, President Putin said Russia “must react to the deployment of components of the U.S. antiballistic [missile] system close to our borders.”³⁰

The Russians are reportedly concerned about the system launching nuclear weapons, even though the United States does not currently deploy any nuclear tipped missiles that could be launched from the MK 41 launcher and the agreement with Romania is explicit on the site being able to launch only conventionally-armed defensive interceptors.³¹ The Russians are reportedly concerned about a decapitating strike against the Russian leadership from Aegis Ashore sites.³²

No amount of NATO and U.S. assurances, treaty obligations, or hardware and software changes would be sufficient to prevent the Russians from repeating their false narratives, partly because these narratives serve their own political purposes regardless of whether U.S. missile defense deployments to Europe are militarily significant. The Putin regime considers NATO its adversary and presents itself as a protector of Russia’s interests and sovereignty to score domestic political points.³³ Indeed, given the abysmal state of Russia’s economy, the regime’s authoritarian tendencies, suppression of civil society, and widespread corruption, President Putin does not have many domestic achievements to point to when attracting popular support.

Logically, U.S. and NATO missile defenses are no match for Russia’s missiles and its nuclear weapons arsenal. Russia has thousands of battlefield and over 1,500 long-range nuclear warheads on hundreds of launchers, many times more than U.S. missile defense assets in Europe or in the United States could counter. If Russia chooses to attack NATO with nuclear weapons (or conventional forces for that matter), it can do so effectively despite U.S. and NATO missile defense systems. In December 2015, commander of Russia’s Strategic Missile Forces General Sergei Karakaev, stated that Russia can destroy NATO’s missile defenses in Europe.³⁴ Therefore, Russia’s objections to a U.S. missile defense presence on the territory of its former Warsaw Pact ally are clearly based more on political than military considerations.

The Romanian government is aware of the dangers posed by Russia’s antagonism to Romania’s membership in NATO.³⁵ Russia maintains a “solid” intelligence presence in Romania,



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according to Teodor Melescanu, Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs.³⁶ Mihai Fifor, the Romanian Minister of Defense, stated that there is not “a single day without a challenge” from the Russian Federation from cyber-attacks to political interference.³⁷

Aegis Ashore and Russia’s Arms Control Concerns

That the Aegis Ashore system cannot launch missiles other than the SM-3 family without substantive modifications is important because Russia alleged that the Aegis Ashore sites in Europe (one in Romania and another one currently being built in Poland) violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.³⁸ Russia even demanded that the United States dismantle the missile defense site in Romania due to arms control concerns.³⁹ But the system did not violate the treaty because it was not able to launch missiles of a prohibited range absent significant software and hardware modifications. Such modifications would likely be apparent to the Russian Federation, would require Romania’s permission, and would be counter to the basing agreement that explicitly states that the site is for defensive purposes only.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Russian officials maintain that they cannot “understand what tasks the Aegis Ashore system will accomplish in the missile defense area...Perhaps, the problem is that we understand missile threats differently than the U.S. and its allies.”⁴¹

Differences between the first U.S. post-INF Treaty test of a missile with a range over 500 kilometers and intermediate-range missiles that the United States would operationally deploy are significant, even if the United States conducted it from the same MK 41 launcher.⁴² In fact, Aegis Ashore sites in Europe lack “essential elements for launching a land-attack missile, including software, fire control hardware, and additional support equipment,” according to Brian McKeon, the Obama Administration’s Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (and the Biden Administration’s nominee for Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources).⁴³ Nevertheless, Russia (and other anti-missile defense activists in Europe and the United States) continued to perpetuate the myth that U.S. missile defenses in Europe violated the INF Treaty.

The Aegis Ashore site is Romania’s most significant – though not its only – contribution to NATO missile defense and the EPAA. For example, Romania purchased four Patriot Advanced Missile Defense units from the United States⁴⁴ and is authorized to purchase three additional Patriot units through the State Department’s Foreign Military Sales program.⁴⁵ In addition to defending Romania, the system will contribute to NATO’s missile defense effort. The total estimated program cost is \$3.9 billion,⁴⁶ and the Patriot purchase is an indication of Romania’s political commitment to the U.S. alliance. The bill approving the procurement of the first Patriot battery passed the Romanian Senate in a 108-1 vote.⁴⁷ The Romanian Chamber of Deputies approved the purchase in a 278-1 vote (and one abstention).⁴⁸



Cooperation with Romania in the Context of NATO Missile Defense

A significant component of the U.S. missile defense effort in Europe has been cooperation within the NATO framework. The foundation for NATO missile defense was laid long before Romania agreed to host an Aegis Ashore site. The Alliance initiated a NATO missile defense feasibility study in November 2002, two years before Romania joined NATO in March 2004.⁴⁹ The study examined “options for protecting Alliance territory, forces and population centers against the full range of missile threats...consistent with the indivisibility of Allied security.”⁵⁰ The study, which concluded that U.S. missile defense plans were compatible with a wider NATO missile defense project and that technical fusion between different elements of the system was plausible, was acknowledged by heads of state and governments at the Riga Summit in November 2006.⁵¹

The 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration endorsed U.S. missile defense plans as a contribution to Allied security.⁵² Similarly, the 2009 Strasbourg/Kiehl Summit declaration stated that “Ballistic missile proliferation poses an increasing threat to Allies’ forces, territory, and populations,” and called for additional work on NATO missile defense.⁵³ NATO decided to “develop a missile defense capability to pursue its core task of collective defense” at the 2010 Lisbon Summit,⁵⁴ and declared an interim missile defense capability at the Chicago Summit in 2012.⁵⁵

While asset contributions are voluntary and national, the 2014 Wales summit declaration states that the Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defense (ALTBMD) command and control systems and their expansion to territorial defense “are eligible for common funding.”⁵⁶ The ALTBMD is a backbone of NATO’s missile defense efforts for short- and intermediate-range ballistic missile threats of up to 3000 kilometers. It is “the communications, command and control and battle management software that binds national capabilities into an Alliance capability.”⁵⁷ With regard to the Aegis Ashore site (either in Romania or in Poland in the future), a decision to shoot down an incoming ballistic missile is with the United States, not with Romania or with the North Atlantic Council, although the United States would undoubtedly promptly inform its allies about a decision to shoot down an incoming ballistic missile. As it stands, missile flight times are too short to permit extensive deliberation. NATO’s Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg praised Romania’s commitment to “helping keep NATO’s nearly one billion citizens safe,” at the plenary session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Bucharest in 2017.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Ten years after Romania agreed to participate in U.S. missile defense efforts, it is clear that U.S.-Romania missile defense cooperation has been a success story. A U.S. Aegis Ashore site in Romania became operational in early 2016 and has contributed to NATO missile defense since,



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despite the Russian Federation's objections to the project. Romania has proven to be a valuable U.S. ally, further encouraging national security cooperation between the two countries. The Romanian example also shows that missile defense basing agreements need not be comprehensive and detailed.

This example of close U.S.-Romanian defense cooperation is a model that demonstrates promise for other countries seeking to defend their sovereignty and national interests from potential Russian aggression by aligning with the United States and the West. Given ballistic missile proliferation, it is a lesson well worth learning.

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