WASHINGTON — The Obama administration’s decision to reconfigure its missile defense plans in Europe will have significant implications for Turkey and its alliance relationships. The new architecture will align more closely with near-term risks from Iran and elsewhere, and will offer improved defenses and strategic reassurance to NATO’s southern allies, above all, Turkey. To capture the benefits of this shift, the United States and NATO need to explore the possibility of basing some elements of the new system in Turkey. With NATO, Turkey can also play a leading role in new missile and air defense initiatives in the eastern Mediterranean. All of this will cast a spotlight on Turkey’s policy toward Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and looming decisions on sanctions and the possible use of force.

Southern exposure

The Bush administration’s plan for missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic turned on an assessment of Iran’s commitment to the development of longer-range theater and multi-stage intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). In recent years, Iran has clearly made a substantial investment in the development of missiles with ranges in excess of 1,000 kilometers. This growing capability has reinforced U.S., European, and Israeli concerns about Iran’s nuclear intentions, not least because it would make little sense for Tehran to invest in weapons of this range merely to deliver relatively small conventional warheads with limited accuracy. That said, the Obama administration argues that Iran’s short and medium range missile programs have progressed more rapidly than its ICBM ambitions. As a result, Iran’s growing strategic reach is being felt first and foremost in the eastern Mediterranean, southern Europe, and the Gulf. NATO’s southern allies, above all Turkey, are particularly exposed. The new missile defense architecture is aimed at addressing these shorter range “theater” risks.

This exposure is nothing new for Turkey. During the first Iraq War, Baghdad threatened to target Turkish territory with its Scud missiles if Ankara allowed the United States to use Incirlik airbase and other facilities for air strikes against Iraq. The threat was reiterated at the time of Operation Provide Comfort (later Northern Watch). These experiences and the tardy NATO response to Turkish requests for air defense reinforcements — repeated in 2003 — had a considerable influence on Turkey’s defense debate. It spurred Turkish interest in cooperation with Israel’s Arrow anti-missile program, and helped to place air defense at the top of Ankara’s defense modernization agenda.

Summary: The Obama administration’s decision to reconfigure its missile defense plans in Europe will have significant implications for Turkey and its alliance relationships. The new architecture will align more closely with near-term risks from Iran and elsewhere, and will offer improved defenses and strategic reassurance to NATO’s southern allies, above all, Turkey. To capture the benefits of this shift, the United States and NATO need to explore the possibility of basing some elements of the new system in Turkey. With NATO, Turkey can also play a leading role in new missile and air defense initiatives in the eastern Mediterranean. All of this will cast a spotlight on Turkey’s policy toward Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and looming decisions on sanctions and the possible use of force.

The New Look in Missile Defense: Thinking Through Turkish Stakes

by Dr. Ian O. Lesser

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration’s decision to take a different tack on ballistic missile defense architecture has opened a vigorous debate in policy circles on both sides of the Atlantic. For some, strategic reassurance in Central and Eastern Europe and a tough line on Russia should have been paramount considerations. For others, near-term operational needs and strategic flexibility are the touchstones. Few doubt the need to address NATO’s exposure to Iranian ballistic missiles of increasing range and accuracy. Without question the new approach makes southern Europe and the Mediterranean the center of gravity for theater missile defense over the next decade, with potentially important implications for Turkey and its alliance relationships.
Exposure to Iranian and Syrian missile systems continues to shape Turkish defense priorities. Just as Washington was elaborating its new approach to missile defense, Turkey announced its plan to buy the American Patriot (PAC-3) air defense system, with an initial investment of some $1 billion. Russian and Chinese systems are another option for Turkey. Less capable in some respects, and more difficult to integrate with existing Turkish and NATO systems, these alternatives are cheaper and could offer greater opportunities for technology transfer. But turning to non-Western sources for a state-of-the-art air defense system would have far reaching implications, quite unlike the sourcing of attack helicopters or other items from Russia. Air defense radars capable of surveillance across a large area are an integral part of these systems. The presence of Russian or Chinese designed radars in the eastern Mediterranean would have potentially serious implications for intelligence and warning. At a minimum, it would complicate Turkish coordination with allies in a region where military transparency and air sovereignty are leading concerns. Turkish strategists should be very familiar with this question given their own concern about the proposed Cypriot purchase of Russian S-300s a decade ago. In that case too, radars and their reach were as much a concern as the surface-to-air missiles themselves.

**A Maritime approach and beyond**

The new U.S. approach envisages an initial reliance on the sea-based Aegis system deployed in the Mediterranean, with an additional shore-based network to follow. Turkey could well be a candidate for part of this new land-based architecture, either for early-warning radars or the interceptors themselves. Facing multiple missile risks on its borders, Turkey should have a keen interest in integrating its new air defense system with a NATO-wide architecture which would, presumably, include the very capable elements deployed as part of the new U.S. plan. An expanded U.S. capacity to counter missile risks in the eastern Mediterranean could even reduce the need for additional and very costly investments in air defense beyond the Patriot purchase already envisioned. To the extent that this becomes a NATO initiative, Turkey will benefit. Indeed, a NATO “hat” might be necessary for Turkey even to consider hosting new U.S. radars and interceptors at Incirlik or elsewhere. This would smooth over the inevitable political acceptance challenges, and could go some way toward reinforcing NATO’s badly tarnished credibility among the Turkish public and security elites. With substantial new assets in its backyard, Turkey should be among the leading Alliance stakeholders in addressing the question of enhanced missile defense as part of NATO’s strategic concept review.

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Other aspects of sea-based missile defense could be less comfortable for Turkey. In some circumstances it might be useful to deploy Aegis equipped vessels in the Black Sea. These transits would obviously be subject to restrictions imposed by the Montreux Convention, and it is difficult to imagine conditions under which Ankara would favor such deployments unless Turkish territory was directly threatened. Having defused one crisis with Russia over missile defense, it is also hard to imagine why a U.S. administration would court another crisis by forward deploying air defenses to Russia’s flank. But future contingencies can bring their own, unanticipated operational needs. All the more reason to make missile defense plans a central topic for U.S.-Turkish policy coordination.

**Proliferation risks and strategic reassurance**

As the controversy over the recasting of America’s missile defense plans makes clear, the question of defense architecture is only partly about operational needs, narrowly defined.
The objections from Poland and the Czech Republic (where it is worth noting that public opinion became increasingly disenchanted with the planned deployments) have nothing to do with their own exposure to Middle Eastern missile arsenals. In any prospective confrontation with Iran, the battle is likely to be fought near the territory of their southern NATO allies, or further in the future, over their heads. Their concerns are in the realm of political signaling; about their geopolitical significance for Washington and strategic reassurance vis-à-vis Russia. These are not illegitimate concerns, and must be weighed against current operational demands.

They must also be weighed against requirements for strategic reassurance elsewhere. Current patterns of proliferation have left NATO’s southern allies dangerously exposed, and Europe as a whole more exposed than the continental United States. In theory, Turkey is the most exposed, although Ankara’s improved relations with neighbors such as Syria and Iran surely reduce this risk in the eyes of the Turkish leadership.

Citizens and leaders understandably worry more about weapons they fear may be aimed at them. The Turkish public remains relatively relaxed about Iran’s nuclear program.1 But Turkey’s defense planners cannot be so sanguine about the implications of proliferation around the region. Turkey has much to lose from the prospect of a nuclear or near-nuclear Iran, not to mention the potential for multiple new nuclear arsenals. Turkey is vulnerable to the cascading effects of nuclear and missile proliferation over the wider neighborhood, from the Aegean to South Asia, including effects on conventional military balances and doctrine. More dramatically, Turkey, with its Western security ties, is exposed to the retaliatory consequences of American, European, or Israeli action against Iran or other proliferators on Turkey’s borders. The physical vulnerability of Turkish cities, as well as Incirlik airbase and oil terminals on the Mediterranean, coupled with growing Turkish unease about the credibility of NATO guarantees, give Ankara a strong interest in strategic reassurance alongside enhanced defenses.

The Russian dimension

The Turkish stake in new missile defense arrangements goes beyond the need to reduce its own physical vulnerability. Turkey’s critical energy and commercial ties to Russia, and its sensitivity to sovereignty issues in the Black Sea and elsewhere (a sensitivity Ankara shares with Moscow) leave the country highly exposed to growing Western friction with Russia.

“The Turkish stake in new missile defense arrangements goes beyond the need to reduce its own physical vulnerability.”

At a minimum, Turkey could find itself torn between commitments to NATO allies and its valuable links to Russia. In the worst case, Ankara could confront destructive conflicts in its backyard that would force Turkey to choose among competing interests. All of this gives Turkey a keen interest in risk reduction vis-à-vis Russia. The decision to cancel missile defense plans in Poland and the Czech Republic—at least for the moment—improves the prospect for a workable U.S.-Russia dialogue on arms control, Iran, and other issues. Given a Justice and Development Party (AKP) foreign policy that seeks “zero problems” and tries to cultivate strategic relationships on multiple fronts, Turkey is among the leading regional beneficiaries of the new look on missile defense.

Taking advantage of the shift

In theory, the new U.S. approach to missile defense in Europe offers Turkey the prospect of improved relations with Russia, greater consensus on containing Iran’s nuclear ambitions, a more effective response to immediate threats to Turkish territory, and renewed reassurance from NATO allies. But capturing these theoretical gains and avoiding perceived threats to Turkish sovereignty will require much closer coordination between Ankara and its allies.

First, the way is now clear for Washington and Ankara to put missile defense on the top of the strategic agenda, and for a more concrete discussion of prospective basing options, including some that could be relevant to the future of Incirlik. If there is no operational need for U.S. missile defense assets ashore in Turkey this, too, can too be made clear early on.

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Properly handled, the missile defense issue has the potential to greatly reinforce bilateral security cooperation. Badly handled, it could easily stoke existing unease about the intentions and predictability of Western security partners.

Second, the new architecture should be put in a NATO context and treated as a multilateral initiative. This will have many benefits, and will be especially important in the Turkish case, where the public and the “strategic class” have grown skeptical about the credibility of Alliance security guarantees in contingencies affecting Turkey. There may also be some useful opportunities for regional cooperation with Greece, Israel, and other partners in the context of new sea-based missile defense initiatives in the eastern Mediterranean.

Finally, as Turkey becomes more central, geographically and politically, to the proliferation and missile defense equation, this will cast a spotlight on Ankara’s policy toward Iran and its nuclear program. With pressure for new sanctions building in the UN Security Council, Turkey will face some critical near term decisions on this question. Turkey’s Western partners will be keen to explore whether Ankara’s improved relations with Tehran offer any leverage over the nuclear issue. Turkish willingness to deliver tough messages on this score may also influence Washington’s willingness to see Turkey as a valid facilitator in any strategic dialogue with Tehran.

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