

The Newsweek logo consists of the word "Newsweek" in a white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a solid red rectangular background.

Missile Yield

President Obama's decision to scrap the missile interceptor planned for Central Europe doesn't mean Europeans will be unprotected from Iran. They'll just be protected from a system that actually exists—and works.

by [John Barry \(/authors/john-barry.html\)](/authors/john-barry.html) September 18, 2009

President Obama's announcement that he would cancel the missile defense system in Central Europe was more than the careful balancing act it appeared to be. It shows how he has decided to handle the future of U.S. missile defenses worldwide: he'll put them to sea.

The optics of the unveiling looked like a catastrophe piled upon other disasters: spurred by a front-page leak in Thursday's *Wall Street Journal*—"U.S. to Shelve Nuclear-Missile Shield," the headline screamed—Obama announced his decision before he had done the Polish and Czech leaders the courtesy of consulting them. To mollify their outrage, the Pentagon's policy chief, Michèle Flournoy, had to be bundled on a plane to Warsaw and Prague. Only the day before, Flournoy had been battered while trying to allay congressional doubts about the Afghanistan mission in closed-door sessions on Capitol Hill. Add to this the failure so far of envoy George Mitchell to coax either the Israelis or Arabs even to the starting line for talks. Suddenly, the administration's foreign-policy goals look pretty distant.

On the wonkier end, though, Obama's decision looks incredibly shrewd. It follows the pattern already evident in Defense Secretary Robert Gates's decisions this spring to kill several of the military's most-prized new weapons systems, including the F-22. The approach has two clear axioms. The first is: don't let unaffordable perfection stand in the way of good-enough-for-now. The second axiom underlying this approach is equally hardheaded: give up what is marginal to preserve what is important.

Iran's program to develop missiles capable of hitting Europe or Israel within a few years—and, ultimately, to field ICBMs capable of reaching the U.S. homeland—is determined and well run, and has the benefit of help from North Korea (and, some suspect, Russian technicians). It presents a challenge that no president can ignore. But President Bush's Central Europe missile defense system was more than Iranian progress warranted. So the diplomatic backlash—in both Europe and Moscow—was unnecessary. The political costs outweighed the military needs.

The solution Obama has decided to adopt is to rely on the most successful antimissile system the U.S. already has in its arsenal: SM-3 missiles deployed on Aegis cruisers and destroyers. The boss of the Navy's Aegis development program, Rear Adm. Alan B. Hicks, laid out in a presentation in Washington last month the system's potential for "regional defense" against missile attack. One of Hicks's slides showed the notional deployments—four Aegis warships in the Mediterranean, one off Britain, one in the Baltic—that, together, would put an umbrella over Europe against at least Iran's first-generation medium-range missiles. After the briefing, Henry

Sokolski—who served in George H.W. Bush's Pentagon and now runs a policy outfit studying nuclear proliferation—murmured, "I think we have just seen the future."

Defense Secretary Gates explained, in a Pentagon briefing, the rationale for the decision: Iranian work on short- and medium-range missiles "is developing more rapidly than previously projected" by U.S. intelligence, while progress on its intercontinental-range missile is lagging. Against those shorter-range missiles, the Aegis warships offshore are a swift, preexisting solution.

Behind this decision lies 30 years and close to \$140 billion of effort. Ever since President Reagan launched his Strategic Defense Initiative in 1983, the debate about missile defense has raged with quasi-religious intensity. Supporters see programs like these as all that stand between the United States and Armageddon. Critics dismiss the effort as a "Star Wars" fantasy—neither technically feasible nor politically desirable. Beneath the rhetoric, though, the military has plugged away, developing antimissile missiles of steadily greater capabilities backed by the sensors and satellites and computer networks to guide them against incoming targets. The Army now protects its troops in the field with the PAC-3 version of the Patriot missile. The Navy's Aegis/SM-3 system goes back 25 years. Its first mission was to defend carriers against air attack; but since 2002 the Navy has been upgrading the system to tackle missiles as well. Test launches have been successful enough that the Pentagon has set aside \$2 billion to deploy a worldwide fleet of 27 of these antimissile vessels. It is these that Obama proposes to station against the near-term Iranian challenge.

The current Aegis/SM-3 system couldn't combat the more advanced and longer-range missiles that multiple nations besides Iran are known to be working on. (Nor could the Army's PAC-3 battlefield system.) But they're good enough for now. As the sophistication of the threat increases, so can the capabilities of the defenses. The administration's timetable envisages a four-phase program—from 2011 or so to about 2020—to deploy newer versions of the Aegis/SM-3, backed up by (mobile) radar in Europe, giving them some capability, the Pentagon hopes, even against intercontinental-range missiles sometime after 2015.

Predictably, Obama's decision has fanned a firestorm of criticism. Republican congressmen are accusing him of having "disgraced this nation," "appeasing rogue dictators," and having "chosen the path of least resistance." All this and much more in the first 24 hours. More rational critics like David Wright of the Union of Concerned Scientists point out that the Aegis/SM-3 has been tested against only a carefully limited set of targets. But that was doubly true of the unbuilt missiles that President Bush proposed to deploy. Besides, more taxing targets—missiles with multiple warheads, decoys, even the ability to change course in the last seconds—will take Iran (or any developing power, for that matter) years of work.

For Obama, the only response that really matters will be Russia's. (Bruised feelings in Poland and the Czech Republic can be soothed easily enough.) Obama's ambition is to cement a new agreement with Russia to dramatically cut the nuclear-weapons stockpiles on both sides. In the intensive negotiations already underway, Moscow has consistently said that the U.S. plan to deploy missiles in Eastern Europe was a barrier to any deal. Obama has now removed that barrier. Russian President Medvedev's response on his visit to Washington this coming week will be the best indicator yet of Moscow's willingness to work with the Obama administration.