

Missile defence in Europe

Sky high

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America needs to sell its plans more persuasively

MINDFUL of American help in the cold war, the Czech Republic and, especially, Poland are among the more Atlanticist countries in Europe. Yet the administration's plans to base ten interceptor rockets in Poland and a radar base in the Czech Republic, though supported by both countries' governments, have gone down badly with voters.

The risks seem high (Russia talks of measures to "neutralise" the installations) and the rewards low. "It is seen as a gift to America without reciprocity," says Radek Sikorski, a former Polish defence minister who is now a candidate for the opposition Civic Platform, the front-runner in the election on October 21st. He thinks a fairer deal would include upgraded Patriot missiles to protect Warsaw, of the type already deployed in South Korea and Japan. These, he says, would cost \$1 billion, or "12 hours of the Pentagon's budget". Yet far from offering sweeteners, America has treated its allies with arrogant disdain. The diplomatic notes requesting the bases even came with prepared replies attached.

Opposition in Poland is shallow. The two biggest parties are in favour, and the issue has barely featured in the election campaign. Poles see a good case for stronger defence ties with America. Their country borders Russia and Belarus, and—at least under the prickly leadership of the Kaczynski brothers—has had worries about Germany too.

The calmer Czechs, by contrast, find the health risks from the radar alarming. America was oddly slow to provide the technical information to rebut these fears. Worse, the government in Prague has blundered. Local officials in the region where the radar is to be based say the politicians tried to buy them off with millions of euros in subsidies. They detect an echo of communist propaganda in their rulers' declarations of loyalty to a military ally, plus an unwillingness to give straight answers. The government's representative for the radar, Tomas Klvana, once lobbied for the tobacco industry, not a good background from which to reassure people about safety. Many opponents of the radar insist they are not anti-American, and resent being depicted as leftist nutcases.

Better diplomacy could ease worries in Poland and the Czech Republic. But two questions remain. One is whether missile defences, hugely profitable to contractors, will work in reality. The other is why Russia is making such

a fuss. Both geography and arithmetic support the American argument that the system is meant to counter a handful of missiles that might one day be fired from Iran, rather than the Kremlin's colossal nuclear arsenal, which can be launched from land, sea and air.

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