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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Iran's Missile Threat

July 10, 2008; Page A14

Talk about timing, perhaps fortuitous. On Tuesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was in Prague signing an agreement that's a first step toward protecting Europe from ballistic missile attack. As if on cue, Tehran yesterday tested nine missiles, including several capable of reaching southern Europe, as well as Israel and U.S. troops stationed in the Middle East. Remind us. Who says Iran isn't a threat?

The chief naysayer is Moscow, which continues to insist that the planned U.S.-led missile defense for Europe is aimed at defeating Russian missiles, not Iranian ones. This was Vladimir Putin's line, and the new Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, picked it up yesterday, saying that the antimissile system "deeply distresses" Russia and is a threat to its national security. The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement warning that if the system is deployed, "we will be forced to react not with diplomatic, but with military-technical methods." Good to see the Russians haven't lost their subtle touch.

No one in that neighborhood – least of all the Russians – actually believes Iran's missile program is anything but dangerous. Russians talk privately about the Iranian threat, and it's not hard to imagine a scenario whereby Tehran shares a missile – and perhaps a nuclear warhead – with its brother Muslims in Chechnya.

In any case, Washington's proposed antimissile system for Europe is designed to defend against one or two missiles launched from Iran, not against the thousands of missiles in the Russian arsenal. It would include a tracking radar in the Czech Republic and 10 interceptors in Poland (or perhaps Lithuania, if the Poles can't get their act together). Russia's claim that this highly limited defense poses a threat to its nuclear deterrence is absurd.

Yesterday's tests offered no big surprises about Iran's missile technology, but they are a useful reminder of just how real the Iranian threat is – and how rapidly it is growing. One of the missiles tested was the latest update of the Shahab-3, which has a range of about 1,250 miles.

Replace the payload with a lighter one – say, a nuclear warhead – and the range gains 1,000 miles. Add a booster and the range can be extended even farther. North Korea did just that with its Taepodong missile – technology that it passed along to Iran. U.S. intelligence estimates that Iran will have a ballistic missile capable of reaching New York or Washington by about 2015.

Iran may already have the capability to target the U.S. with a short-range missile by launching it from a freighter off the East Coast. A few years ago it was observed practicing the launch of Scuds from a barge in the Caspian Sea.

This would be especially troubling if Tehran is developing EMP – electromagnetic pulse – technology. A nuclear weapon detonated a hundred miles over U.S. territory would create an electromagnetic pulse that would virtually shut down the U.S. economy by destroying electronic circuits on the ground. William Graham, head of a Congressional commission to assess the EMP threat, testifies before the House Armed Services Committee this morning. We hope someone asks him about Iran.

The proposed "third site" in Europe is part of a rudimentary missile-defense system that the U.S. already has in place for the

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homeland. It's one of the unsung successes of the Bush Presidency, and the U.S. and its allies are safer for it. Yet few Democrats are willing to acknowledge it. That apparently includes Barack Obama, whose response to Iran's missile tests yesterday was to call for more direct diplomacy with Tehran, tougher threats of economic sanctions and bigger incentives to behave – all of which Tehran has sneered at numerous times.

Some 30 nations, including North Korea and Syria, have ballistic missiles and their proliferation is sure to continue. The European site is part of the Bush Administration's vision of missile defense with a global reach. Iran's latest missile tests show that Europe needs an antimissile system more than ever.

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