

Common Defense

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The American plan to install the forward edge of its antimissile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic has raised memories of the great cold war struggle over America's decision to station medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe. Of course, back then the resistance was largely in the streets. This time most of the questioning is coming from within the governments of Germany and France.

We have argued before that the proposed missile defense is not a good idea. The technology is uncertain; the threat from Iran and North Korea might yet be averted diplomatically. And repeatedly provoking Russia will only make Russia more of a problem, we fear. The shield, moreover, is really intended as a defense of the United States (and Europe) by the United States, and so only deepens the perception of American arrogance and selfishness. The Bush administration, scornful of traditional diplomacy, has made it worse by not doing more to consult either its longtime allies or its rival Russia.

As ever, Europe has confused the situation further by its inability to agree on any position or speak with a single or even a few voices. (Part of the problem is that "Old Europe" clearly resents the desire of "New Europe" to make the Americans happy.) If the European Union really wants to have a say on this issue — and many others — it would do best to first sort out what it would say.

It should start by insisting that Washington seriously discuss what threats are out there — and what it sees as the best ways to defend against them. Europe needs to know that it is not being used as a pawn in some larger chess game between Washington and Iran. Europe should remind Washington of the dangers of riling up the Russians. The best defense is still a common defense.

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