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Agence France Presse -- English

September 18, 2009 Friday 2:02 AM GMT

Obama's missile move -- why now?

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LENGTH: 747 words

DATELINE: WASHINGTON, Sept 17 2009

President Barack Obama's decision to abandon a Bush-era plan for an Eastern European missile shield raised intriguing questions of timing, at a moment of intense global diplomacy.

The decision came as several foreign policy crises, for instance the effort to halt Iran's nuclear program, reach a pivotal stage, and days ahead of the UN General Assembly and the G20 summit in Pittsburgh.

As well as the timing question, foreign policy experts are also pondering whether the move will provide a substantially warm US ties with Russia.

Moscow had repeatedly and loudly protested at former president George W. Bush's version of an Eastern Europe-based missile shield.

So when Obama came to power pledging to "reset" chilled ties with Moscow, and then on Thursday removed one of the most divisive issues between the ex-Cold War foes, observers were bound to look for deeper motives.

Instead of the missile and radar sites in ex-Soviet states the Czech Republic and Poland, Obama envisioned a more mobile system at first based on ships, then transition to land by 2015.

He reasoned that the system that so angered Russia was no longer necessary because intelligence estimates show the threat from Iran's short and medium range missiles is higher than its yet-to-be developed long-range hardware.

The White House denied there was any "quid pro quo" at work.

"This is not about Russia," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said.

But Obama's political foes scented ulterior motives, with several hinting he was appeasing a nationalistic government in Moscow.

Others complained he had played a trump card in his relationship with Russia without securing guarantees from Moscow for concessions on combating the Iranian missile or nuclear threat.

There are multiple geopolitical reasons why Obama might want better ties with Moscow.

His missile decision came as he hopes for more robust Russian support should he seek crippling UN economic sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program.

Moscow will also be a key player in the October 1 nuclear talks between top global powers and Iran.

Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is also important in the US-led effort to contain North Korea's

nuclear program.

Furthermore, Obama has invested substantial personal prestige in the US-Russia effort to hammer out a new nuclear arms reduction pact to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expires on December 5.

Despite the convergence of issues and events, a senior Obama aide dismissed the view that the missile shield decision was rolled out for political reasons.

"I know it seems like we are really clever and we have lined up all these decisions but ... this is a process that has been chugging along," the official said.

Officials said the timing of the announcement was the result of a policy review concluding and a recommendation being sent to the president.

Pentagon departments must also begin work on 2011 budgets in coming months.

Arms Control expert Joseph Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund, backed the administration position.

"There is no indication that US-Russia relations were the deciding or even a significant factor in this decision," he said.

Another expert, John Isaacs, executive director of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, agreed.

"The decision to revamp the missile defense plan in Europe is based on technological reality rather than rigid ideology," he said.

"The Obama administration's proposal is a better choice for US and European security."

A senior official said that Obama's looming encounter with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at the UN and the G20 was not a determining factor.

"No matter when we would have announced this there would have been some meeting with the Russians at some point in the calendar because we meet with them fairly regularly."

"Philosophically, the notion that we are going to do trades, and tit-for-tat ... that doesn't work," the official said.

"We are going to do things together that are a 'win, win' for both countries.

Despite denying a quid pro quo, officials did however leave open the possibility that Obama's move would improve the mood of US-Russia ties.

One Washington analyst, Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute, suggested Washington may already have won a payoff from Russia.

In early July, Obama sealed an agreement with Medvedev allowing Washington to supply Western forces in Afghanistan via Russia.

"I think that was Moscow's conciliatory gesture," Carpenter said.

LOAD-DATE: September 18, 2009

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newswire

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