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## DIY Defense

by Doug Bandow

09.30.2009

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The Berlin Wall fell two decades ago, leading to a brief moment in which many people believed that history had ended. Europe's security no longer was an issue.

However, history has begun again. Russia may have no interest in conquering its neighbors, but last year in Georgia Moscow demonstrated that it would assert itself along its border. The Bush administration responded with words rather than bombs. Now the Obama administration has dropped missile-defense plans for the Czech Republic and Poland.

The result was predictable cries of betrayal abroad and capitulation at home. Disquiet was expressed by not only the Czech and Polish governments, but also other neighbors of Russia, such as Lithuania.

Former Polish President Lech Walesa even complained that "The Americans have always tended to their interest only and have taken advantage of everyone else." However, which European state does not pursue its interest? Including expecting Washington to risk American lives and treasure to defend countries unwilling to spend much on their own defense?

In any case, better relations between Washington and Moscow are likely to lower tensions between Russia and its neighbors. No one gains from two nuclear powers challenging one another while maneuvering military forces in close proximity, as in Georgia last year. Any U.S.-Russian conflict would likely engulf most of Moscow's vulnerable neighbors.

Moreover, the illusion that the United States would rush to the aid of distant, hard-to-defend states with little relevance to America's security could only mislead nations like Poland. John Bolton called the missile decision "a near catastrophe for American relations with Eastern European countries and many in NATO," but the real catastrophe would be for more countries to mimic Georgia in provoking Russian military action in the expectation of U.S. support. A heightened risk of war with Moscow is a high price to pay for better relations with dependent states.

Rather than bemoan the Obama administration's shift, nations in Central and Eastern Europe should act on the obvious wake-up call. No longer should they entrust their fates to a large, distant and (like them) self-interested power. In the end, they must rely on their own efforts. This is as it always has been. For centuries peoples in this region have

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The Two Timetables

lived uncomfortably in the shadow of neighboring great powers. The demise of the Soviet Union offered sudden liberation, but no permanent guarantees. Last year's Russo-Georgian war illustrated the uncertainties of even peaceful times.

During that conflict, said Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus: "Let's stand together united and victory will be on our side." But the Central and Eastern Europeans had little practical help to offer Georgia, the European Union made only symbolic gestures and Washington preferred to bluster. Some observers saw then and continue to see the problem as the lack of NATO membership for Tbilisi. Ron Asmus of the German Marshall Fund contends: "We must take real steps toward solving this problem by providing strategic reassurance to Central and Eastern Europe through the front door of NATO and not the back door of missile defense."

However, the problem is not membership in the club, but geopolitical interest—or lack thereof. Washington had reason to risk much during the Cold War to prevent Soviet domination of Western Europe. The United States is little affected by Russian influence in nations once belonging to the Warsaw Pact, or even part of the Soviet Union itself. "Old Europe" is similarly less interested in the fate of countries as they range further east. Where the United States and leading European states might draw the defense line against Russia is hard to say, but draw it they very well might, irrespective of the formalities of the transatlantic alliance.

Moscow understands the geopolitical disparity. A conflict along Russia's southern border matters much more to Russia than to America or Europe. Even had Georgia been part of NATO last year, Moscow likely would have struck and NATO likely would have temporized. The Baltic nations are equally distant and indefensible. Poland is better situated, but hardly secure. For all of these countries allied intervention would be anything but automatic. After all, in 1939 Britain and France guaranteed Poland's security and even declared war on Nazi Germany—but then did nothing as the latter conquered Poland. There would be no more enthusiasm today for risking a showdown with nuclear-armed Russia in its geopolitical backyard. Any state leaving its security up to outsiders in such circumstances risks catastrophic disappointment.

Vulnerable nations should adopt a different approach. First, they should forge better relations with Moscow. That does not mean sacrificing national independence, but it does mean taking the interests of other countries into account. Certainly it means not deliberately antagonizing more powerful neighbors.

Some might characterize this course as shameful appeasement, but it is really good sense. If you live next to a hungry bear, you should not provoke it. Former-Polish Defense Minister Aleksander Szczygło complained of the Obama administration's missile decision: "The Russians will have a voice in the affairs of this part of Europe." But that seems inevitable, just as the United States has more than a little influence in Latin America. Just ask Honduras, under pressure from Washington for ousting its president in a constitutional dispute.

Yet prior to the victory of Donald Tusk in 2007, the Polish government seemed intent on offending both of its big neighbors. Georgia's determination to violently reassert control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia irrespective of the preferences of residents of those territories and the views of Russia made conflict in the Caucasus inevitable.

Adam Chmielewski of the University of Wrocław in Poland argues that the missile decision "may only help Poles to understand that they have



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no other geopolitical choice but to make friends with Germans and Russians alike, and to abandon their own foolish policy of 'two enemies'." To some degree the Tusk government already has embarked on such a course, especially looking west. Accommodation between Georgia and Russia will be more difficult, but that is as much the fault of Tbilisi as Moscow. President Mikheil Saakashvili may posture as a democratic champion, but his aggressive and impulsive behavior serves his own people ill.

Of course, diplomacy is not always enough. Equally important is developing military assets and relationships sufficient to deter if not defeat Russia. None of Moscow's neighbors alone can match Russian military strength, even significantly attenuated after the Cold War. However, all could make themselves largely indigestible.

Ukraine already would be difficult for Moscow to intimidate, let alone swallow. Kiev may be more vulnerable to an energy cut-off than military action. Confronting Poland should be no mean task for Moscow. Other countries could charge a high price for hostile Russian action.

Yet nations which claim to feel threatened by their big eastern neighbor (no one appears to be much concerned about Germany) spend surprisingly little on the military and place surprisingly small proportions of their populations under arms. The United States, facing no existential threat like that during the Cold War, devotes a much larger percentage of its GDP to the military. Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations contends that such countries "should double their military spending to make themselves into porcupine states that even the Russian bear can't swallow."

The issue is not just military budget but force structure. Washington has provided generous subsidies to NATO aspirants, but not to prepare for their own defense. Neil Barnett, an associate analyst at Center for European Policy Analysis, reports that the latter nations "are developing armies focused on the deployment of units from platoon to battalion strength to theatres like Iraq and Afghanistan." He instead advocates territorial defense, suggesting that Eastern and Central European countries emphasize "something like partisan or insurgent resistance to an invader."

Indeed, these states have been wasting scarce resources elsewhere with Washington's encouragement. Countries ranging from Albania to Georgia to Poland to Ukraine have deployed troops to Iraq; in fact, the United States had to rush Tbilisi's two thousand soldiers back home after the outbreak of hostilities last year. Many of the same countries have sent small units to Afghanistan. Politicians in affected nations have assumed that such aid—marginal for Washington irrespective of how significant a burden for them—entitled them to protection by the United States.

This resource diversion continues. U.S. Marines are training Georgian troops for deployment to Afghanistan. Yet Marine Corps Commandant General James Conway observed that counter-insurgency skills "aren't very helpful when it comes to main force-type units if there were to be engagement of nations."

Although the U.S. embassy in Tbilisi described the Georgian contingent as a "vital contribution," the one-hundred-seventy-man contingent obviously will make no difference to the U.S. war effort. The Georgians continue to hope to win Washington's favor, even though their earlier participation in Iraq failed to convince the Bush administration to intervene last year. Alexander Rondell of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, lets hope trump experience in

contending that the current training mission reinforces the two nations' strategic alliance: "It means Georgia continues to enjoy American protection."

The Central and Eastern Europeans also need to cooperate more intensively with each another. Before World War II, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia formed the "little entente." Its impact was limited, but there was little that could have restrained Nazi Germany's ambitions. Russia's objectives are far more limited.

A new "little entente" should seek to deter Russia by raising the cost of military action against any of its members. Toward this end states in the Caucasus, Baltic region, and Central and Eastern Europe should work together. Relatively wealthier nations to the west, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary, could assist weaker countries in weapons acquisition and force training. Larger nations, such as Poland, could consider providing more direct aid should conflict engulf smaller members.

Hopefully this is all idle theorizing. Absent the sort of provocation provided by Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili last year, war between Russia and any of its neighbors seems unlikely.

Nevertheless, the possibility remains worrisome—for the latter as well as for the United States and "Old Europe," which are expected to ride to the rescue in any conflict. Another continental or global conflict, and especially one over such minimal geopolitical stakes, would be particularly tragic after Washington and Moscow avoided turning the Cold War into another Great War.

Administration critics prefer to simply ignore America's interest. For instance, Matthew Omolesky at the Laboratoire Europeen d'Anticipation Politique in Paris argues that backers of the missile system "have provided ample evidence of their good faith," but good faith should not be the criterion for an American decision to risk war.

Zbigniew Lewicki of Warsaw University was even harsher, contending that the missile decision indicated that "President Obama is ready to sacrifice the interests of Central European countries." To the contrary, the decision suggested that the administration was going to stop sacrificing U.S. interests for Central and Eastern Europe, which favored the missile system because they saw it as directed against Moscow. American security in Europe starts with peace with Russia.

History continues to run. The administration's decision should remind the Central and Eastern Europeans of an important lesson. In the event of a confrontation with Russia, they can rely on no one but themselves.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of several books, including *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon).

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