



Czechs give go-ahead for US 'son of star wars' base

- Prague says move is good for European security
- Russia threatens to review its own missile defences

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Protesters display a banner against a US missile base in the Czech Republic. Photograph: Michal Cizak/AFP/Getty Images

The Czech government has announced that it wants to host a large US military site for the Pentagon's much-criticised missile shield system, confirming for the first time that Washington had asked Prague for permission to build a radar site for the national missile defence programme.

Russia had warned earlier this month that any extension of the US missile project to eastern Europe would force it to review its military planning.

In one of his first acts as the new Czech prime minister, Mirek Topolánek said that building the facilities in the Czech Republic, the first extension of the "son of star wars" project beyond the US, would boost European security.

Mr Topolánek referred only to a radar site, a strong indication that the Pentagon is hoping to locate the bigger part of the European project - a large missile interceptor silo that would theoretically fire off rockets to destroy incoming missiles - in neighbouring Poland.

Russia warned earlier this month that any US extension of its missile defence project to eastern Europe would force it to review its military planning to counter the perceived threat.

The American demand was one of the first issues Mr Topolanek has had to handle after becoming prime minister. The Czech Republic has effectively been without a government since elections became deadlocked seven months ago.

The centre-right leader cobbled together a weak coalition and won a parliamentary confidence vote on Friday courtesy of two opposition defectors.

As soon as Mr Topolanek won the vote, the Americans tabled their request. "We are convinced that a possible deployment of the radar station on our territory is in our interest," he said.

"It will increase the security of the Czech Republic and Europe."

The new defence minister, Vlasta Parkanova, a Christian Democrat, reinforced support for the contentious scheme, while acknowledging public reservations. "I am aware that locating an allied radar site on our territory is a sensitive issue for Czech citizens. Some threats can be confronted only in cooperation with our partners, and an attack by a ballistic missile is among them.....We should not consider this issue ideologically but consider whether it raises the security of the Czech Republic and all its citizens."

The US has been quietly negotiating with the Czechs and the Poles for four years, while scouting Poland and areas east of the Czech capital, Prague, for suitable missile defence sites. Both centre-right governments in Prague and Warsaw are pro-American. If the US plan gets a green light, the spending on the Polish and Czech projects is likely to total \$1.6bn (£810m) with the bases built by 2011.

The Americans have already built two missile interceptor sites, in California and Alaska, but the proposed project in the Czech Republic is the first in Europe. It has alarmed Russia, which claims it and not "rogue states" in the Middle East or Asia is the target of the missile shield. The US says the installations are aimed at thwarting potential North Korean long-range missiles, while the European sites guard against long-range missiles from Iran or other regional foes.

Up to two-thirds of Poles and Czechs are against taking part in the missile shield, according to opinion surveys, and the government in Warsaw, while in favour, has opposed the US terms. The Pentagon insists both would-be sovereign US bases with the staff stationed there, some 500 in total, not subject to Polish or Czech law.

"I approach the problem of extra-territoriality with reserve, I won't hide that," the Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, said last year.

Poland said it had no comment on a report that a final deal had been agreed. Foreign ministry spokesman Andrzej Sados told Reuters: "Consultations concerning that issue

have been going on for months... We need more consultations, which we are conducting with our American friends through diplomatic channels."

Although discussions have been going on for years to reassure Russia, the Kremlin argues that the missile shield is in any case doomed to failure, and will merely succeed in stoking tension and mistrust.

Nikolai Solovtsov, the officer in charge of Russia's strategic missile command, said this month that a US extension of its missile defence project to eastern Europe would affect Russia's military planning.

"Russia will have to take additional measures to counter missile defence systems to prevent its strategic deterrent potential being downgraded," he said.

The Russian top brass dismiss assertions that the scheme is aimed purely at countries such as North Korea and Iran, pointing out that the project deals with intercontinental ballistic missiles, which neither North Korea nor Iran possesses.

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