

U.S. Missile Defense after the Bush-Putin Summit

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Prior to the November 12-15 summit meeting between Presidents Bush and Putin, there was widespread speculation that the two leaders would “cut a deal” on nuclear reductions and missile defenses that would allow the United States to conduct tests of missile defenses that were otherwise prohibited by the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. While President Bush pledged to reduce the U.S. deployed nuclear arsenal from 7,000 warheads to 1,700-2,200 operational warheads over the next decade, and President Putin promised to reduce Russia's arsenal by two-thirds, they announced no agreement on missile defenses.

What does this mean for the future of the U.S. missile defense program? The short answer is: not much. For several years, technology, and not the ABM Treaty, will continue to be the major constraint on building defenses against long-range missiles.

Under the Clinton Administration, the United States moved beyond basic research on missile defense technologies and began developing a missile defense system whose components and design were specified in detail.

The “midcourse” system would use ground-based “hit-to-kill” interceptors in the midcourse of the warhead’s trajectory to destroy the incoming warhead by colliding with it in outer space. While deploying this system would be illegal under the ABM Treaty, full testing is permitted.

Shortly before leaving office, President Clinton decided not to begin deployment of this missile defense system, in large part because the technology was not ready and the system was known to be vulnerable to a variety of simple countermeasures that an attacker could use to confuse or overwhelm the defense.

When the Bush Administration took office, it pulled back from the Clinton plan and announced that the Pentagon would pursue research on a wide variety of missile defense systems and decide later which of these were suitable for deployment. The Bush administration has claimed that the United States needs “relief” from the ABM Treaty to proceed with its development and testing program. This is a specious claim: while testing of sea-based or space-based systems is prohibited by the treaty, the United States is nowhere near ready to conduct tests of such systems.

As the FY2002 defense budget shows, the Clinton groundbased midcourse hit-to-kill system remains the core of current missile defense plans. Thus, while sea-based boost-phase missile defenses will receive \$25 million, the midcourse system will receive some \$3.2 billion.

The treaty would stand in the way of deployment of this system, but the United States will not finish the planned test program for at least five years. It is not yet clear whether the planned test program will incorporate enough realistic testing, but the information needed to make a well-informed deployment decision will not be available for at least five years. Thus, the treaty need not be an issue for several years.

The real urgency for the Bush Administration to leave the ABM Treaty has nothing to do with testing. Next spring the Pentagon plans to begin building five missile silos for interceptor missiles at Fort Greely, Alaska, with the goal of having these interceptors serve as part of an “emergency defense” by 2004. This would ensure that President Bush would deploy something before his first term in office expires. (For more detail, see “The Alaska Test Bed Fallacy: Missile Defense Deployment Goes Stealth,” *Arms Control Today*, September 2001, pp 3-9.

Available at www.armscontrol.org/act/2001_09/gronlundwrightsept01.asp).

The Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO) has argued that these interceptors would be part of a new “Alaska test bed” that is needed to improve the test program, and would fund these activities out of the research— rather than procurement— category of the budget. However, these silos would not be used to launch interceptor missiles during tests. For safety reasons, the United States does not launch long-range missiles from an inland site. Indeed, the Pentagon has stated that test launches cannot be conducted from Fort Greely because it is too near populated areas. Thus, interceptors at Fort Greely would in no way be useful to a flight-test program. (Congress was moving to block funding for Fort Greely, but these efforts were dropped following the September 11 terrorist attacks.)

At the same time, the five interceptors at Fort Greely would have very limited utility as a defense system, in part because no missile defense radar will be deployed in Alaska to enable the system to discriminate the warhead from debris and even simple decoys.

To permit silo construction at Fort Greely to begin next spring, the United States would need to give its six months notice of withdrawal sometime by late 2001. And, prior to September 11, President Bush had made several statements indicating the United States would withdraw from the ABM Treaty “at a time convenient to America.”

However, global politics have changed since September 11, and President Bush appears to recognize that unilateral withdrawal from the treaty would likely harm the anti-terrorism coalition his administration has worked to create. Whether President Bush is willing to put aside the Pentagon’s Fort Greely deployment plans to avoid a rift with Russia in the near term remains to be seen, but the chances are greater now than they were several months ago.

At a deeper level, the lack of a summit “deal” on missile defenses demonstrates that Russia still has concerns about US missile defense plans— concerns that are legitimate given the US-Russian nuclear relationship. Bush is eager to convince President Putin that the end of the Cold War means that US missile defenses should not worry Russia. But Russia cares about US missile defenses because the United States continues to rely on its Cold War strategy and continues to target thousands of nuclear weapons on Russia.

During the presidential campaign, Bush said that “the premise of Cold War nuclear targeting should no longer dictate the size of the US arsenal.” Yet Cold War thinking remains institutionalized in US nuclear targeting plans, which require the United States to have enough highly accurate weapons to target and destroy Russian missiles in their silos. Only a few hundred nuclear weapons are needed to destroy a country the size of Russia. No current or conceivable future threat requires the United States to maintain more than a few hundred survivable warheads. The only reason the United States would retain 2,000 warheads is to target Russian nuclear weapons.

Bush cannot fundamentally change the US-Russian nuclear relationship by building missile defenses and abandoning arms control agreements while keeping thousands of nuclear weapons on alert and ready to be targeted at Russia. Until the United States fundamentally changes its nuclear policy with respect to Russia, it will face not just substantial technical barriers to developing effective defenses against long-range missiles but also deep political opposition to their deployment by Russia.

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