

Obama chooses vulnerability

President's quest for 'nuclear zero' would endanger the homeland

By Robert Joseph

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Ten years ago, the U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty prohibited the United States from defending the American homeland against missile attack. Despite dire predictions, when we withdrew, the sky didn't fall, and few today would openly suggest a return to that condition of legally mandated vulnerability. While we now have the legal right to deploy a robust missile-defense system, the policies and programs of the Obama administration have undermined progress in protecting our nation against emerging threats, such as those from Iran and North Korea. For the administration, vulnerability is a choice, part of its feckless pursuit of the nuclear zero agenda and its failed promotion of reset with Russia.

There are three lessons from the ABM Treaty withdrawal that apply today.

The first is that it is extremely difficult to withdraw from ratified agreements, even if they include supreme national interest clauses that permit such action. Today, in debates over the Comprehensive Test Ban, often touted as an important step toward a nuclear-free world, we hear from arms-control advocates that we can simply abrogate the treaty if we determine there is a need to conduct a nuclear test in the future.

Our experience is to the contrary. The ABM Treaty was in force from 1972 until 2002. During the last 15 years of its existence, three of four presidents emphasized its negative effects on national security and expressed their desire to seek relief from its constraints.

President Reagan criticized the treaty on both moral and strategic grounds. His Strategic Defense Initiative was severely hampered by the prohibitions on testing and deployment of mobile, maritime and space-based capabilities - both interceptors and sensors. While experts debated alternative treaty interpretations in an attempt to expand permitted research and development, we stayed in the treaty at the expense of developing effective defenses.

President George H. W. Bush also sought relief from the treaty - again without success. In his case, the most fundamental conditions had changed: the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the only other signatory to the treaty, and the emergence of third-country missile threats. Yet the lawyers at the State Department and elsewhere were quick to insist that Russia was the successor for ABM Treaty purposes and that the treaty remained in effect.

Why did both Reagan and the first President Bush fail? Because there were always contrary arguments that prevailed: Withdrawal would threaten the prospects for further arms control, the allies would never accept it, congressional supporters would respond negatively, and on and on.

It was only under the leadership of George W. Bush that the United States withdrew. The second President Bush thought that it was imperative to deploy missile defenses to deny countries like North Korea and Iran the ability to blackmail and intimidate us in the future by holding our cities hostage to attack. To deploy, we needed to withdraw from the ABM Treaty.

In doing so, President Bush rejected the arguments made by every secretary of state from George Shultz forward.

This leads to the second lesson. We need to win the intellectual debate and expose the myths that often surround arms-control agreements.

For the ABM Treaty, this meant demythologizing the articles of faith that accompanied what some referred to as a "sacred document." The treaty was based on the counterintuitive proposition that protecting the United States from missile attack was detrimental to our security. The belief was if the United States and the Soviet Union did not deploy defenses, both would feel secure in their ability to destroy the other and therefore would not build up their offensive nuclear forces.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger actually praised the treaty by noting that it would give Soviet missiles "a free ride" to their U.S. targets. Following ratification, the corollary was also frequently heard: If the U.S. withdrew, there would be an arms race.

To the contrary, the signing of the ABM Treaty ushered in the Soviet Union's most ambitious expansion of nuclear forces. And President Vladimir Putin's public announcement on the day we declared our intention to withdraw put a stake through the heart of the arms-race myth. In that statement, he was explicit that the U.S. withdrawal was not a threat to Russia and that Moscow intended to make large reductions in its nuclear forces.

Other now-discredited myths that surrounded the ABM Treaty were that defenses were too expensive and would never work. As long as we stayed in the treaty, these were self-fulfilling propositions because its provisions - and the U.S. compliance process - ensured that we could not develop effective defenses or maximize our theater defense capacities out of concern they might possess a theoretical capability against longer-range missiles.

For the true believers - in Congress, academia and elsewhere - the theological adherence to the treaty prevailed until the end. It was only when the treaty went away without a murmur that they went quiet.

In contrast, it was easier to get acceptance from Moscow than from the die-hard adherents at home and in allied countries. Perhaps this was because the Russians never bought into the myths and, once it concluded we were serious about deploying defenses, they accepted it.

Many of the same myths that accompanied the ABM Treaty have resurfaced in the debate over the use of space in the U.S. missile-defense architecture.

Advocates, both foreign and domestic, of an agreement banning the "militarization of space" often seem less interested in the growing anti-space capabilities of China, Russia and others, than in prohibiting the United States from deploying interceptors in space on the grounds that such a capability would be destabilizing, unaffordable or unachievable technically - all familiar assertions from the past.

The third lesson of the ABM Treaty experience is the need to overcome the bureaucracy, which irrespective of administration exerts a powerful influence over national security policy and is generally resistant to fundamental change.

For the ABM Treaty, this included not just the State Department and our embassies abroad which, whenever asked, reflected the arguments of those who favored the treaty. After fighting for missile defense in the 1960s, the uniformed military, up the hierarchy to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also adopted the civilian-led commitment to vulnerability.

If the new administration was to succeed, it had to move quickly - before the opponents asserted themselves. And that is exactly what we did. In his first month in office, President Bush signed out presidential guidance, entitled "Transforming Deterrence," providing a new security framework in which defense of the homeland against small-scale missile attack was central. At the more operational level, and within days of assuming office, new talking points were sent by the White House to all departments and embassies. No longer would the ABM Treaty be the cornerstone of U.S. strategic policy. Instead, it was seen as a relic of the Cold War.

Today, while there are no vocal advocates of reinstating the ABM Treaty, the Obama administration is taking us back to the era of vulnerability, to the defenseless posture of the past.

There are growing indications of a willingness to negotiate a "demarcation" arrangement with Russia to define the technical boundaries between strategic and theater defenses. This proposal, which was tried and failed in the Clinton administration, would impede the development of all U.S. missile-defense programs that require an integrated layered defense to protect the United States and our allies.

Moreover, the Obama administration continues to underfund homeland defense while favoring theater capabilities that are seen as less offensive to Russia. The imbalance is pronounced, with about four of every five dollars going toward theater defenses and with the cancellation of most programs intended to provide capabilities against future longer-range threats. Funding for the currently deployed ground-based system has been dramatically reduced, and the test program artificially constrained. While more silos are being dug, there is no money for interceptors to fill them.

Finally, the president's "off mic" comments to Russia's Dmitri Medvedev in March that he would be "more flexible" on missile defenses following the U.S. presidential election provides yet

another indication of the administration's intent to trade away homeland defense in pursuit of its quixotic quest for nuclear zero.

We have been through all this before. We cannot afford to go back.

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