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The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty codified mutual U.S.-Soviet vulnerability to nuclear retaliation by precluding the deployment of national missile defense (NMD). At the time, unquestioned mutual vulnerability was viewed in Washington as the key to creating the conditions necessary for deterrence “stability” and agreed reductions in strategic offensive weapons. Washington’s logic was elegant: if defenses were deployed one or both could feel compelled to build more offensive weapons to maintain deterrence. With the ABM Treaty effectively banning NMD, however, both sides could stop building offensive nuclear weapons because both already possessed an adequate deterrent. Despite this logical elegance, it now appears that the Kremlin’s original motives for the treaty were different: according to recently available data, Moscow sought the treaty to limit competition with Washington in an area of potential U.S. technological superiority (i.e., missile defense), and thereby free resources for the continuation of a significant Russian buildup of strategic offensive forces. The notion that the treaty signaled Moscow’s acceptance of American concepts of “stable” mutual deterrence and offensive arms reductions was a fiction concocted in Washington to help justify the treaty.

The current U.S. push for NMD runs afoul of the ABM Treaty. This push is a response to the post-Cold War proliferation of long-range missiles to countries such as North Korea, and prospectively Iran and Iraq. Unfortunately, the ABM Treaty continues to demand vulnerability while these new post-Cold War missile threats create the urgent need for NMD. Despite the inherent contradiction, much of official Washington now wants to maintain the ABM Treaty, continue the START arms reduction process, and to deploy NMD. Consequently, the Clinton Administration is searching for those revisions to the treaty that Moscow will accept, and also will allow at least the appearance of NMD protection against emerging missile threats.

The difficulty for Washington in this search is that the treaty continues to appeal to Moscow, largely for the same reasons that drove Soviet positions in 1972. And, in addition, it now provides Moscow with a sense of lingering prestige, and equality with the United States. It is a cherished vestige of the days when Moscow was America’s peer.

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The Kremlin's expressions of fear and dismay concerning the U.S. NMD threat to international "stability" mostly is rhetoric. It is rhetoric known to have a useful effect on American ears because it plays to the largely Western concepts of mutual deterrence and "stability". In fact, the ABM Treaty is considered valuable not because Moscow actually views the treaty itself as strategically significant, but because it now provides significant leverage over Washington. Because Washington wants to maintain the treaty and the START process, and to deploy NMD, Moscow is in the position to put the U.S. on notice that it can scuttle virtually all existing arms control agreements if it judges U.S. NMD plans to be unacceptable. The message to Washington, of course, is to back off on NMD or risk all arms control agreements.

In addition, Russian "traditionalists," unable to leave the Cold War behind, continue to call for "parity" in strategic arms, and demand new offensive capabilities to defeat any U.S. NMD. Such a responses they say, could include retention of "heavy" Russian ICBMs scheduled for elimination under START-II, and MIRVing of the new generation "Topol-M" missiles. Other countermeasures discussed in Russia sound even more provocative, though they may be intended largely for bargaining purposes. These include a shift either to a strategy of preventive nuclear strikes, or to an "automatic counter-strike" in which Russian ICBMs would be launched automatically upon the receipt of signals from sensors registering nuclear explosions.

Moscow's great hope, given its limited resources, is for international political pressure, preferably involving Russia, China, and whichever U.S. allies will sign-on, to derail any serious U.S. NMD program. If the U.S. drive for NMD cannot be derailed politically, the newly elected Russian president, Vladimir Putin, almost certainly will endorse the search for a compromise on the question of the ABM Treaty and U.S. NMD deployment. Putin certainly springs from an authoritarian background. Nevertheless, he is fully aware of Russia's current inability to engage in serious strategic competition or confrontation with the U.S., especially while Russia is preoccupied with massive internal unrest.

If Washington actually commits itself to limited NMD deployment, Putin has only two options: continue rigidly to reject any revision to the ABM Treaty and risk unilateral U.S. treaty withdrawal and unfettered U.S. NMD deployment; or, engage in negotiations on the subject to retain serious constraints on U.S. NMD, gain other arms control concessions, and to advance his reputation as being reasonable and responsible. By providing strong endorsement to START-II ratification only a few weeks after his election, the new Russian president demonstrated his desire to establish a reputation as someone with whom the West could do business. And, undoubtedly with the tacit consent of the Russian

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political hierarchy, some Russian experts have recently sent out several “trial balloons” exploring the potential for, and limits of, American readiness to come to a compromise on NMD and the ABM Treaty. The picture thus is set for a grudging Russian willingness to negotiate some limited revisions to the ABM Treaty—in return for U.S. agreement to maintain the basic ABM Treaty framework and other arms control concessions.

One tentative approach clearly favored in Moscow is to retain the basic limitations of the ABM Treaty while pursuing the trivial modifications necessary for the deployment of an NMD system with 100 interceptors at a single site in Alaska. This option, according to press accounts, is compatible with Clinton Administration proposals. Some Russian experts and officials have suggested, perhaps as a trial balloon, that they ultimately may be prepared to return to the original 1972 limitations of the ABM Treaty, which permitted two sites and 200 interceptors.

Returning to the original treaty limitations on interceptors and sites would require Moscow and Washington to void the 1974 Protocol to the ABM Treaty; but its advantages for Russia are significant: it could sail through Senate ratification; it would maintain the image of Russian strategic parity while keeping U.S. NMD within benign bounds; and it could serve as the carrot necessary to secure U.S. agreement to offensive nuclear force reductions to levels consistent with Russia’s relative economic poverty (1000-1500 warheads according to Russian sources, a force level well below what the U.S. could and probably otherwise would maintain). Russians who are willing to raise the possibility of this ABM Treaty modification clearly link ABM Treaty revision to deep nuclear cuts in a START III. The goal of this linkage is to ensure that Washington reduces its strategic offensive force arsenal to the relatively low level that Russia can afford. Russia wants the U.S. to accept the principle of offensive force parity at the low numbers it alone must now accept for reasons of economy. Another proposal to the same end now circulating in Moscow is to forego START III and the ABM Treaty altogether, in favor of a newly negotiated agreement that would place all strategic offensive and defensive forces under a low, single aggregate ceiling. Under such an agreement each side would have the “freedom to mix” its preferred number of offensive and defensive systems.

As an alternative, some Russian defense analysts have floated the trial balloon of U.S.-Russian cooperation on the deployment of short-range interceptors near the borders of rogue states such as North Korea. The advantage to Russia here is that the treaty could remain unchanged and short-range U.S. defensive missiles would be very unlikely to have the necessary reach or speed to threaten Russian missiles (or Chinese missiles for that matter).

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Washington clearly wants to have some form of NMD without giving up the ABM Treaty and START, and Moscow is prepared to negotiate a “grand compromise” on its own terms. Given Russian interests, that compromise will seek to maintain: first, Russia’s image as the strategic equal of the United States; second, U.S.-Russian “parity” in strategic offensive forces at the relatively low levels Russia can now afford; and third, continuing severe limitations on NMD. Moscow will be able to threaten to withdraw from offensive agreements if the United States wants more NMD than Russia will countenance and threatens to move unilaterally beyond the ABM Treaty. Given these dynamics at play, it is easy to see that although America is the sole remaining superpower, with significant technological and resources advantages, unless congressional NMD proponents remain active, Putin may have the leverage to frustrate American desires for anything more than a token NMD system.

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