

Missile Defense Complicates U.S.-Russian Relations

Paul Podvig

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The announcement made by President Clinton on September 1st that the United States will postpone the beginning of work on the National Missile Defense (NMD) system was met in Russia with an audible sigh of relief.

That decision means that in the near future the United States will not withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, providing Russia with additional time to attempt to preserve the regime limiting deployment of missile defenses established by this treaty. The U.S. decision also means that Russia does not have to make the tough choice of whether to deliver on its promises to withdraw from other arms control agreements in response to a U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. In this sense the decision to postpone work on National Missile Defense was a reasonable one. However, it did not resolve the issue of missile defense as it affects the U.S.-Russian relationship.

A closer look at the events that led to the U.S. decision and at the circumstances in which it was taken leaves precious little room for optimism. The issue of missile defense in general and the question of preserving the ABM Treaty in particular will remain contentious points that will most likely restrain if not impede any serious progress in arms control and disarmament. At the center of the disagreement are questions of intent related to U.S. missile defense programs and the impact their deployment will have on the relationship between Russia and the United States. The United States rightly points out that neither of the systems currently under development could pose serious threats to Russian strategic forces. But from the Russian point of view, U.S. missile defenses have the clear potential to disrupt the strategic balance Russia inherited from the Soviet Union and strives to preserve despite its economic problems.

The program that causes the most serious disagreement is strategic national missile defense, deployment of which would require either the oldest contentious point of the current withdrawal from the ABM Treaty or a very serious modification of its provisions.

Other differences, such as the demarcation between strategic and non-strategic defenses for the Soviet Union's successor states, are also taking a toll. Thus any step the United States and Russia take, such as the U.S. decision to postpone NMD deployment or Russia's offer to work with Europe on a non-strategic defense, are set against the existing problems. From this perspective, neither the United States nor Russia have demonstrated the willingness to resolve the disagreement over the missile defense issue and move on toward deeper reductions of nuclear weapons. This article briefly describes the areas of disagreement and the impact the missile defense dispute has or will have on the U.S.-Russian arms control dialogue.

The problem of non-strategic defenses is historically the oldest contentious point of the current debate and the one that has done most of the damage thus far. It originated in 1993, when the United States ruled in an internal review that testing of some of its theater missile defense systems, such as the THAAD Theater High Altitude Area Defense system, might violate some of the ABM treaty provisions. The ABM Treaty does not limit non-strategic defenses, but prohibits giving them capabilities to counter strategic ballistic missiles. However, the treaty does not specify what this capability is exactly. The United States decided to seek a clarification of this particular treaty provision that would determine which systems should be considered nonstrategic and thus not limited by the agreement. Russia agreed to the idea in principle, but almost immediately rejected the U.S.

approach to the problem. While the United States suggested that any system that is not tested against a strategic ballistic missile should be considered non-strategic, Russia saw this as too permissive. It insisted on establishing a set of technical parameters, such as maximum velocity of an interceptor, which would be used to define more strictly non-strategic systems.

The disagreement proved to be serious and soon became politicized. Russia saw the United States as trying to avoid the inclusion of specific technical parameters into an agreement as an attempt to open a way to circumvent the ABM Treaty. As a result, Russia became convinced that solving the problem of demarcation on its terms was the only way to preserve the ABM Treaty, which was seen in Russia as one of the basic elements of the arms control regime. The demarcation agreement, which was supposed to preserve it, came to be viewed as an integral part of the START II strategic arms reduction treaty, which was awaiting ratification by the Russian parliament.

The United States, quite naturally, objected to a demarcation agreement that included specific limits on future defense systems since such limits could potentially limit a missile defense's effectiveness. Also, the United States found it difficult to reconcile itself to the fact that Russia, in effect, has a right of veto over U.S. national security decisions.

Eventually, after almost four years of negotiations, the United States and Russia signed the demarcation agreement in September 1997. It consists of several protocols and comes in a package with other documents, namely a protocol to the START II Treaty, which extends the implementation time until January 2008, and a protocol of succession to the ABM Treaty, which names Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan successor states of the Soviet Union.

Although both countries announced a major breakthrough, the demarcation agreement failed to achieve any of its stated goals and does not, in fact, prevent circumvention of the ABM Treaty. Nevertheless, the Russian Duma gave its consent to it and made it part of the START II ratification system. This explicitly prohibits exchange of ratification documents unless the United States ratifies protocols to the ABM Treaty (the memorandum on succession and the demarcation agreement). Thus the START II Treaty has almost no chance of entering into force, since the United States Senate has made it clear that it will not approve ABM Treaty protocols that limit capabilities of future defense systems or the memorandum on succession in its current form.

The situation with the demarcation agreement, although overshadowed by other events recently, gives a striking example of how missile defense plans are damaging nuclear arms reduction even before they become real. As it stands now, the situation could be resolved by either the Duma's dropping its conditions or the Senate's agreeing to approve the memorandum on succession and ABM protocols. Unfortunately, both these developments are equally unlikely. And consequently the START II Treaty will probably never enter into force.

Disagreement on Strategic Defenses and the ABM Treaty

By the time the United States and Russia concluded the demarcation agreement that was supposed to prevent giving nonstrategic systems strategic capabilities, it became clear that this issue was no longer the central one. The idea of building strategic missile defense was gaining popularity in the United States, so by mid-1998 the problem that occupied the political scene was not whether the demarcation agreement set excessive limits on U.S. theater defenses. The issue was whether the United States should withdraw from the ABM Treaty in order to build a defense system to provide protection for its territory.

As a result of this debate Congress passed a bill declaring it a policy of the United States to deploy a national

missile defense system as soon as technologically possible. Attempts to pass a similar bill were made before, but it was not until 1999 that it received almost unanimous bipartisan support. President Clinton, although not enthusiastic about NMD plans, signed the bill into law and made a formal proposal to Russia to negotiate amendment to the ABM Treaty that would make deployment of strategic defense possible. Russia's reaction to that proposal made in January 1999, was sharply negative. Russia has opposed any modification of the ABM Treaty and, in fact, made this opposition one of the central points of its foreign policy.

At first glance, the modifications proposed by the United States are relatively minor since they are aimed at allowing deployment of a limited defense that would be capable of intercepting no more than 20 incoming warheads. Since the current capabilities of the Russian strategic forces are much larger, it looks like Russia should not be concerned about losing retaliatory potential. However, the modification would change the most fundamental provision of the treaty prohibiting deployment of a base for a nation-wide defense. Removing this ban from the treaty would make meaningless all other provisions and leave the treaty virtually powerless. For practical purposes, modifying the ABM Treaty would be to abandon it.

Confronted with strong opposition to any ABM Treaty modification, the United States adopted a tactic of linking Russia's concessions on missile defense to progress at the START III talks — a possible tactic because Russia is interested in negotiating the START III arms reduction agreement that would set a much lower ceiling on the number of offensive weapons than the 2,500-warhead START II limit, not to mention the 6,000-warhead limit of START I. However, neither of the arms reduction proposals the United States made to Russia was attractive enough to make the trade worth making. Russia would like to see an agreement that would reduce the number of offensive weapons to about 1,500, the maximum number Russia will be able to maintain after the next several years. But the United States thus far has been unwilling to discuss any number lower than 2,000–2,500 nuclear warheads.

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