

Arms Control Association Calls Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty Withdrawal 'Neither Necessary Nor Prudent'

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(Washington, D.C.) Today, President George W. Bush formally notified Russia of the United States' intention to unilaterally withdraw from the landmark Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in six months. According to the independent Arms Control Association, the decision could negatively affect long-term U.S. relations with its allies, China, and Russia, and undermine efforts to curb the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

"Abrogating the ABM Treaty, coupled with abandoning the strategic nuclear arms reduction process, will undercut four key elements of the strategic relationship with Russia: structure, predictability, stability, and transparency," warned Jack Mendelsohn, who served as a member of the U.S. delegations to the SALT II and START I negotiations and is currently on the Board of Directors of the Arms Control Association.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has reiterated his opposition to scrapping the 1972 ABM Treaty, which Putin has said Russia would be willing to amend to accommodate a more robust U.S. strategic missile defense testing program. In September 2000, candidate George W. Bush promised to "offer Russia the necessary amendments to the ABM Treaty so as to make our deployment of effective missile defenses consistent with the treaty." However, since taking office, Bush officials have not proposed amendments to the treaty, offering only joint withdrawal.

"In recent weeks, President Bush has also turned down the opportunity to lock-in reductions of Cold War-era U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons through a new agreement with Moscow, preferring unilateral, voluntary reductions over ten years," added Daryl G. Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association.

"U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty will likely inhibit Russia's willingness to implement deeper reductions of Cold War nuclear stockpiles and encourage China to accelerate its strategic nuclear weapons modernization program from two-dozen to over two-hundred nuclear-armed, long-range missiles," cautioned Kimball.

Bush and his advisors insist that the ABM Treaty must be discarded because it stands in the way of a robust national missile defense testing program and eventual deployment. To help make their case, the Pentagon formulated a new series of missile defense program activities, including construction of a "test bed" in Alaska in mid-2002, specifically designed to "bump up against" the ABM Treaty.

"In reality, deployment of a reliable national missile defense is decades away. President Bush is betting future U.S. security on an unproven technology that requires many more years of treaty-compliant developmental testing before operational testing can begin. President Bush has the opportunity to secure Russian agreement to modifications of the ABM Treaty to permit a wider range of national missile defense testing, but he has apparently spurned that opportunity," Kimball said.

"The Bush administration is single-mindedly focused on dismantling and discarding proven arms control agreements at the expense of cooperative international efforts to prevent the acquisition, development, and potential use of weapons of mass destruction," said Kimball. In recent weeks, Bush officials have also blocked progress on an international agreement to enforce the Biological Weapons Convention and boycotted international consultations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

"Unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty also sets a dangerous precedent that could undercut other countries' participation in and adherence to other arms control regimes," warned Kimball.

"Eliminating proven arms control and nuclear risk reduction tools is a foolish approach, particularly when the United States seeks international support in the struggle to stem the spread of weapons of mass destruction and the threat of their use," Mendelsohn said.

"National missile defenses will do nothing to guard against more likely means of future terrorist attack, such as trucks, planes, or even suitcases, involving weapons of mass destruction," Kimball noted.

For expert analysis and background information see the ACA Web site at <http://www.armscontrol.org>.

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