

A World Without Arms Control

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Flanked by an honor guard of Cold Warriors, on May 23 Governor George W. Bush proclaimed a vision of a world freed from the arms control constraints negotiated over the past 40 years. His recognition that the world has entered a new post-Cold War environment is encouraging, but his proposed new regime combines the deployment of a treaty-busting global missile defense with a laissez-faire approach to strategic offensive forces unfettered by legally binding constraints. Given the policy predilections of his advisers, it is difficult to be sanguine about whether or how his proposals would be fleshed out and implemented.

The centerpiece of Bush's proposal would be a missile defense to defend not only all 50 states but also "our friends and allies and deployed forces overseas from missile attacks by rogue nations or accidental launches." Without revealing the architecture of this latest version of Star Wars Lite, Bush made clear that it would be much more robust than the Clinton administration's "flawed" limited national missile defense (NMD) and would be defined by "exploring all options," presumably including space-based interceptors. Development of such a system would be completely incompatible with the ABM Treaty, which Bush indicated he would not hesitate to repudiate. The Bush vision of a global missile defense system starkly demonstrates why Russia has been so reluctant to venture onto the slippery slope of amending the ABM Treaty and becoming a cosponsor of the proposition that a national or global missile defense is an inevitable development.

Even if it did not work, the proposed system would be perceived as negating even a substantially expanded Chinese deterrent and providing at least the base for a defense that would challenge Russia's ability to maintain a survivable deterrent. This would confirm the worst fears of Russia, China, and U.S. allies as to the direction of U.S. defense policy and would block further progress in nuclear arms reductions either by agreement or unilateral action. Despite the Clinton administration's failure to reassure Russia, China, or the allies about its more limited NMD, Bush expressed confidence they could be convinced his missile defense system posed no threat to them, but he gave no hint as to how he would accomplish this diplomatic feat.

In articulating his vision, Bush correctly emphasized that the present U.S. nuclear arsenal far exceeds post-Cold War requirements and pledged to "pursue the lowest possible number consistent with our national security." This welcomed insight provides an excellent basis for bipartisan support for lower levels for START III and beyond. However, lacking an agreed framework, there would appear to be little prospect that such an unregulated and unverified process of unilateral reductions would get very far, particularly in the shadow of a major U.S. NMD program that would inhibit Russian reciprocation. Moreover, in the real world, the U.S. Senate would not look with favor on a process that bypasses its constitutional treaty prerogatives.

Bush also recognized the importance of removing as many weapons as possible from hair-trigger alert status. But here again, Bush's proposal for a major U.S. missile defense would increase the pressure on other countries to keep their weapons on high alert in order to maintain the credibility of their deterrent against a possible pre-emptive U.S. attack. This, in turn, would discourage the de-alerting of U.S. forces. Above all, maintaining confidence in de-alerted status would require the negotiation of extremely intrusive verification procedures.

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Negotiation of formal agreements can indeed be long and frustrating, but unilateral reductions are unlikely to succeed in the absence of detailed understandings and procedures. As numbers decrease, the need for more intrusive verification will increase, as will concern over destabilizing deployments such as land-based MIRVs, which are verifiably banned under START II but which Russia would want in response to a U.S. NMD deployment. Not surprisingly, Russia has threatened to meet U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty with withdrawal from START II. By ignoring President Ronald Reagan's dictum of "trust but verify," Bush seriously limits his efforts to reduce the nuclear threat.

Underscoring his disdain for verified agreements, Bush dismissed out of hand the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), demonstrating his preference for retention of U.S. freedom of action over participation in international efforts to constrain nuclear developments. Given the centrality of the CTBT to the future of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), one questions whether Bush approves of the NPT or any other arms control treaty.

Governor Bush appears to have been persuaded that in the post-Cold War world U.S. strategic security interests will be best served by unilateral exploitation of its technological advantage without recourse to bilateral and multilateral agreements which, in constraining the threat to the United States, necessarily limit U.S. options. This would be a fundamental change in the U.S. security policy that has emerged on a bipartisan basis over the last four decades. If this is not his intent, he should promptly clarify his message.

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