

The Rogue Elephant

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To much of the world, the United States is emerging as an irrational rogue state that is increasingly out of step with the rest of the international community. The starkest example of a growing U.S. unilateralism and undisguised contempt for the views of others is the administration's approach to national missile defense (NMD) and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. In order to facilitate its pursuit of an NMD, the United States has by now made it clear that it intends to eliminate the ABM Treaty, whatever the consequences. Promised discussions with Russia, China, and U.S. allies have turned out to be simply briefings on U.S. testing plans, which the administration claims will conflict with the ABM Treaty "in months."

The administration's actions following the apparently successful personal interaction between President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin in June and July underscore that the administration's pursuit of national missile defense has become an irrational obsession and not simply a misguided policy. A steady stream of senior U.S. officials has descended on Moscow and reciprocal visits have been encouraged. Great care has been taken, however, to emphasize that these are not negotiations or even discussions, but simply "exchanges of information" intended to persuade Russia that it has nothing to fear from U.S. NMD plans.

The administration is brashly proposing that Russia should join in repudiating the ABM Treaty, which Moscow strongly supports as the foundation of strategic stability. Putin and other senior Russian officials complain that they have received no information on the extent of the U.S. NMD program or future strategic offensive force levels, which U.S. officials say must await the current nuclear policy review. In addition, U.S. representatives have not made clear what, if any, formal agreement might replace the ABM Treaty. Russian officials, including Putin, have stated they are not interested in signing a "blank check" and see no possibility of resolving such a complex issue in time to celebrate agreement at the November summit at Bush's Texas ranch. Whether the U.S. approach represents the irrational expectations of true believers or is simply a ploy to create an excuse for unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty remains to be seen. But unilateral U.S. withdrawal has garnered no international support, including from close U.S. NATO allies, who have been treated to similar condescending briefings.

While tied to its obsessive NMD craving, the administration's desire to eliminate the ABM Treaty also reflects its fundamental opposition to all formal arms control treaties. The administration sees such agreements as constraining U.S. flexibility to use its superior technology and economic resources to achieve unchallenged military superiority. Confident of substantial U.S. advantage, it has no interest in constraining the forces of potential adversaries. In this spirit, the administration has dismissed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and is not concerned by Putin's assertion that U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty would force Russia to withdraw from START II and even START I. This would eliminate the basis for verifying strategic reductions and allow Russia to retain its land-based MIRVs, including the 10-warhead SS-18 and SS-24 missiles, as well as future replacement MIRVed missiles. This rejection of formal treaties in general and particular disdain for the ABM Treaty because it is a "30-year-old Cold War relic" seems odd for an administration that wants to expand the Cold War NATO alliance to the borders of its new friend.

The administration now plans to unleash the same officials to persuade China that the U.S. NMD

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Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

would not be a threat. If these briefings are anything like those given to Congress, U.S. allies, and Russia, setting forth a technological buffet from which the United States will construct a multi-layer defense, China will hardly be persuaded that such an undertaking, costing a few hundred billion dollars, is really directed at North Korea. To sweeten this bitter pill, the administration leaked that China would be informed that the United States was prepared to accept modernization of Chinese nuclear forces and would not object if China resumed nuclear testing, which the United States might also find necessary. When this proposal was widely greeted with shocked incredulity, it was denied by another senior official—in the cacophony of contradictory statements that have characterized exposition of U.S. foreign policy.

Having predictably failed to intimidate Russia to join in a crash program to dismantle the ABM Treaty and having found absolutely no international support, President Bush should re-evaluate the wisdom of this approach. Recalling the metamorphoses of Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan to support arms control during their presidencies, influential Republican leaders should come to the aid of the Grand Old Party and persuade President Bush to adopt a less confrontational posture and avoid branding his presidency and his party as a Rogue Elephant.

Source URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2001-09/issue-briefs/rogue-elephant>