

Russia Sends Conflicting Messages on Missile Defenses

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Russian officials sent mixed signals during September about the possible consequences of a unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which prohibits both countries from building nationwide defenses against strategic ballistic missiles.

Interviewed September 1 by the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat, Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated the Kremlin's long-standing position that the ABM Treaty is not "outdated," as the Bush administration has argued. Yet, Putin said, if the United States determines that it "doesn't need any talks or any treaties," Moscow "will not stir up any hysteria." Putin explained that Russia has enough missiles to "guarantee" its security "for many decades ahead."

However, during a September 19 interview with a German television station, Putin said that the START agreements, which cap the number of deployed U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear warheads, are linked to the ABM Treaty. If the United States unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty, then the START accords, along with some 30 other agreements and treaties, would be "destroyed overnight," Putin said.

Although a common refrain from Russian officials throughout this year, the Kremlin had notably avoided such dire predictions over the previous several weeks. Visiting Moscow September 17, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton had even observed that whereas Russian officials used to contend that a U.S. ABM Treaty withdrawal "might precipitate the withdrawal of other parties from many other arms control treaties...they're not saying that anymore."

Russian Colonel-General Yuriy Baluyevskiy, who has been leading a Russian delegation in talks with Pentagon officials about the treaty and missile defenses, declared September 11 that Russia would continue talks with the United States even if Washington withdrew from the ABM Treaty. After referring to the "trust and openness" in U.S.-Russian relations, Baluyevskiy said, "The withdrawal of the U.S. from the ABM Treaty will not cancel these relations." One week earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov had also told an Italian news agency that U.S.-Russian relations should not be "hostage" to one issue.

Yet Russian officials have urged the Bush administration not to act alone and with haste. In his remarks to the Italian news agency, Ivanov said unilateral actions should be avoided and that existing agreements should not be scrapped until better ones are in place. Baluyevskiy echoed Ivanov, telling reporters September 11 that a "new system of treaties and agreements" should be agreed to and "then we decide whether the ABM Treaty hinders us."

As part of their talks, the United States and Russia are also discussing nuclear reductions. Ivanov told the UN General Assembly September 24 that Russia has reaffirmed to the United States that it wants a "coordinated" reduction down to 1,500 warheads apiece by 2008 with the possibility of subsequent cuts. Washington, according to the Kremlin, has yet to volunteer how low it is willing to go, claiming it first needs to conclude a review of its nuclear posture.

In his UN speech, Ivanov also detailed other Russian arms control proposals, including preventing any weapons from being stationed in space. Ivanov noted that the "practical implementation" of the

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Russian initiatives would require a “responsible and delicate handling” of the ABM Treaty.

Impact of Terrorist Attacks

While expressing sympathy for victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Russian officials have also pointed out that the attacks underscore its assertion that terrorism poses a more urgent threat than ballistic missiles. However, Ivanov told CNN September 12 that Russia would not use the terrorist attacks to “exploit” the ongoing talks with the United States, and Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters after meeting with Ivanov September 19 that Russia made “no linkages” between the talks and the terrorist attacks.

For their part, Bush administration officials have argued that the attacks do not lessen the need for missile defenses and that they intend to continue with their testing and development plans. In Moscow September 12, U.S. Ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow said, “Threats emerging from long-range missiles...are just as serious today as they were yesterday.”

Although Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld canceled a late September meeting with his Russian counterpart, U.S.-Russian talks on the ABM Treaty and missile defenses will continue. Ivanov noted after meeting with Powell, “We have agreed to continue these consultations to be able to report the first results during the forthcoming summits of our presidents.” President George W. Bush and Putin are scheduled to meet in October and November.

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