

## THE ANTI-BALLISTIC MISSILE TREATY

October 22, 2001

*"The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty  
is a fundamental element of U.S. arms control policy..."<sup>1</sup>*

### What is the ABM Treaty?

The United States and the former Soviet Union agreed the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty (ABM) in 1972. By limiting the amount of territory that can be defended against ballistic missile attacks to two sites each, the ABM Treaty ensures that both remain vulnerable to retaliation if they launch a 'first strike' nuclear assault. With each assured that they could inflict unacceptable destruction on the other, if attacked, an uneasy 'balance of terror' established itself between the two countries. This became known as 'mutual assured destruction', with the appropriate acronym MAD.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the treaty was updated in 1997 and the signatories became Russia, the United States and, because they have Russian missile defence facilities on their territory, the former Soviet States of Belarus, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

### What does the ABM Treaty allow and prohibit?

The ABM Treaty, as amended in 1974:

- Allows each side to have one limited ABM system, to protect either its capital or an inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch area. Russia has a system to protect Moscow while the US chose to cover a missile silo area at Grand Forks, North Dakota;
- Permits a maximum of one hundred interceptor missiles and one hundred launchers on either side;
- Places precise technical limits on radar that may be used as part of an ABM system;
- limits qualitative improvement of ABM technology, e.g. bans development, testing, or deployment of ABM launchers capable of launching more than one interceptor missile at a time; bans the modification of existing launchers to give them this capability; and bans systems for rapid reload of launchers
- bans interceptor missiles with more than one independently guided warhead;
- prohibits the improvement of surface-to-air missiles (SAM) systems intended for defense against aircraft along with their radar to the point where they can be used as an ABM system;
- specifies that all early-warning radar must be located along the territorial boundaries of each country and oriented outward, so that they do not contribute to an effective ABM defense of points in the interior;

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<sup>1</sup> US State Department Fact Sheet on the ABM Treaty, undated but produced sometime during the Clinton administration

- prohibits the development, testing, or deployment of sea-based, air-based, or space-based ABM systems and their components, along with mobile land-based ABM systems;
- provides for the establishment of a U.S.-Soviet Standing Consultative Commission to promote the ABM Treaty's objectives and implementation which meets at least twice a year, and;
- allows either side to withdraw from the treaty's obligations after six months notice.

### **Has the ABM Treaty ever been amended?**

Yes. For example, in 1974, the Parties to the Treaty agreed by means of a Protocol to reduce the number of permitted ABM deployment areas to one for each side, from the original two. The Soviet Union chose to maintain (and Russia continues to maintain) an ABM defense of its national capital, Moscow. The United States chose--- to complete its Safeguard ABM system designed to defend its ICBM silo launch area near Grand Forks, North Dakota; however, this system was operational for a very short time and has been inactive since 1976.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States, Russia, the Ukraine, the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Belarus met in September 1997 as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) Successor States. They reaffirmed the "importance of preserving the viability of" the ABM Treaty and signed up to the rights and obligations under the ABM Treaty previously held by the Soviet Union.

The signatories to the ABM Treaty have met every five years to formally review the treaty's provisions and its implementation. The most recent review was in October 1998 in Geneva.

### **Is the ABM Treaty really that important?**

The ABM Treaty is described by most nations and arms control experts as one of the foundation stones of the international nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime. More than thirty international agreements have been linked to its continued existence.

The uneasy balance of power that grew out of the ABM Treaty lead to a less aggressive relationship between the two superpowers. This in turn lead to the successful completion of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) which became the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties I and II (START I and II), that will cut both sides nuclear arsenals down to 3,000 to 3,500 warheads each. Deep unilateral cuts in either sides nuclear arsenal and other arms control treaties, for example, may never have been possible if relations between the two had not been relaxed.

In a recent statement to the United Nations the Foreign Ministers of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden summed up why they and so many other nations feel that the continued existence of the ABM treaty is so important:

*"Ministers stressed the importance of the Treaty... in the promotion and maintenance of international stability and as a basis for further reductions of strategic offensive weapons. Abrogation of the ABM Treaty could hold grave consequences for the future of global security..."<sup>2</sup>*

This is a view strongly held by Russia, the other partner in the ABM Treaty. In a recent interview with a German radio station President Vladimir Putin issued a chilling warning to the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Ministerial Communique of the New Agenda Initiative (Foreign Ministers of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden) in advance of the 56<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations released to the UN First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, 8 October 2001

*"Today's system of international security is largely based on the ABM Treaty of 1972. The START-1 Treaty is connected with it, and so is the START-2 Treaty, which we have ratified. Our US partners so far haven't, unfortunately. Associated with it is a whole series of other international legal obligations in this sphere, in the sphere of international security, approximately 30 treaties and agreements. This will be destroyed overnight."<sup>3</sup>*

## **What is the Bush administration policy toward the ABM treaty?**

President Bush has stated that the United States would *"withdraw from the ABM Treaty on our timetable, at a time convenient to America..."*

A 14-page cable sent by the Bush administration to all embassies and diplomatic posts and also circulated to Congress and the Senate on July 11 lays out the Administration's basic arguments:

*"The United States intends to move beyond mutual assured destruction and the ABM Treaty..." and that the US "...needs release from the constraints of the ABM Treaty to pursue the most promising technologies and basing modes to field... missile defenses..."*

The cable states categorically that the new Bush administration missile defense strategy will *"...reflect a clean and clear break from the Cold War, and will not be based on the 1972 ABM Treaty..."* and notes that the Star Wars testing program *"will conflict with the ABM Treaty limitations in a matter of months, not years..."* and that the US has *"informed" its "allies and Russia"* of this fact.

The cable also reminds diplomats that:

*"The President has stated publicly that we must move beyond the constraints of the 1972 ABM Treaty – "an artifact of the Cold War confrontation" that prevents us from acquiring the capabilities we need to deter and defend against new threats and that perpetuates an adversarial relationship with Russia. The Treaty explicitly prohibits any defense of our nation's territory and bans development, testing and deployment of many of the most promising missile defense technologies and basing modes."*

## **The future**

The latest round of talks between the US and Russian Presidents occurred on the fringes of the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) in Shanghai on 21 October.

President Bush once more reiterated his belief that the ABM Treaty is *"outdated" and "dangerous"*.

In a press briefing following their meeting US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice made clear that *"...it's going to be time to move on [from the ABM Treaty] very soon..."*

The next round of US/Russian discussions on the ABM Treaty is scheduled for November 12 at the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas.

It is widely expected that if no compromise is reached which allows the US to proceed unhindered with its missile defense plans the Bush administration will announce its intent to unilaterally withdraw from the ABM Treaty by the end of this year.

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<sup>3</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin Interview to German ARD Television Company", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia Website, September 19, 2001