

MISSILE DEFENSE

For Russia, little loss, little gain

By Pavel Podvig

THE TERRORIST ATTACKS ON THE UNITED States will certainly lead to a reevaluation of the nature of threats faced by countries in the modern world as well as policies for dealing with them. Among the policies that will be scrutinized the most during this reevaluation is the U.S. intention to build a ballistic missile defense to protect its territory.

The missile defense system that the United States is planning to build could not have possibly prevented the destruction caused by the terrorists, and many commentators quickly concluded that the missile defense program would soon come to an end. But it would be wrong to assume that the attacks will affect U.S. missile defense plans in any serious way. Missile defense efforts are more likely to get a boost from September 11's tragic events.

Missile defense has been supported by members of the American public because of claims that it would offer protection from even larger-scale destruction than in New York, but delivered by means of ballistic missiles. Now that the destructive effect of an attack of this kind has been so brutally demonstrated, any effort that promises to protect the population is likely to receive virtually unqualified support. Moreover, it is probably understandable that in the current circumstances questions about the effectiveness and appropriateness of the effort will not receive the highest priority.

The program had already gained a momentum that makes building some kind of missile defense system almost inevitable, although the scale of eventual deployment is not yet clear.

The system that the United States will actually deploy is likely to be modest, especially if judged by today's

higher expectations. The United States will probably complete development of a number of theater missile defenses and deploy significant parts of the infrastructure—radars and some satellite systems. At the same time, as deployment proceeds, it will be increasingly clear that the capabilities of the deployed systems are so minimal that they can add virtually nothing to U.S. security.

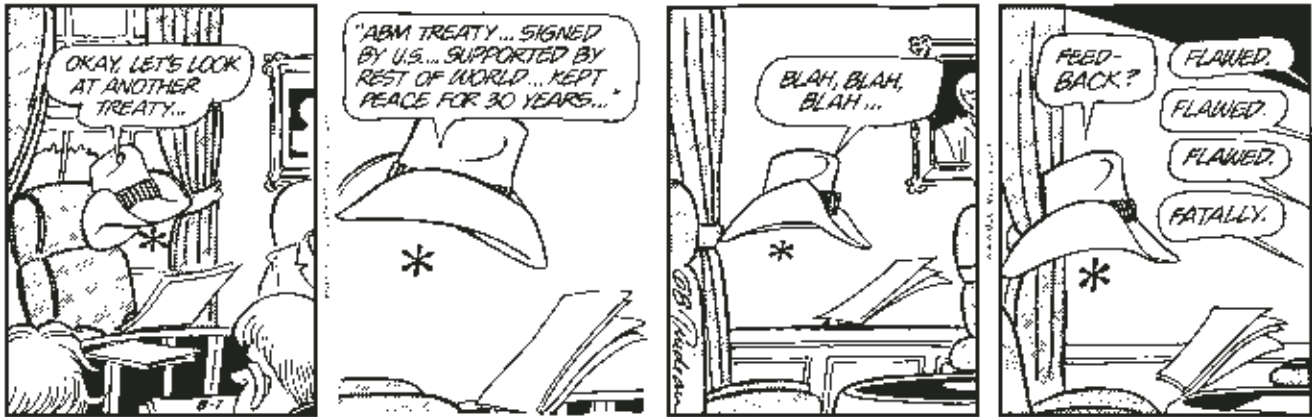
Concerns about the consequences of missile defense deployment, however, have little to do with the system's capability to shoot down ballistic missiles. The most serious effect is the effect missile defense development will have on the existing framework of international security agreements and treaties.

The first victim of the current missile defense program will be the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which limits missile defense development and deployment and provides a foundation for the system of arms control and disarmament treaties that were built by the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War.

CURRENT U.S. POLICY THREATENS TO UNDERMINE THE EXISTING security framework without offering anything to replace it. At the same time, whether we like it or not, that policy is a response to changes in the U.S.-Russian relationship that have occurred over the last 10 years.

It is unfortunate that the U.S. response has taken the

Pavel Podvig, a Bulletin board member, is a research associate at the Center for Arms Control, Energy, and Environmental Studies at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology and a visiting researcher at the Center for Energy and Environmental Studies at Princeton University.



form of missile defense development and other unilateral steps. But it is equally inappropriate to counter these unwelcome U.S. policies by trying to return to the old Cold War confrontation.

Nothing illustrates this point better than the debate over the ABM Treaty. The most common argument against U.S. withdrawal from the treaty is that it will trigger a new arms race. The link between increasing defensive and offensive efforts was exactly the argument that led the United States and the Soviet Union to conclude the treaty in 1972; the treaty's role in limiting the scale of offensive weapons deployment cannot be overestimated.

At the same time, if we apply the logic of the ABM Treaty to the current situation, we get a different result.

The action-reaction escalation that the treaty prevented in the 1970s assumed that the United States and the Soviet Union required thousands of nuclear weapons to deter each other and that they were willing to build up their offensive arsenals in order to preserve the capability to inflict "unacceptable damage" to the adversary.

Today's situation is quite different. The threshold of an "unacceptably large nuclear attack" in the United States or in Russia is no longer thousands or even tens of weapons. It is a single-digit number. For this level, the current nuclear arsenals are so excessive that the actual number of deployed nuclear warheads simply does not matter.

From a practical point of view it makes no difference to the United States whether Russia has 3,500 nuclear weapons or 1,500—both numbers are equally too high. Similarly, Russia has no reason to be concerned about any missile defense system, since no defense will ever be able to intercept every missile.

The result is a situation in which the deployment of a missile defense should provide no serious incentives to increase offensive forces because they are already much larger than necessary. This means that the main goal of the ABM Treaty, which was to remove incentives for offensive buildup rather than to limit missile defenses, is achieved without the treaty. Changes in the relationship between Russia and the United States simply have made

the legal restrictions of the ABM Treaty redundant.

Those restrictions, of course, have other important roles and make the strategic situation more predictable, but it is hardly appropriate to try to change the relationship back to the days when the limits imposed by the ABM Treaty were vital for maintaining strategic stability.

The most important characteristic of the current relationship between Russia and the United States is that the role of nuclear weapons is not nearly as important as it was in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, as the situation with the ABM Treaty shows, this generally positive trend may sometimes have unexpected and unwelcome consequences. An example is the stalemate at the U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations. The stalemate shows clearly that neither country perceives the other side's nuclear forces as an immediate threat and therefore neither feels any urgency to reduce their size.

This new situation makes the task of arms control more difficult than ever. After all, the size of nuclear arsenals still matters, for there are significant security risks associated with nuclear weapons even if militaries do not consider them a threat.

The new relationship notwithstanding, Russia will respond to the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, and regardless of whether its response is mild or strong, it will not make the task of reducing nuclear arsenals any easier.

AT THE SAME TIME, THE ARTIFICIAL INFLATION OF THE RISKS associated with missile defense development is wrong if not outright dangerous. It neither provides compelling arguments against missile defenses nor helps decrease those risks.

The "new arms race" argument is the best example. This argument against missile defense is still being made quite regularly, despite the fact that nothing in current Russian policy suggests that a reaction to abrogation of the ABM Treaty will be strongly negative, let alone spark a new arms race. About the most serious measure men-

tioned by Russia was the possible deployment of multiple warheads on its new land-based missiles. However, when Russia suggested that it might deploy these multiple warheads in response to a U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, the United States reacted with unusual calm. Russia not only lacks the resources to start a serious arms race, but apparently its deployment of additional nuclear weapons would not change anything in the current U.S.-Russian relationship—and therefore would not deter the United States from pursuing its missile defense program.

The danger of Russia's placing its strategic forces on high alert, which has been mentioned as another possible response to U.S. missile defense development, is also overstated. Russian officials have never mentioned this possibility or otherwise indicated that this option is being considered. In addition, Russia has never had a true launch-on-warning capability and probably could not maintain its forces on high alert even if it wanted to.

Technical and economic problems alone make a new arms race unlikely. But an even more important factor that will shape Russia's response is the position of its leaders. On the one hand, Russia's leaders argue that the ABM Treaty must be preserved and that there is no threat to justify missile defense development. On the other hand, Russian leaders have clearly shown that they see the issue not as a matter of principle, but rather as a tool in efforts to reassert Russian influence in international relations and achieve the status of one of the world's leading powers.

To some extent, these efforts have been successful, primarily because doubts about the scale of a ballistic missile threat and concerns about possible effects of missile defense deployment are shared by many countries. However, Russia's attempts to consolidate the opposition to the U.S. missile defense plans around its own position have largely failed, primarily because its position has appeared inconsistent and ambiguous. In the aftermath of the September terrorist attacks on the United States, the prospects for arranging any organized opposition to U.S. plans became especially dim, which increases the chance that Russia will accept U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

In fact, for several months now, Russia and the United States have been trying to reach an understanding that would allow them to avoid a confrontation over the ABM Treaty. It is not clear whether their consultations will have concrete results, but the very fact that Russia has been willing to discuss the issue indicates that it will not take any strong measures in response to a U.S. withdrawal from the treaty.

None of this, of course, makes missile defense a good idea. U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty will not go unnoticed and, even absent a negative reaction from Russia, it may still have an adverse effect on international security. That is why it is important to concentrate attention on the real problems associated with missile defenses, not invoke old Cold War-style arguments against it. ✱

MISSILE DEFENSE

China will have to respond

By Li Bin, Zhou Baogen, and Liu Zhiwei

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION IS RUSHING TOWARD EARLY deployment of a limited national missile defense system. If it cannot get the Russians to endorse a revision of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, it threatens to go ahead unilaterally, ending the treaty altogether.

Although the Bush administration has focused on Russia, it began last summer to pay more attention to Chinese concerns; it says it will consult with China on the matter.

In China, U.S. plans for national missile defense are not just a topic for security experts. It is a matter of wide concern. A search for "NMD" on the Internet in China, including the mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, yields

about as many web sites as those devoted to McDonald's restaurants. (And in China, the fast food chain's influence is a hot topic.)

About 90 percent of the web pages on the mainland and an even larger proportion in Taiwan and Hong Kong use the English acronym "NMD" rather than its Chinese translation, which indicates that national missile defense is still regarded as a foreign concept.

Li Bin is director of the Arms Control Program at the Institute of International Studies, Tsinghua University, Beijing (libin@tsinghua.edu.cn). Zhou Baogen and Liu Zhiwei are graduate students in the program.