

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE 1972 ANTI-BALLISTIC MISSILE TREATY:
A STUDY OF U.S. DECISION-MAKING

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Introduction

On 13 June 2002, the United States formally withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Arms control advocates throughout Russia, Europe, and the U.S. had routinely referred to the ABM Treaty as the “cornerstone” of strategic stability and had predicted abrogation would trigger a new nuclear arms race. Yet the international community greeted the treaty’s termination with muted resignation. Russian President Putin responded the next day by declaring his nation no longer bound by the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), a largely hollow gesture since START II never entered into force by either party and, just one month earlier, Russia and the U.S. had concluded the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty which reduced offensive nuclear weapons far below the START II goals.¹

How was it possible that the ABM Treaty, regarded as crucial to nuclear stability and world peace, expired with so little political fallout or even fanfare? How was the Bush administration able to achieve, if not world-wide consensus, then at least widespread acquiescence towards its missile defense proposals? This paper will attempt to answer these questions by examining the political, technical and strategic considerations that produced the consensus against missile defenses in 1972 and then determining how these considerations had changed by late 2001 in favor of missile defenses. To limit the scope of this paper, I’ve chosen to examine only two periods in the history of missile defense: the 1957-1972 period preceding the adoption of the ABM Treaty, and the 1991-2002 period resulting in the treaty’s termination.

1957-1972: The Genesis of the ABM Treaty

For the first several years of the 1950s, missile defense was largely a theoretical problem simply because intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) tipped with nuclear warheads didn't exist. American and Soviet strategic forces consisted of nuclear bombers. The Eisenhower administration was unwilling to contemplate the expense associated with developing a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system, even though some projections indicated that ballistic missiles would become major strategic assets in the future.²

The future arrived in August and October of 1957 when the Soviet Union tested the first ever ICBM and launched Sputnik into orbit, respectively. ICBMs traveled at enormous speed and posed a substantial risk of destroying the bulk of the manned bomber fleet before it could be airborne. The U.S. Army, eagerly seeking a greater role in strategic warfare, accepted the designation as lead agency for developing BMD. The Army's Nike-Ajax and -Hercules series surface-to-air missile systems were already responsible for continental defense against nuclear bombers. It was widely believed these systems could be quickly modified to counter ICBMs as well.³

The resultant Nike-Zeus BMD system faced significant technical challenges. The system was supposed to destroy incoming re-entry vehicles (RVs) in outer space with nuclear-tipped interceptor missiles. Many doubts were immediately raised about the system's capabilities. Would the Soviets be able to overwhelm the system with large numbers of RVs and penetration aids (decoys)? Were the system's mechanically scanned radar antennas too fragile to survive nuclear combat? Could the radar system be "blinded" by high-altitude nuclear bursts? Would the command and control systems be able to bring interceptors within kill distance of RVs?

President Eisenhower chose not to approve a production order until the Army could provide satisfactory answers to the perceived shortcomings.⁴

The new Kennedy administration won sufficient budgetary support for a significant BMD research and development (R&D) program. The Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) was founded specifically to oversee BMD and other Pentagon R&D programs. The BMD R&D effort was dubbed “Project Defender” and quickly addressed many of the technical shortcomings with the Nike-Zeus system. By November 1963, the system had successfully intercepted RVs during a series of 13 test firings. Advances in computer technology led to the development of phased-array radars. These radars were scanned electronically, rather than mechanically, and could be hardened to withstand the rigors of nuclear warfare. Improved rocket motor technologies allowed an improved Zeus interceptor (now called Spartan) to carry a larger nuclear payload capable of killing multiple RVs and penetration aids with a single shot. A new, endo-atmospheric (within the atmosphere) Sprint interceptor missile would also be able to discriminate between RVs and penetration aids; once within the atmosphere, the lighter decoys would be identified by their much-reduced velocity.⁵

The two-tier Defender system was designated Nike-X in 1963, with its technical capabilities so improved, and cost so modest, that in 1965 the Joints Chiefs of Staff (JCS) unanimously recommended that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara request funding for Nike-X pre-production components and an eventual two-phase system deployment. Three factors helped to explain the strong political support for Nike-X by McNamara and Congress. First, the JCS presented a united front which eliminated any hint of inter-service sniping which might have undermined support for the system. Second, intelligence reports indicated that the Soviets were working on BMD; no one wanted to fall behind the Soviets in BMD technologies.

Finally, the system would be deployed around twenty-five major American cities and would protect virtually the entire continental United States. Congress certainly appreciated both the appeal of protecting their constituents from nuclear attack and the additional defense dollars that deployment would funnel into their districts and states.⁶ The path to deployment of the Nike-X system seemed assured.

Unfortunately for BMD proponents, the technical achievements of the Nike-X R&D program were undermined by changes in U.S. nuclear strategy. The Eisenhower administration had a straight forward nuclear doctrine known as “massive retaliation” against Soviet cities and industry (a “counter-value” strike) which would deter both conventional and nuclear Soviet aggression. This doctrine was viable while the U.S. possessed an overwhelming advantage in nuclear arms during the 1950s. However, “massive retaliation” was losing its appeal as the Soviet nuclear force came closer to achieving parity with its American counterpart. In January 1962, President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara presented a new, more flexible nuclear strategy which incorporated a second-strike capability which could survive a first strike on the U.S. The survivable “second strike” force would allow the U.S. to tailor its response to either Soviet counter-value targets (cities, populations centers and industry) or nuclear forces (counter-force targets). This doctrine also employed BMD as well as massive civil defense measures to provide as much protection as possible (“damage limitation”) to the American people.

The new doctrine was roundly attacked. Opponents balked at the costs of the drastically increased numbers of ICBMs required for both first and second strike forces, in addition to the BMD forces and the civil defense infrastructure. But the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis shook the administration’s faith in its nuclear strategy. With the superpowers at the brink of nuclear war, any thought of “limited” nuclear warfare became unsupportable. McNamara

became convinced that limited counter-force strikes to achieve damage limitation was futile. No defensive measures were likely to prevent the Soviet Union's nuclear forces from devastating the U.S.

McNamara advocated a new strategy of "mutual deterrence" in which both super powers would leave themselves open to nuclear attack ("mutual assured destruction"). These doctrines would create a nuclear stalemate and avoid the costs and destabilizing effects of damage limitation measures like BMD and civil defense. McNamara also believed that improvements in ICBM technology, such as multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), would defeat any BMD system. By 1966, McNamara came to see Nike-X as a danger to strategic stability.

Congress and the JCS sought to press on with Nike-X deployment. President Johnson chose to fund procurement of Nike-X components while delaying a full-scale system deployment decision until after meeting with the Soviets for arms control talks. The decision reflected President Johnson's desires to 1) defuse the tension among his administration, Congress and the JCS, 2) show concern for defending America from nuclear attack, and 3) not complicate arms control talks with the Soviets.⁷

The anti-BMD consensus was rocked by three critical events in 1967. First, in February, the Soviet Union announce their deployment of a BMD system. Second, during the June arms control talks, the Soviets trumpeted the virtues of Moscow-based BMD and refused to discuss any limitations upon their deployment. Finally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) successfully tested a thermo-nuclear weapon in June.⁸ By September 1967, these events forced McNamara to propose deploying a scaled-down Nike-X system, designated "Sentinel", which

could at least defend the U.S. against limited (PRC) or unintentional nuclear strikes. Against the Soviet threat, Sentinel could ensure “mutual assured destruction” by adding some measure of additional survivability for America’s nuclear forces. Sentinel would also eliminate the appearance at home and abroad that the U.S. was falling behind the Soviets in BMD systems.

The political tide turned against the Sentinel deployment turned in mid-1968. In July of that year, tensions between the superpowers were significantly reduced when the U.S. and Soviet Union signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Also, an apparent reduction in Soviet ICBM deployments continued the trend toward relaxed tensions. But the final nail in Sentinel’s coffin came from a surprising source: the U.S. public. Army land purchased for Sentinel sites spawned grave concerns among citizens who would live near BMD sites containing hundreds of nuclear-tipped interceptors. As the popularity of Sentinel plunged among their constituents, Congressional enthusiasm quickly waned. The Nixon administration faced little effective Congressional opposition when it decided to stop the Sentinel deployment in February 1969. In March, Nixon proposed an even more austere BMD system called “Safeguard” which would only be deployed around ICBM sites to preserve America’s retaliatory capability.⁹ By 1972, the U.S. and Soviet Union chose to limit missile defense deployments to one system guarding their respective national capitals. The treaty effectively killed Safeguard while allowing the Soviets to retain their BMD system around Moscow.

The 1972 consensus against missile defense technology was based on both technical, political and strategic considerations. New ICBM advances such as penetration aids, submarine launched ballistic missiles, depressed trajectory flight paths, and MIRVs guaranteed that no BMD system could guarantee 100% effectiveness against even an unintended or limited nuclear strike. After the Cuban missile crisis, missile defenses were seen to contribute to the increasingly

flawed idea that nuclear war was “winnable” or at least “fightable” by feeding unrealistic expectations that damage limitation possible. With the superpowers in rough nuclear parity, mutual assured destruction (MAD) seemed the best strategy to avoid nuclear war. Even a partially effective BMD system would undermine MAD and contribute to nuclear instability. This strategic logic sustained the ABM Treaty for the next 20 years.

1991-2002: The Demise of the ABM Treaty

The widespread support for the ABM Treaty was challenged by the Reagan administration’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Reagan’s speech of 23 March 1983 called for a “long-term research and development program to begin to achieve the our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles.”¹⁰ The visionary (some might say, fanciful) nature of Reagan’s proposal guaranteed it would never seriously challenge the ABM Treaty. The advanced weaponry and sensors required to stop a 10,000 RV nuclear strike simply did not exist and, in all likelihood, were beyond the technical capability of man to create within any reasonable timeframe. Since SDI was unable to change the strategic calculus underpinning the ABM Treaty, it remained an R&D project and lost much of its political support after Reagan left office.¹¹

However, in 1991, events in the Middle East unfolded that weakened support for the ABM Treaty. During the 1991 Gulf War, Iraqi use of Scud missiles against Israel, Saudi Arabia and deployed American troop formations revealed a dire need for theater ballistic missile defense. The tactically speaking, the Iraqi missile attacks were largely inconsequential. However the strategic effects were enormous. By attacking Israel with ballistic missiles, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein hoped to fracture the American-led coalition by forcing Israel to attack Iraq.

President Bush rushed batteries of Patriot surface to air missiles to the region to counter the SCUDs. The Patriot missiles were not effective at their assigned mission; few, if any, actually intercepted incoming SCUDs. However, they provided critical political cover to Israel's leaders who could only forgo retaliation against Iraq as long as the Patriots appeared to be defending Israel.

The Gulf War experience revealed that "theater-level" ballistic missile defenses would be an important military capability in future conflicts. The need for this capability was driven by the spread of ballistic missile technology during the 1990s. In addition to Iraq, Iran and North Korea possessed medium-range ballistic missiles. Combined with chemical, biological and nuclear warheads, such weapons would provide substantial leverage against intervention by U.S. or coalition military forces in the event of a crisis. Even more troubling were the efforts by North Korea to increase the range of its ballistic missile technology to "intercontinental" distances. Supporters of a limited national missile defense (NMD) system reasoned that if the U.S. saw the need to defend regional allies from theater ballistic missile attacks by "rogue" states, surely the U.S. deserved similar protection from a low-end ICBM attack.

In the ABM Treaty's strategic framework, the possibility of a limited ICBM attacks from lesser adversaries was always overwhelmed by the Soviet threat. Guaranteeing mutual assured destruction by restricting missile defenses was essential to maintaining the strategic balance between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. However, the December 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union undermined this concern. Over the long term, this development led to significant cuts in the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, and a substantial easing of nuclear tensions. In the short term, the disintegration of the Soviet Union increased the possibility of limited or accidental missile

attacks because a weakened Russia or its successor republics might lose control of nuclear and ballistic missile technology, thus weakening the case against missile defense.

A final factor favoring missile defense technology emerged in 1991: the promise of non-nuclear interceptor technology. The use of nuclear-tipped interceptors had stirred strong public opposition to the Sentinel deployment in the 1960s. SDI research had focused on developing a number of non-nuclear intercept technologies. Despite the enormous technical difficulties of “hitting a bullet with a bullet,” by 1991, these “hit to kill” technologies appeared mature enough to be ready for full-scale testing. The still-theoretic “hit to kill” concept was far easier sell politically to the American public than nuclear BMD systems.

These factors produced a strong agreement within Congress to approve deployment of a limited BMD system. The 1991 Missile Defense Act called for deployment of a still-undefined BMD system by fiscal year 1996. However, the act still specified that the system should be compliant with the limitations imposed by the ABM Treaty and urged the President to pursue “immediate discussion” with the USSR to make suitable amendments to the ABM Treaty to permit use of new technologies banned by the treaty. Not only was the U.S. limited to one BMD site, the ABM Treaty specifically banned deployment of space- and sea-based BMD systems. Many proponents of missile defense asserted that the U.S. needed greater flexibility to deploy such systems to deal with both theater and intercontinental missile threats.

The debate during the Clinton administration largely focused on how to resolve the contradictions between the perceived American need for robust theater and national missile defense technologies without undermining the comprehensive system of international agreements on arms control. At a minimum, the advocates of arms control asserted that BMD

deployments should be contingent upon changes to the ABM Treaty negotiated with and agreed to by Russia. Failure to do so might not only undermine U.S.-Russia relations, but would also weaken support for the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Non-proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.¹² While the Clinton Administration clearly favored maintaining the ABM Treaty, the election of a Republican-controlled Congress in 1995, and advanced ballistic missile capabilities in North Korea, compelled the administration in 1997 to accede to Congressional demands to deploy a national missile defense (NMD) system.

The Clinton NMD system clearly did not comply with the ABM Treaty because it provided territorial defense for most of the U.S., not just the national capital. Furthermore, the Administration would have to commence construction of the system's X-band radar in Alaska no later than fall 2000 to meet the planned 2005 deployment date.¹³ These factors meant any changes to the ABM Treaty would have to be negotiated and agreed to within a narrow, 3-year window. On 14 May 1997, the Administration promised to submit language to amend the treaty to the Senate which would allow deployment.¹⁴

In October 1999, Russian defense and foreign ministry officials bluntly outlined their categorical opposition to amending the treaty. Russia suspected that the "limited" NMD system was just the first step to building an SDI-like missile shield which would re-ignite the arms race and force Russia to consider withdrawal from other arms control agreements.¹⁵ At the June 2000 Moscow Summit, Russia again rebuffed proposals to amend the ABM Treaty, agreeing only to further discussions on the matter and restating Russia's intention to withdraw from other arms control agreements if the U.S. proceeded with NMD.¹⁶

Finally, on 5 September 2000, the Clinton Administration announced that it would not commit to deploying its NMD system. Certainly, Russian intransigence against amending the ABM Treaty was an important consideration in making this decision. Also, a National Intelligence Estimate warned that deployment without a revised treaty would create serious problems with America's European allies. However, the electoral politics of the 2000 presidential campaign were also important. Republicans (who were never enthusiastic about the Clinton NMD system's limitations) were privately pleased; their presidential candidate, George W. Bush, openly advocated abrogating the ABM Treaty to build a more capable system. The decision took its toll on Al Gore's political fortunes, the Democratic presidential candidate, who was painted as "soft on defending America" for having supported the treaty-based approach to NMD.¹⁷

The election of George W. Bush in November 2000 eliminated much of the ambiguity surrounding an NMD system and the ABM Treaty. In a May 2001 speech at the National Defense University, President Bush outlined his plans for missile defense. The ABM Treaty "enshrined the past" and prohibiting the U.S. from addressing emerging threats using the most promising technologies. He announced an initiative to examine "all available technologies and basing modes" to protect not just the U.S. and forward deployed troops, but also American "friends and allies." He also announced an intensive, high-level consultation effort to address allied concerns.¹⁸ At the meeting in NATO Headquarters in June 2001, President Bush personally presented his new strategic framework for nuclear security to the NATO allies.¹⁹ After a July 2001 meeting in Italy, Russian President Putin significantly downplay the contention over the ABM Treaty and expressed optimism for U.S.-Russia consultations on both defensive and offensive strategic weapons.²⁰

Having placated the most strident Allied and Russian protestation over consultation and American unilateralism, the Bush Administration formally announced its decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty in December 2001. A few days later, Russian Defense Minister Ivanov stated at a NATO press conference that while the U.S. decision was unfortunate and mistaken, Russia did not believe it would change the fundamental aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship.²¹ European protests were circumspect and mainly limited to expressions about American unilateralism and possible chilling of relations with Russia.²²

Why was the Bush administration able to withdraw from the ABM Treaty with so few international implications? The decisive reason was the grudging consent of the Russians. President Putin recognized that Russia had far more to fear from rogue states' ballistic missiles than U.S. weapons. Furthermore, Russia was simply too weak economically to pursue a new arms race. Also, Bush soothed Russia fears by offering deep reductions in offensive nuclear weapons. Much of the European and American opposition to withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was based on its effects on the strategic balance with Russia. Once Russia acquiesced, these arguments were largely negated.

Conclusion

The ABM Treaty was born when the Nixon administration realized that the new strategic realities between the superpowers made missile defense a threat to the nuclear balance of power. Yet it took almost 9 years to convince Congress, the American people and the Soviets to codify these realities with a treaty. Similarly, it took a little less than 10 years after massive strategic and political shifts to achieve consensus to terminate the ABM Treaty. What's fascinating is how little the actual effectiveness of the proposed BMD systems mattered and how little the

arguments and terms of the debate changed between 1960 and 2001. When the fundamental strategic situation between the superpowers was altered, the advocates of the status quo doggedly adhered to outdated policies until their positions were overwhelmed into irrelevance by the changing political, diplomatic, and technical landscape.

Notes

¹ Wade Boese, "Little Progress on ABM, START at Moscow Summit; Putin Proposes Joint Anti-Missile Umbrella." Arms Control Today, July/August 2000.

² Scott K. McMahon. Pursuit of the Shield: The U.S. Quest for Limited Ballistic Missile Defense. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1997, p14.

³ McMahon, p. 15.

⁴ McMahon, p. 16.

⁵ McMahon, p. 17.

⁶ McMahon, p. 19.

⁷ McMahon, p. 26.

⁸ McMahon, p. 27.

⁹ McMahon, p. 46.

¹⁰ Ronald Reagan. "Launching SDI." In Promise or Peril: The Strategic Defense Initiative, edited by Zbigniew Brzezinski. (Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1986) p. 50.

¹¹ James M. Lindsay, James M. and Michael E. O'Hanlon. Defending America: The Case for Limited National Missile Defense. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001) p. 3.

¹² Lindsay, p. 17.

¹³ Lindsay, p. 89.

¹⁴ Wall Street Journal, "Where's the Treaty?" 10 May 1999.

¹⁵ Michael R. Gordon. "Russians Firmly Reject U.S. Plan to Reopen ABM Treaty." New York Times, 21 October 1999, p. 3.

¹⁶ Wade Boese. "Little Progress on ABM, START at Moscow Summit; Putin Proposes Joint Anti-Missile Umbrella." Arms Control Today, July/August 2000.

¹⁷ Greg Jaffe. "Clinton Leaves Choice to Deploy Missile Program to his Successor." Wall Street Journal, 5 September 2000, p. A.8.

¹⁸ George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University". The White House 1 May 2001. <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/05/print/20010501-10.html>> (08 Jan 2003).

¹⁹ George W. Bush, George W. and Lord George Robertson. "Press Availability with President Bush and NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson." The White House 13 June 2001.

<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/06/print/20010613-10.html>> (08 Jan 2003).

²⁰ George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin. "Press Conference with President Bush and President Putin." The White House July 22, 2001. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/07/print/20010722-3.html>> (08 Jan 2003).

²¹ Sergei Ivanov and Lord George Robertson. "NATO: Press Conference by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson and Mr. Sergei Ivanon, Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, Brussels." M2 Presswire, 19 December 2001. Proquest (8 Jan 2003).

²² Steven Erlanger. "Bush's Move on ABM Pact Gives Pause to Europeans." New York Times, 13 December 2001, p. A.19.

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