

Berliner Informationszentrum für Transatlantische Sicherheit (BITS)

Berlin Information-center for Transatlantic Security (BITS)

BITS Policy Note 00.2

ISSN 1434-3274

June 2000

National Missile Defense Under Attack

By Denise Groves

US President Bill Clinton returns to Washington from his travels through Europe having failed to win any international support for American plans to build a National Missile Defense (NMD). Instead, the trip made it very clear that this issue is threatening to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe. In addition, continued pursuit of the controversial project promises hazardous consequences for both arms control and global security.

The American Perspective

When Clinton arrived in Europe for his last trip there as president, he was greeted with criticism from EU leaders who argued that NMD plans are destabilizing, dangerous, representative of isolationist tendencies, careless and reckless. Clinton and his staff then traveled on to Moscow where they met similarly strong Russian resistance to American plans. At the conclusion of the long awaited summit meeting, Clinton only managed to extract largely symbolic agreements from newly elected President Vladimir Putin to create a joint early warning missile launch detection system and to reduce surplus stocks of weapons grade plutonium. On the question of NMD and possible revision of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, Clinton was compelled to accept a broadly worded joint statement in which the two leaders concurred that ballis-

tic missile proliferation represents a "potentially significant change in the strategic situation and international security environment" but did not agree on how the emerging threat should be addressed. As a result, Clinton returns to Washington empty-handed. Yet it seems his decision on whether to deploy the system will be taken even if an agreement to amend the ABM Treaty remains out of reach.

Pundits are already discussing whether early construction work would constitute a violation of the Treaty, although such discussions will have only temporary value. Deployment will occur sooner or later because construction of an NMD system is almost a foregone conclusion within the United States. Both the presumptive Republican and Democratic candidates for this November's presidential election support some form of NMD, with George W. Bush advocating a system more extensive than Vice President Al Gore.

The domestic debate about this issue revolves around three factors: money and technology, but primarily politics. President Clinton's impending decision on whether to deploy the system will take into account four criteria of a slightly different nature: technological feasibility, cost, effects on international security (specifically arms con-

Berliner Informationszentrum für Transatlantische Sicherheit (BITS)
Rykestr 13, 10405 Berlin, Tel 030 446858-0, Fax 030 4410-221

Berlin Information-center for Transatlantic Security (BITS)
Rykestr. 13, D-10405 Berlin, Germany, ph +49 30 446858 -0, fax +49 30 4410-221

trol), and the threat. Naturally, technology and money are two factors that resonate in the US—particularly in light of growing criticism of the rigged tests and spiraling costs. Less well considered are the effects on arms control and international stability. Hardly debated at all is the legitimacy of the threat. This is where the rest of the world enters the debate.

European Concerns

In Portugal and again in Germany, Clinton came face to face with European concerns. First, European leaders explained the detrimental effects on the future of arms control. NMD, they argue, could force the Russians to maintain larger nuclear forces, and even more, discourage any efforts to take those weapons off of hair trigger alerts. The effects are actually even more ominous and destabilizing: Russia can already barely afford to maintain its current force, but if faced by a system that could potentially undermine its deterrent, Russia might feel compelled to divert resources from its struggling economic development programs and funnel them into nuclear weapons programs. This could damage the reform process taking place in Russia and possibly spark economic and political instability. For Germany, the stakes are not simply geographic. Germany has invested billions upon billions of Deutsch Marks to encourage economic reform in Russia and would surely prefer not to see any meager returns on the investments threatened by a renewed arms race.

Second, the Europeans warned that it is even more likely that an arms race could be touched off in Asia if the US continues to pursue its plans. In spite of official assurances by Washington, the planned “limited system” appears as if it would be potent enough to negate the relatively small Chinese strategic deterrent. A little known fact is that the Chinese are suspected of maintaining no more than two dozen liquid-fueled nuclear weapons with an intercontinental range. Fearing that its own deterrence would be effectively nullified, the Chinese could launch a modernization pro-

gram to build more, and more mobile, nuclear tipped missiles. This might include development of missiles capable of carrying multiple warheads. India, a longtime adversary of China, might respond by augmenting its own modest force. A reply from Pakistan is virtually guaranteed at that point. The domino effect would probably not stop there. It is not unreasonable to expect that the level of insecurity that would necessary accompany this kind of nuclear competition would prompt some non-nuclear Asian nations to reconsider their nuclear options. In this context, the future viability of the Non-Proliferation Treaty may be threatened.

The German government also expressed its concern that moves by the US to construct the NMD system in spite of European misgivings might damage cohesion within the NATO alliance. Unilateral actions by the US—actions often seen as isolationist—were already a sore point among the allies. But on this issue, achieving consensus within the Alliance would be practically impossible, particularly as long as Europe is left vulnerable to a missile attack.

The argument of European vulnerability is an old one, one that prompted the US to station American military personnel in Europe throughout the Cold War to demonstrate its commitment to the protection of the continent. This time the situation is very different, primarily because Europeans do not completely subscribe to the American assessment of the threat. According to the US argument, a missile defense is necessary to protect against possible attack by so-called “rogue” states—otherwise known to the rest of the world as North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. Numerous threat assessments or intelligence estimates have been conducted, each concluding to various degrees that the rogue states have ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs that could threaten the continental US. These threat reports form the basis of the reasoning for US NMD. Indeed, within the US, the threat from the rogue states and from non-state actors such as Osama bin Laden is considered a fact.

Europeans are more dubious. While agreeing that the “risk states” the US consistently refers to may in fact have programs to develop long range missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), European governments politely point out that first, offensive capabilities by these states are exaggerated; second, they will not necessarily be launched at the US at the first possible opportunity; and third, the US is probably more at risk of attack by a truck bomb or poisoned water supplies.

Threat perception is exactly that: perception. The European point of view may not fully appreciate how or why the US feels threatened enough to pay billions of dollars for a system that may not actually work. But the alternative they offer is sensible. If the threat does not actually exist yet, and there remains a possibility to prevent it, less dangerous and destabilizing measures are more appropriate. Increased cooperation on a whole range of non-proliferation activities, through greater funding for the activities of the IAEA or stronger arms control or export regimes for example, are both simple and reasonable options. Effectively addressing the very roots of the proliferation problem could keep the world safe by preventing dangerous weapons from falling into the wrong hands and by eliminating the need for a destabilizing missile defense system. Conversely, if the US sneers at the rest of the world and continues to pursue a missile defense strategy, positive trends like the moderate political movement in Iran or the subtle progress toward peace on the Korean peninsula could be thrust into reverse. The term “self-fulfilling prophecy” seems an apt characterization when contemplating this scenario.

Russia’s Stand

Although Europeans do not accept American threat assessments, Russia actually has experienced terrorist attacks at home—albeit not missile attacks. But this could partly explain why Putin suggested just before the summit that the US and Russia develop a missile defense system together. It did not

take long for US officials to clarify why this was not a feasible option: Putin is suggesting a different kind of missile defense system that would take too long to build, they explained. Otherwise, President Clinton welcomed the idea of cooperation with the Russians. Cooperation is actually necessary with respect to amendment of the ABM Treaty. Yet before the Moscow summit meetings, President Clinton’s staff indicated that they did not expect to leave Moscow with an agreement to amend the ABM Treaty in their hands. The Clinton Administration was forced to downgrade its expectations because President Putin had given no indication that he would agree to modify or accept protocols attached to the ABM Treaty.

It is this treaty that is causing the most headaches for NMD planners. Many consider it the centerpiece of the nuclear arms control regime and argue that tinkering with it could destroy both the historical balance of deterrence as well as the hard fought for gains made recently in the field of nuclear disarmament. Barely one month ago, the Russian Duma ratified the START II Treaty, which would reduce the number of nuclear warheads ready for launch held by the US and Russia to between 3000 and 3500 by the year 2007. Furthermore, the five declared nuclear powers announced at the recent NPT review conference held in New York that they are committed to total nuclear disarmament.

The problem is that Putin has warned, and the Russian Duma has confirmed, that if the US moves to unilaterally withdraw from the ABM Treaty, Russia would likewise withdraw from all other existing arms control agreements. Putin’s threat has not made him less endearing to Europeans, however, because he is now trying to push the US to negotiate a START III Treaty that would bring nuclear force levels down to below 1500, well below what Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin had originally envisioned for in START III. The Pentagon strongly opposes that particular suggestion, arguing that fewer than 2000 warheads would not be sufficient

for the maintenance of a credible force. Yet recent reports suggest that Putin's shrewd maneuvering (partly aided by the fact that he remains an enigma to the West) is bearing some fruit. There are indications that the US may agree to adjust the START III levels downward if Putin agrees to compromise on the ABM.

And therein lies a major danger. European governments have asked Clinton to delay making a decision on NMD deployment until an agreement can be won from the Russians. Europe has apparently tied many of its hopes to the stubbornness of Putin, anticipating that a compromise will not be found and that the US will be forced to delay the decision-making process. First, it is far from clear that Putin will not seek a favorable compromise on the ABM treaty. If he does, the end result could be that nuclear disarmament freezes at the agreed upon START III levels, whatever they may be. Missile technology will continue to advance, while at the same time, states intent to overcome the defense system will build ever more and more advanced nuclear missiles. The ultimate aims of the Non-Proliferation Treaty will thus remain forever elusive.

Domestic Politics

Even if Putin does remain unwavering in his resolve to maintain the integrity of the ABM Treaty, it should not be forgotten that this is an election year in the US. One can hope that President Clinton returns to Washington enlightened, bearing a refined understanding that the US is not alone in this world, that actions do have consequences. It is almost certainly true that if Clinton were to visit China or India, he would be enveloped in a storm of criticism more fierce than that in Europe or Russia. Still, this election year marks the end of the Clinton presidency, which means more than ever that President Clinton is determined to ensure his legacy. He will want to leave office being remembered not as the man who had an affair with an intern in the Oval Office and was later impeached, but rather as the man who achieved something as notable as committing the US to a major arms con-

trol treaty with the Russians. However, Jesse Helms, the powerful chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and arch-nemesis of President Clinton, has already warned that any ABM Treaty change Clinton submits, will be dead on arrival.

This election year is also like every other election year: it is a messy, unpredictable, often reckless struggle for political power. Despite the huge repercussions for international security and stability, the future of arms control, and for important strategic relationships between the US, Europe and Russia, this question of NMD has unfortunately fallen victim to—or perhaps is even a result of—American domestic politics. Nevertheless, if President Clinton truly does want to leave a legacy that makes the world safer, then he should summon up the same defiance of Republican pressure he demonstrated throughout the entire impeachment debacle and refuse to be the man who committed the United States to deploy a National Missile Defense system.

This Policy Note was written by Denise Groves. She is a researcher at the Berlin Information-center for Transatlantic Security.

BITS acknowledges the generous support received from the Ford Foundation for its work on NATO-Russia relations.