

Bush pushes rapid development of US missile defense

By Joseph Kay
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Over the past several weeks the Bush administration has stepped up its drive for the construction of a missile defense system before the end of Bush's term in 2004. As part of a general reorientation of American military and foreign policy in a more aggressive and unilateralist direction, the government is promoting a policy of scuttling existing arms control agreements.

Even within the US military and foreign policy establishment, Bush's rush to begin construction of a missile defense is seen by some as reckless and dangerous. But there is an objective logic underlying the effort to dismantle the system of nuclear restraints dating from the Cold War. Behind the talk of a purely "defensive" measure, the drive to construct a national missile defense system is animated by a perspective of exploiting and enhancing the current military-technological supremacy of the US to facilitate American capitalism's aspirations to impose a global "Pax Americana."

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on July 12, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz outlined the Pentagon's plans for rapid construction of a missile defense testing facility in Alaska that would eventually be converted into an operating control-and-command center for a rudimentary national missile defense system (NMD). The Alaska center will eventually consist of a missile base with between 5 and 10 interceptors, the avowed purpose of which would be to shoot down missiles aimed at the US carrying nuclear or biological weapons. These plans, which include breaking ground in Alaska (clearing trees, leveling the surface, etc.) as early as August of this year, will quickly "bump up against" the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, Wolfowitz told the Senate panel.

On July 14, two days after Wolfowitz's testimony, the Bush administration conducted its first missile defense test with apparent success, though government officials acknowledge that the test was rudimentary. Missile defense supporters took pains to play down the significance of the result before it was known in order to protect future plans against another failure. (Tests conducted during the Clinton years ended in only partial success or outright failure.) While the latest test by no means demonstrates the technological viability of NMD, its results will certainly be used by Bush to boost his plans for rapid construction of the system.

The debate surrounding these plans centers on the ABM treaty, negotiated between the United States and what was then the Soviet Union. It prohibits the construction of extensive missile defense systems. As in all other international agreements, Russia replaced the USSR as a party to ABM after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Bush administration spokesmen continue to suggest that an agreement to amend the ABM treaty might be reached with the Russian government, the basic thrust of the current drive for missile defense is to remove the treaty—de facto if not de jure—as a constraint on American military policy.

The acceleration of the testing and construction schedule outlined by Wolfowitz and developed by the Pentagon—including 17 tests over the

next year, in contrast to the three tests conducted during the Clinton administration—is a transparent attempt to negate ABM before the next presidential election.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in comments after Wolfowitz's testimony, stated, "We are going to have to find a way to get beyond this treaty. If ... we haven't been able to negotiate something new, obviously there's a provision we can withdraw in six months [after declaring intent to withdraw], and that's what [we would] have to do." Wolfowitz noted, "No one is pretending ... what we are doing is consistent with the treaty. We have got to withdraw from it or replace it." This, he continued, is likely to occur "in months rather than years."

Wolfowitz's testimony and the ensuing statements by Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell are significant in that they constitute the most clear and forceful indication yet that the Bush Administration is determined to pursue missile defense in the face of intense international opposition—from Russia, China and the states of the European Union, among others.

Russia initially responded to reports of Wolfowitz's testimony by denouncing the American government for pursuing a system that would, according to President Vladimir Putin, lead to "a new powerful spiral of the arms race, particularly in space." Igor Sergeev, security advisor to Putin, declared that the recent round of consultations between Bush and foreign governments was a merely "smokescreen," since the United States was clearly determined to carry out its plans regardless of any objections raised. "Unfortunately," he said, "our forecasts are coming true—no reasons or arguments we cited during the consultations with the American side could stop the United States' striving for hegemony in the strategic arms sphere."

While Wolfowitz indicated it was unclear at precisely what point during the construction process the ABM treaty would be breached, some Russian officials have indicated that it will consider the initial stages of construction in Alaska to be a signal of American withdrawal. This, Russia has said, would lead to the abandonment on Russia's part of previous arms control agreements.

Later, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov struck a more conciliatory note, pointing to a certain ambiguity in the statements of American officials as to whether the United States would definitely withdraw from ABM. "We are still oriented towards patient consultations and will conduct them," he said.

Nevertheless, the policy of the Bush administration has clearly provoked the anger of Russia and China, as well as most of Europe. They are particularly concerned with the administration's contempt for the ABM treaty, seeing this as a sign that the US no longer considers itself bound by international arms control agreements. Even Britain, which of all the major powers has most closely aligned itself with the US, is balking at giving its support to the abandonment of the treaty.

Wolfowitz's testimony met with opposition from Democratic senators, particularly Carl Levin, the current chairman of the Senate Armed

Services Committee. Many Democrats are concerned with Bush's move to abandon the ABM treaty, seeing this as a reckless step that will harm the interests of the United States by disrupting international stability and provoking a new arms race. Levin and other Democrats have threatened to block any defense spending that might lead to the abrogation of ABM. Bush's proposed 2002 defense budget includes \$8.3 billion for missile defense, an increase of 57 percent over current spending.

Though the Democratic Party's assumption of Senate control earlier this year has cast a certain pall over Bush's plans, and helps explain why the administration has begun such an aggressive campaign for missile defense now, the criticism by Democrats of NMD has been restrained. It was under the Clinton administration that the initial steps to NMD construction were taken, and while voicing concern at the abandonment of ABM, Democrats have been careful to assert that they do not oppose NMD as such.

Last year's Democratic vice presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, has openly declared his support for the direction of the current government, saying he "will not shy away from supporting authorization or an appropriation that might necessitate a withdrawal from the ABM treaty if I am convinced that it is necessary to do so for ... national security, and that the administration has made every possible effort to negotiate ... with the Russians."

The basic drive for the acceleration of testing for NMD is two-fold. On the one hand, a successful missile defense system would increase the ability of the United States, either by military action or the threat of such action, to project its influence and pursue its interests on a world scale. Lt. General Ronald Kadish, director of the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization, noted that with regard to the Alaska test facility, "We have designed the program so that in an emergency, and if directed, we might quickly deploy test assets to deploy against a rapidly growing threat."

The justification given by NMD supporters that the system would merely be a defensive measure designed to protect the American people from nuclear weapons launched by so-called rogue states (e.g., North Korea or Iraq) is a pretext for putting in place a system that will allow for increased American aggression abroad. By blocking retaliation from small and large states (such as China) alike, missile defense would allow the American government to intervene more freely in regions such as the Middle East, Asia or the Balkans. To cite only one example, even a rudimentary NMD, such as that to be constructed in Alaska, would have enormous consequences for American relations with China, which has only a limited missile stockpile. The American military would have a freer hand to intervene in such regions as Taiwan.

The further development of missile defense—Bush envisions a comprehensive "multi-layered" system consisting of land, air and sea-based defenses—could pose a direct threat to Russia and its interests in the Caucasus and Caspian Sea regions. Missile defense would also threaten an increasingly independent Europe, which has increasingly come into opposition with American foreign policy goals on a number of issues.

Essentially, a successful missile defense would be an important component of an aggressive military policy. This is a principal reason why it has come under attack from foreign powers, especially China and Russia.

However, the aggressive character of NMD lies not merely in its immediate military impact, but, more fundamentally, in the role the Pentagon's plans will play in a general reorientation of American foreign policy in a more unilateralist and militarist direction. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a substantial section of the American establishment—represented most consistently by the Republican Party—sees all constraints on US military power to be unnecessary and intolerable.

This includes, in the first instance, the ABM treaty negotiated between

the two Cold War adversaries. Why, it is asked, should the US constrain its own military when the principal factor that forced these constraints—the USSR—no longer exists? By pursuing NMD in such a rapid manner, the Bush administration is seeking to make this turn of American strategy an accomplished fact.

These underlying strategic and political interests explain why the Bush administration is relatively unconcerned with the enormous technological problems associated with missile defense. For the Republican Party, it is not so much a question of a successful defense—though this has long been a dream of American military planners and would certainly be welcomed—but of transforming the character of the basic strategic orientation in an extremely aggressive and unilateralist direction.

Thus, the administration has indicated that the success or failure of future tests is largely irrelevant in determining further construction. According to this conception, testing will be conducted, and the technology developed, in the very process of construction itself.

This new strategic orientation is evident not only in the administration's attitude to NMD and the ABM treaty, but also its position on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which was signed by Clinton but rejected by the Republican-controlled Senate in 1999. CTBT would prohibit future testing of nuclear weapons, and has been strongly supported by Europe. Bush is seeking to scrap the treaty entirely, which, due to procedural regulations applying to treaties, is still sitting in the Senate and could be resurrected by the Democratic leadership at some point in the future. The US government has also attempted to alter wording routinely incorporated into international documents in the past urging ratification of CTBT by all signatories.

As with the Senate's rejection of the treaty in 1999, the current administration's opposition is based on an unwillingness to constrain the future development of American nuclear weapons, which would require testing. In line with this policy, Bush has commissioned a study to see how quickly nuclear test sites in Nevada could be reactivated.

The US is currently abiding by a nine-year-old informal moratorium on missile testing, in spite of its refusal to ratify CTBT. However, General John Gordon of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) stated in testimony before the Senate earlier this month, "During this year we will look hard again at improving test site readiness and will review whether an appropriate level of resources is being applied to this vital element of stockpile stewardship."

If Bush decided to begin nuclear testing, it would normally take between three and four years to ready the facility. The administration is seeking to reduce this period to several months. In particular, the Pentagon is seeking to develop low-yield nuclear weapons designed for destroying underground nuclear stockpiles that currently exist only in Russia and the US.

Moreover, the Bush administration has indicated that, while planning to reduce the US nuclear arsenal, it will not accept a new weapons reduction framework or engage in extensive reduction talks, preferring to make unilateral cuts in line with an independent estimation of its own security requirements. In opposing a plan proposed by Russia for negotiations between the five established nuclear powers (including France, Britain and China) to set up a strictly controlled system of mutual cuts, Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice stated, "There's a good reason not to get into 15-year negotiations, which is what it has taken to create arms control treaties ... it is not necessary."

All of these developments are of one piece: no new constraints; scrap the old constraints; allow the United States to develop its military policy freely in accordance with its requirements, which, according to American strategists, will likely include confrontation with China, Russia or other competitors.

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