

Missile Defense Tests Are Put Off

U.S. Delay Averts Face-Off With Russia

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The Bush administration put the brakes on its missile defense program yesterday, steering clear of a confrontation with Russia by deciding for the first time to delay testing elements of the system that could violate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

With President Bush hoping to close a deal on strategic weapons when he meets Russian President Vladimir Putin in the United States next month, administration officials said they would put off a pair of exercises scheduled for this fall that involve using two radars to track rocket firings.

The announcement by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld marked an abrupt change of pace for an administration that has been determined to forge ahead with the development of missile defenses despite the restrictions of the 1972 treaty and the objections of U.S. allies and Russia.

Administration officials said the United States remains committed to freeing itself from the constraints of the ABM accord and to proceeding with the development of a missile defense shield. U.S. and Russian officials, however, have been reporting progress in their talks over limitations on strategic weapons. The decision to delay some testing improves the climate for the Bush-Putin meeting, while underscoring how the treaty is already hampering the administration's missile defense program.

"For some time now, we've advised the Congress and the government of the Russian Federation that the planned missile defense testing program that we have was going to bump up against the ABM Treaty. That has now happened," Rumsfeld said. "This fact, this reality, it seems to me, provides an impetus for the discussions that President Bush has been having with President Putin, and which will continue here in Washington early next month."

Under the Pentagon's development program, researchers would have used a radar system on a Navy ship and a separate radar in California to track the test firing of a long-range missile and the dispatching of an anti-missile interceptor to strike it. The sea-based radar would also have tracked the subsequent launch of a space rocket.

Though the firings of the missile, interceptor and space rocket are all allowed under the ABM Treaty, a Pentagon review group concluded that the use of the radars would violate the accord. "It was pretty clear-cut," said a senior Pentagon official.

Some Defense Department officials had suggested that the treaty should be interpreted as allowing the use of the radars in the testing program, according to administration sources. But other officials, in both the Pentagon and elsewhere, had argued against a liberal reading, saying it would be better to emphasize that the treaty was already hampering U.S. interests and should be scrapped as soon as possible.

Rumsfeld himself cast doubt yesterday on whether the scheduled exercises would have violated the ABM Treaty, which limits the use of certain radars as part of a long-range missile defense system,

but he said the administration decided to avoid a dispute.

"As we all know, treaties and most legal documents have vagueness to them. We've said we won't violate it; therefore, we do not want to be in a position of having a small minority of people suggesting that we, in fact, are violating it," said Rumsfeld, who is one of the administration's chief advocates for missile defenses.

Administration officials have said since early summer that the United States must move quickly to withdraw from the ABM accord because the planned development of the missile shield would run afoul of the treaty in a matter of "months, not years." While most officials said they hoped to win Russian assent for both countries to pull out of the treaty, some in the administration have advocated a unilateral U.S. withdrawal if Moscow did not agree in time.

In the days leading up to the president's meeting with Putin in Shanghai last week, U.S. officials urged that Bush notify the Russian leader that the United States would withdraw at the end of the year. But Bush did not give this deadline.

Senior administration officials said the decision to delay elements of the test program was not meant as a reward to Russia, which has taken substantial steps since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to enhance relations with Washington.

"It is not a bone to anybody," Rumsfeld said. "It is simply the fact that the president and the administration is engaged in discussions with the Russians. We believe they are proceeding in a satisfactory way. And we believe that, in fact, at some point going forward, we'll have a way to permit our country to go forward with the kinds of testing and development of ballistic missile defenses that we believe is in the best interests of our nation."

Both American and Russian officials have said recently that a new strategic understanding -- which would allow greater latitude for missile defenses and sharply cut the number of nuclear warheads -- could be within reach.

The two sides seem to have traveled a considerable distance since earlier this year, when Putin called the ABM Treaty the "cornerstone" of international nuclear stability. After his talks with Bush in Shanghai, Putin told reporters that they had obtained an "understanding that we can reach agreements."

Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-Del.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a missile defense skeptic, welcomed the delay. "I'm happy they restrained. I don't think they would have restrained three months ago if they got to this point. . . . They are restraining now apparently because the president is in negotiations and doesn't want to, I assume, act unilaterally here," Biden said.

Senior administration officials said, however, that the decision to delay the radar exercises is proof that time is running out for the two countries to close a deal on shelving the ABM accord. Withdrawing from the treaty requires six months' notice.

"This shows that the ABM Treaty is already constraining us in a very material way," said a senior administration official. "These are aspects of tests that we canceled, and they need to be done at some point."

The first exercise would have revolved around a missile test that had already been pushed back until

later this fall for non-treaty reasons. In this test, an anti-missile interceptor was to be fired from a U.S. test range in the central Pacific to strike an intercontinental missile with a mock nuclear warhead launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

Both missiles were to be tracked by an Aegis radar system aboard a Navy ship. At the same time, another system based at Vandenberg, called a Multiple Object Tracking Radar, was to track the ICBM. Though the firing of the two missiles would not abrogate the ABM Treaty, the use of the two radar systems to monitor the action and collect valuable research data could be deemed a violation.

Use of the Aegis radar would be part of an effort to convert the Navy's regional defense system now used against aircraft and short-range missiles into a long-range shield against attacks on the United States from countries such as Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Some missile defense proponents say that by capitalizing on the existing Aegis radar capability and putting missile interceptors on ships, the United States could quickly and inexpensively develop a long-range defense.

But the treaty and subsequent protocols between the United States and the Soviet Union ban the tracking of ballistic missiles and anti-missile interceptors by sea-based radars or other radar systems not initially designed for this purpose. The accords also bar radar like the system at Vandenberg from tracking a long-range missile unless the system is located at a designated anti-ballistic missile test range.

A second exercise would have used the Aegis radar to track the launch of a Titan 2 space rocket as it carries an Air Force weather satellite into space. This would provide further information about the performance of that sea-based radar against a long-range missile.

Both exercises, part of an ongoing series in the missile defense program, would have involved using the existing radars in a new fashion to gather data about potential missile interceptors. By incorporating the radars in the missile defense development program, defense officials had been hoping to expand the information generated by the tests.

"When we put together the testing program earlier this year, we were instructed to put together the best plan we could, without regard to the treaty," said a senior officer involved in the program. "So we crafted a plan that would get the most data out of the tests."

The decision to forgo use of the radars came as a disappointment to program officials, who said it would handicap the overall development effort.

"The way I'd describe the impact is this: The less data we can collect, the more risk will be added to the program," the senior officer said.

But Michael E. O'Hanlon, an analyst at the Brookings Institution, called the delay reasonable, especially since U.S.-Russian negotiations are at a critical stage. Moreover, he said, any setback in converting the medium-range shield into a strategic defense was of little consequence because the technology is "not that far along and not that promising against long-range missiles."

Staff writers Karen DeYoung and Steven Mufson contributed to this report.

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