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A Missile Shield Road Map

The flight data must still be fully evaluated, but the Pentagon reports that last weekend's missile defense test was a success, giving a modest but timely advance to a troubled program. For the second time in four tries, the Pentagon said, a prototype interceptor hit and destroyed a dummy warhead far above the Pacific. Many more tests will be needed before a reliable ground-based system is ready for use. These must include tests under more realistic conditions, with the dummy warhead surrounded by multiple decoys designed to draw the interceptor away from the target. Saturday's test used a single decoy.

This extended testing period should be used to try to negotiate a new understanding with Russia that would modify or supersede the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty to allow fielding of a limited defensive shield designed to thwart attack by unpredictable nations. That is the course suggested by Secretary of State Colin Powell in a recent interview with *The Washington Post*.

Ideally, other defensive technologies should be tested as well, including boost-phase systems, which target enemy rockets soon after launch, when they are most vulnerable. Only ground-based systems can be tested under the current language of the ABM treaty. Russia and China called for maintaining the treaty "in its current form" in an accord the two nations signed in Moscow yesterday. But President Vladimir Putin of Russia has spoken favorably of boost-phase systems and might be willing to alter the treaty to allow testing of this technology. The Bush administration should explore that possibility in high-level meetings with Russian officials scheduled over the next few months.

Boost-phase systems have some clear technological and diplomatic advantages. They home in on an enemy missile when it is still moving relatively slowly, is unlikely to be surrounded by decoys and is trailed by a hot and bright plume of rocket exhaust. The interceptor rockets, whether based on land or sea, would need to be situated very close to the specific countries being defended against and would pose no threat to the missile forces of other countries, like Russia or China.

But these systems also have important drawbacks. The order to fire interceptors would have to be issued almost immediately by field commanders after an enemy missile launch, leaving little time for consultation with Washington. Design and testing of a boost-phase system would take many years.

Even if Moscow agrees to permit boost-phase testing, Washington should continue its efforts to perfect a ground-based system. It will be years before either technology yields a system reliable enough to protect American cities against nuclear missile attack. Because of this, the administration should not be in any rush to break out of the treaty.

This weekend President Bush will see Mr. Putin at the summit meeting of industrial nations in Genoa, Italy. Tomorrow Secretary Powell will meet Russia's foreign minister, Igor Ivanov. Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, travels to Moscow next week, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld expects to meet with his Russian counterpart in the near future.

These meetings should be used to explore ways to expand testing options without throwing away the benefits of an arms control treaty that has helped restrain nuclear weapons dangers for decades.

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