

Missile Test Postponement Shows Priority Shift

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Just two months ago, a gambling person would not have bet against the Bush administration's determination to pursue missile defense tests, even if it meant discarding the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty the president had branded a "relic" of the Cold War.

But yesterday's postponement of three missile defense tests provides the latest evidence that the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 have changed the administration's priorities. It is now putting a premium on good relations with Russia while coming up with a strategy over how to proceed with missile defenses and reduce the two countries' nuclear arsenals.

"Before Sept. 11, this [missile defense] was the number one foreign policy issue, the place where the Bush administration wanted to leave a legacy. Before Sept. 11, that was what they thought they would be judged upon," said Michael McFaul, a Russia expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a Stanford University professor. "Obviously today that's not true. So it just matters a whole lot less. They know how they'll be judged and it has nothing to do with the ABM treaty."

Despite the administration's temporary retreat on the tests, some experts close to the administration said they believe the United States and Russia have been getting closer to an agreement on missile defenses, and that the administration is likely to ultimately get the latitude it needs to continue whatever missile tests it desires without dealing a severe blow to relations with Moscow.

But those agreements might not be finished by the time Russian President Vladimir Putin visits President Bush in Washington and the president's ranch in Crawford, Tex., next month despite considerable pressure to have something to show by that time. The administration's decision to put off the tests avoids a confrontation when it already has a lot on its plate with its war against terrorism.

The administration's retreat on the missile defense schedule was made more palatable because of Putin's gestures of friendship since the Sept. 11 attacks. Putin was the first foreign leader to call Bush after the attacks, and he has supported the U.S. campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan.

"It is clear that President Putin understands that Russia's future primarily lies to the West," Secretary of State Colin L. Powell told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday. "That's the source of inspiration, that's the source of technology, it's the source of capital, it's the source of debt relief, it's the source of security."

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said the tests were being put off to avoid violating the ABM Treaty. While the delay solves an immediate confrontation with Moscow over the ABM accord, the announcement that the United States already believes its testing is bumping up against the treaty makes the issue seem immediate.

Some experts familiar with administration strategy saw Rumsfeld's announcement as a way of keeping up pressure on Russia -- as well as more moderate members of the administration -- and of

making his case that the United States needs to withdraw from the treaty sooner rather than later.

Indeed some experts say that Rumsfeld made no effort to avoid making a schedule of tests that would conflict with the treaty, even though one administration member said just three weeks ago that there was no clear collision between tests and the treaty until the spring. Many top administration officials still favor early notification of withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, which requires six months' notice.

All this takes place in the context of next month's Bush-Putin talks.

The administration has agreed to link the elimination of -- or radical changes in -- the ABM Treaty to the level of offensive nuclear weapons held by both countries. Russia is seeking deep cuts in those weapons, beyond the 2,000 to 2,500 level that President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin agreed to in 1997.

Bush aides favor deep cuts, but have not yet obtained final Pentagon agreement on what level is needed. Though the gaps between U.S. officials are not big, top Bush foreign policymakers have been overwhelmed by the demands of the war on terrorism.

A senior administration official said the issue of an offensive weapons ceiling was complicated by variables such as whether China increases its intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities, whether India or Pakistan gain long-range missiles and whether Russia's government changes dramatically.

"In the Cold War, we had one target set. In the post-Cold War, we have multiple target sets and that has effects on your planning," a senior administration official said recently.

One factor that could push U.S. numbers lower might be the belief that a working missile defense system would reduce or eliminate the need to have a second-strike nuclear force, the official said.

The other issue in talks with Russia over missile defense is whether the ABM Treaty will be simply scrapped, amended or replaced by a new agreement. Many administration officials resist the idea of having any new treaty or revised treaty, saying that the United States and Russia are not going to attack one another and need to turn their attention to common threats.

The two sides have discussed a variety of possibilities, ranging from a joint statement about strategic principles, to a new agreement on weapons, to major changes in the ABM Treaty.

One key issue could be not what to put in the new document or what missile defense tests to allow, but simply what to call a new agreement. Sources close to the administration say that any new document would have to be different enough for the Bush administration to say that it had effectively put the ABM Treaty to rest, while Putin is seeking something that would enable him to say he salvaged the accord.

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