

Missile Defense Rush

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THE BUSH administration's announced plan for missile defense lacks clarity in several important respects. The administration says it intends to build a new facility for ground-based missiles in Alaska that it would use for testing. But it also suggests that going ahead with this construction could amount to deployment, because the facility could be used to field a preliminary defense system within three or four years. The administration also says its testing will conflict with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty within months. But it won't say what activity will trigger the violation, when it will happen or whether it will occur following an amendment of the treaty or a unilateral U.S. abrogation of it. Some of this ambiguity may be justified by logistical or legal problems. But within the muddiness lies the possibility that the administration will build and deploy a missile defense without meeting two of the most important conditions for success: that it prove the technology before deployment and that it reach agreements with Russia and other nations that ensure that the defenses will increase rather than detract from global stability.

A missile defense system that meets those conditions would be an important addition to U.S. security and likely would attract broad bipartisan support in Congress. But meeting them also could require considerably more time, expense and diplomatic effort than the administration appears to have built into its plans -- and several senior officials have expressed impatience with such requirements. Deployment of a partially effective system, they say, would be better than nothing. Russia, they think, should be given a few months to choose between accepting amendment of the ABM Treaty and a unilateral U.S. withdrawal. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, among others, talks about missile defense in tones of great urgency. The suggestion is that the threat from nations developing ballistic missiles is so great as to override the usual practice of thoroughly testing a weapon before its deployment and to invert the usual notion that the construction of a new security framework governing nuclear weapons should precede the destruction of the old one.

Mr. Rumsfeld's concerns are not to be dismissed; it is true that several nations hostile to the United States are working on ballistic missile technology. Still, North Korea's sporadic tinkering with long-range boosters and the active but less-advanced programs of Iran or Syria hardly seem to add up to the equivalent of a wartime emergency. Moreover, the problems the Pentagon would skip over are serious ones. Many experts, including a panel commissioned by the Pentagon last year, say that fundamental technical problems remain with all of the various missile defense systems. Even the ground-based system, which passed a preliminary test Saturday and for which the administration would begin clearing ground as early as next month, has not yet overcome the problem of how to discriminate between incoming missiles and decoys.

Similarly, the administration has advanced bold, if somewhat sketchy, ideas about forging a new strategic understanding with Russia that would cover both offensive and defensive nuclear weapons as well as cooperation on proliferation. It's an ambitious and worthy initiative. But it will be a formidable challenge for the administration to negotiate such a dramatic shift in the global security framework with the prickly Russian government -- and to sell it to skeptical European allies and other key parties such as China -- in the "months" it says are left before the ABM Treaty is violated by its planned tests. The danger is that the administration's haste to ready a system -- and, perhaps, satisfy those in the Republican Party who have made missile defense an article of ideology -- will lead to unilateral action that will antagonize allies, inspire a weapons buildup by Russia or China and end by worsening U.S. security. At the moment, such haste looks like more of a threat than any ballistic missile.

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