

# Withdrawal from ABM treaty signals escalation of US militarism

Joseph Kay  
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President George W. Bush formally announced December 13 that the United States will unilaterally withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

The move is not a surprise, given the administration's public opposition to the treaty. Nevertheless, it is a milestone in the development of American foreign policy and in postwar international relations. It marks the first time in the nuclear era that the United States has abandoned a major arms control treaty.

Bush's announcement underscores the fact that his administration's "international coalition" against terrorism does not represent a retreat from his unilateralist policies, as some commentators have suggested, but rather a means of imposing Washington's agenda on enemies and nominal allies alike.

The treaty was signed by the Soviet Union and the United States in 1972, with Russia taking the place of the USSR after the latter's collapse in 1991. It was meant to limit the buildup of nuclear arms by prohibiting the construction of missile defenses. A provision allows for the withdrawal of either side after giving six months notice.

The ABM treaty was an important part of the general framework of international relations sponsored by the United States following the Second World War. The predominant view within American ruling circles at that time—articulated first by President Eisenhower—was that arms control agreements and international institutions such as the United Nations were necessary and positive, from the standpoint of US interests, in a world where the US had to contend with the Soviet Union. They were seen as a component part of the overarching Cold War policy of containment: arrangements could be made with the Soviet Union that would preserve a certain amount of international stability while allowing the US to advance its interests abroad at the expense of Moscow.

From the beginning, however, an extreme-right tendency within the political establishment opposed the ABM, and arms control measures in general, as an impermissible concession to the Soviet Union and an unacceptable constraint on the use of US military power. For decades, this tendency was held in check and remained in the minority within the bourgeois establishment. Even during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, which saw a major expansion of the military, the American government operated within the framework of international arms control agreements.

Since the end of the Cold War, this extreme-right tendency within the American ruling elite, concentrated in the Republican Party and a section of the military brass, has insisted with increasing truculence on the lifting of all treaty limitations. In the absence of any state capable of militarily challenging American hegemony, it sees a unique opportunity to employ armed force to assert American interests internationally.

In recent years this unilateralist faction has gained increasing control over American foreign policy. In a major blow to the foreign policy of the Clinton administration, the Republican Senate in 1999 rejected ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which would have limited the capacity of the United States to test nuclear weapons. More recently,

the Bush administration has moved to scuttle the Biological Weapons Convention, which would have placed similar constraints on American germ warfare programs.

The ABM treaty has long been a favorite target for these forces. During the Clinton administration, construction of a national missile defense and the abandonment of the ABM treaty were prominent planks in the Republican Party program, which Republican leaders—in particular, then-Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Jesse Helms—sought to advance as part of the campaign of political intrigue and dirty tricks against the Democratic White House.

The installation of George W. Bush as president last January was seen as a golden opportunity to junk the ABM treaty and initiate a further buildup of American military might. As with every reactionary policy pursued by the American government since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Bush has attempted to justify the abandonment of ABM by declaring it a necessary step in the "war on terrorism." In a December 11 speech at the Citadel Military Academy, he stated, "The attacks on our nation made even more clear that we need to build limited and effective defenses against a missile attack.... We must protect Americans and our friends against all forms of terror, including the terror that could arrive on a missile."

Bush critics in the Democratic Party have pointed to the obvious fact that, if anything, the hijack-bombings showed that a missile defense is of little use in preventing terrorist attacks. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda are not even close to having the capacity to attack the US with ballistic missiles.

But the construction of a missile defense has far broader purposes. Abandoning the ABM will allow the US to pursue a wide range of tests over the coming months, including defense systems involving land, sea, air and space-based weapons. The Pentagon has plans for various systems, which would, if successful, allow for an even more aggressive military policy by removing the capacity of states to retaliate with missile strikes against the US.

In line with the general foreign policy objectives of the Republican Party and the Pentagon, the very idea of an international treaty codifying military restrictions has become something of a bogeyman. Bush has repeatedly indicated his aversion to treaties in general, feeling that the US should be able to do what it wants, when it wants.

Indeed, Russia has indicated its willingness to make amendments to the ABM treaty that would allow for the tests the US plans to conduct. But because such proposals would preserve the treaty, the Bush administration has rejected them.

The *Washington Post* quoted an administration official who summed up the basic disagreement that led to American withdrawal: "The Russians wanted a treaty. The administration didn't want a treaty. The administration wants maximum flexibility. The Russians wanted something that allowed them some oversight."

For the time being, the Russian response to the withdrawal has been somewhat muted. Since September 11, Russia has sought closer relations

with the US as a means of advancing its own interests abroad, including its ongoing struggle against Muslim separatists in the southern province of Chechnya, near the Caspian Sea. Russian President Vladimir Putin has also been courting American support for Russian entry into the World Trade Organization and closer relations with NATO.

Moscow's post-September 11 diplomacy is partially responsible for Bush's decision to announce the withdrawal now, at a time when he could count on a conciliatory Russian response. In a reply that had been carefully coordinated with Washington over the previous week, Putin repeated his opposition to the abandonment of the ABM treaty, but added, "I think that the current level of bilateral relations between the Russian Federation and the US should not only be retained, but also used in order to work out the new framework of a strategic relationship as soon as possible."

This response is in sharp contrast to more bellicose warnings made by Russia in the past. While Putin is hoping that by accommodating the US he will be in a better position to advance Russian interests, a substantial section of the Russian ruling elite, especially within the military establishment, is not satisfied with the gains this policy has brought. It is very wary of American involvement in Central Asia and the former Soviet Republics, as well as the implications for Russia of a unilateral buildup of American military power.

Bush's announcement is likely to harden divisions within the Russian ruling circles, with some advocating a strong stance against the United States. Vladimir Lukin, vice-speaker of the state Duma and former Russian ambassador to the US, summarized the frustration felt within the Russian elite: "We supported the US unconditionally, we worked, we shared all sorts of very sensitive data that have to do with combating terrorism. What happened after that is, the moment we scored the victory [in Afghanistan], the following line prevailed in the US: 'Thanks, but on matters concerning the both of us, we will be acting the way we want.'" Within the Russian military, there are many calls for abandoning the strategic arms limitation treaties (START I and II).

The opposition within Europe to American withdrawal from the ABM treaty has been more vocal than in Russia. The British newspaper, *Financial Times*, remarked in an editorial on December 13, "There is a disturbing return to unilateralism suggested by Mr. Bush's decision. He has proclaimed the virtues of multi-lateralism in the anti-terrorism war. But he has yet to show that on issues close to his heart he can bend to the wishes of his allies. He could have finessed the disagreements over the ABM treaty but chose not to. There will be other questions on which Washington will disagree with its NATO allies. Mr. Bush should not forget that even if the US needs no outside military support, political backing is invaluable, as the current war has shown."

The ruling elites of Europe are concerned about the prospect of growing conflicts with the United States, as is evident in the *Financial Times'* oblique reference to the divisions within the NATO alliance. On issues such as a potential intervention in Iraq and the character of the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the interests of the various states within NATO are opposed.

The question running through the minds of many European officials is: What happens when the American government wants to pursue a course of action contrary to the interests of the states of Europe? The answer suggested by Bush's policy toward the ABM treaty, as well as its previous unilateralist course, is that the interests of Washington's NATO allies will not be a major factor in American decision-making.

The abandonment of the ABM treaty is certain to have an extremely destabilizing effect in other parts of the world as well. Many commentators have pointed to the fact that China will likely modernize its nuclear weapons in response, which could lead to a general arms race in Asia, a region that is already at the boiling point. India will likely respond by increasing its nuclear capacity, provoking Pakistan to do the same. The

Pakistani newspaper *Frontier Post* has reported that the US has plans to set up a missile defense in Afghanistan, which would only further undermine whatever stability remains in the region.

The consequences that withdrawal will have on international relations has provoked concern within sections of the American ruling class, particularly in the Democratic Party. These factions feel that American interests are threatened if relations with Russia and Europe are undermined. The Democrats are not opposed to the aims that Bush seeks to pursue by withdrawing from the ABM treaty—in a word, the establishment of American hegemony—but the means by which the administration seeks to advance these aims.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle stated, "[The decision] undermines the fragile coalition that we have with our allies." In order to pursue its war in Afghanistan, some Democrats have argued, it has been necessary to garner the support of other countries. Withdrawing from the ABM treaty will undermine such support in future interventions. In response, some Senate leaders have threatened to pass legislation that would withhold funding for any tests that would violate the treaty.

There is no reason to believe that Democratic opposition to Bush's policy will be serious or prolonged. Over the past decade, the consensus within the corporate, political and military elite has shifted far to the right, undermining support for the traditional means by which American imperialism sought to advance its interests, a strategy that combined covert operations and military force with arms control and related international agreements.

The Democrats have moved to accommodate this change. During the Clinton administration, the Democrats increasingly sought to appease Republican opposition to the ABM treaty. Clinton initiated the most recent plans to construct a missile defense, and at one point during his administration a bipartisan bill was passed that obliges the government to construct a missile defense as soon as technologically feasible. The bill diplomatically omitted any mention of the ABM treaty.

While the war in Afghanistan has been cloaked in the rhetoric of an international campaign against terrorism, it is, in reality, an attempt to assert American interests in the region—above all, control over the vast oil reserves in and around the Caspian Sea. Scuttling the ABM treaty is entirely consistent with the unilateralist and aggressive character of this war.

For some 40 years, from the late 1940s until the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US served as the main force for stabilizing inter-imperialist relations and maintaining an overarching framework for the economic development of world capitalism. The ABM treaty and the arms control system of which it is a part were cornerstones in this international structure.

Now America's role has been reversed. The US is the primary force within world capitalism for the destabilization of international economic, political and military relations. It pursues its national interests with scant regard for international treaties and institutions or the needs of its nominal allies. It seeks to use its economic and, above all, military superiority to throw its weight around and bend everyone else to its demands, or crush them. This is an extremely reckless policy that is creating the conditions for international crises of unprecedented proportions, which inevitably will give rise to new revolutionary upheavals and future debacles for US imperialism itself.



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