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HAS THE ABM TREATY A FUTURE?

by Ronald G. Purver

INTRODUCTION

When the 'Treaty between the USA and the USSR on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems' (the ABM Treaty) was signed in 1972, it was hailed by its negotiators and independent observers alike as the greatest achievement in the history of nuclear arms control. Severely restricting the deployment of ballistic missile defences (BMD) by the two countries, the Treaty was widely believed to have prevented a major new round in the arms race which would have cost tens, if not hundreds, of billions of dollars. This in turn would have considerably worsened US-Soviet relations and brought the world closer to an outbreak of nuclear war.

A decade and a half later, while still in force, the Treaty has come under a number of severe challenges threatening its very existence. Each side has charged the other with blatant violations of its provisions. The US Government has adopted a novel interpretation of its terms, designed to permit unfettered development of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). That project, it is widely acknowledged, will indisputably run afoul of the Treaty's provisions within a few short years. And the inability of the superpowers to agree on the question of ballistic missile defences is blocking progress on the reduction of strategic offensive missiles in the negotiations currently going on in Geneva.

How did this unhappy state of affairs come to pass? Will the ABM Treaty be reaffirmed and strengthened, in either its present form or some amended version? Or will it be cast on the trash-heap of history, as were the disarmament agreements of earlier eras? Most importantly, has the ABM Treaty outlived its usefulness? Does it deserve to die, or can it still serve a useful purpose in moderating the strategic arms competition between the superpowers and reducing the likelihood of nuclear war?

EARLY EFFORTS AT BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENCE

Both the US and the USSR began working on anti-ballistic missile systems — missiles designed to intercept other missiles in flight — in the late 1950s. The US successfully tested one at Kwajalein Island in the Pacific in 1962, but refrained from immediate operational deployment. About the same time the Soviets appeared to be deploying a system around Leningrad. This was dismantled, however, and a new system, the 'Galosh,' began around Moscow in 1964.

During the mid-1960s, pressures mounted in the US to match the Soviet system. The Johnson Administration sought to deflect these pressures by engaging Moscow in strategic arms limitations covering both offensive and defensive weapons. At first, the Soviets were unenthusiastic about the idea of limiting defensive missiles, refusing to accept the theory that such systems could be destabilizing. American critics of BMD argued that it would stimulate an arms race not just in defensive weapons but also in offensive systems. The adversary would be driven to acquire larger forces in order to 'saturate' the defences. Further, BMD would increase the temptation of one side to strike first in a crisis, if it thought that its system might be adequate to deal with the 'ragged retaliation' of a wounded adversary. Even though it would be extremely expensive, its effectiveness was doubtful, given the apparent ease with which it could be overcome by Soviet countermeasures. Nevertheless, in September 1967 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced that the US would deploy a limited or 'thin' ABM system, named 'Sentinel,' intended primarily for defence against the Chinese nuclear 'threat' but with some obvious capacity against limited Soviet attacks as well. In March 1969 US President Richard Nixon announced a change in the American ABM programme gearing it, at least initially, to the defence of

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