

The interpretation of the ABM Treaty has, therefore, become an issue of considerable debate, centring on how ABM systems based on new technologies are dealt with by the Treaty. The key to the debate lies in Article V of the Treaty which states that:

Each Party undertakes not to develop, test, or deploy ABM systems or components which are sea-based, air-based, space-based, or mobile land-based.

Proponents of the new or "broad" interpretation maintain that the systems and components referred to in Article V are defined by Article II. The use of the phrase "currently consisting of" as part of the definition of a system in Article II, according to this interpretation, means that only systems based on 1972 technology (current at the time the Treaty was signed) are banned. This would mean that systems based on new technology in the basing modes listed were not affected.

The traditional or "narrow" interpretation holds that Article V clearly bans all sea-based, space-based or mobile land-based systems and components, whether they are based on 1972 technology or not. According to this interpretation, the phrase "currently consisting of" was used in Article II only to demonstrate the functional nature of the definition, not to exclude future technologies.

The Soviet Union has stated that it believes the narrow interpretation to be the only valid interpretation of the Treaty. Indeed, until 1985 this was the only interpretation held by the United States. The Soviets have stood by this position at the Defense and Space Arms Talks, insisting that the testing of ABM systems and components must be restricted by the traditional interpretation. The United States at the Defense and Space Arms Talks has focussed on discussing the effects of the relationship between offence- and defence-based systems on the strategic balance; attempting to negotiate a smooth transition from an offense-dominated to a defence-dominated military structure; and raising concerns over possible Soviet violations of the ABM Treaty, especially concerning the radar site at Krasnoyarsk, in central Siberia.

Both sides long used the 10 December 1987 Joint Statement from the Washington Summit as the basis for an agreement in negotiations that have taken place since. At Washington, they agreed to have their negotiators work out "an agreement that would commit the sides to observe the ABM Treaty, as signed in 1972, while conducting their research, development, and testing as required, which are permitted by the ABM Treaty, and not to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, for a specified period of time." Intensive discussions on strategic stability were to begin not later than three years before the end of the specified non-withdrawal period. Failing agreement in these discussions, each side would be free to pursue its own course of action once the non-withdrawal period was over. The general wording of the Joint Statement, however, left open the question of the narrow versus the broad interpretation of the ABM Treaty.

On 15 January 1988, at the ninth round of the NST talks, the Soviets tabled a draft protocol to the proposed Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) Treaty. During the ten-year non-withdrawal period suggested in the proposal, testing of ABM systems and components would be restricted by the narrow interpretation of the ABM Treaty. The United States rejected the