



AFPC CONFERENCE: 2010 Missile Defense Conference Examines New START Treaty, Obama Priorities

May 21, 2010

Related Categories: Missile Defense

Related Expert: Ilan I. Berman

On May 20th, the American Foreign Policy Council convened the eighth installment of its Capitol Hill conference series on “Missile Defenses and American Security.” As in previous years, the event brought together leading national security and defense practitioners to examine the current state of the U.S. missile defense system, and ballistic missile threats to the United States. Speakers included: Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC); Lt. Gen. Henry Obering, former director of the Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency; former NASA Associate Deputy Administrator Eric Sterner; former Acting Assistant Defense Secretary Frank Gaffney; and former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Robert Joseph.

In his keynote address, Senator DeMint criticized the “New START” treaty just concluded between Moscow and Washington, dubbing it a concrete demonstration of the Obama administration’s willingness to restrict America’s ability to defend itself as a confidence-building measure to foreign nations. That approach, he argued, is foolhardy, insofar as it connotes a false equivalence between the U.S. and Russia.

Moreover, the new START agreement is likely to have the opposite of the administration’s intended result of reducing the global danger of nuclear weapons, spurring America’s adversaries to make greater investments in their own capabilities as a way to secure a strategic advantage over the United States, based on the perception that the U.S. is incapable or unwilling to defend itself.

In his presentation, General Obering outlined the similarities and differences between the Bush and Obama administration’s missile defense plans. The Bush strategy, he pointed out, involved the development of an integrated, layered system aimed at dealing with ballistic missiles of all ranges in all phases of flight. The “phased, adaptive approach” adopted by the Obama administration continues much of this focus with regard to short- and medium-range threats. But under the new plan, effective protection against long-range threats is now several years further away.

The next speaker, Eric Sterner, turned his attention to the Obama administration’s emerging space priorities. Currently, Sterner outlined, the White House is making strides in two arenas. The first is that of “civil space,” where the Administration has trimmed key programs and refocused priorities, abandoning programs such as manned spaceflight in the process. The second is the “space policy review,” currently under formulation by the White House, which places greater emphasis on enhanced cooperation with emerging space-faring powers. Both avenues, Sterner noted, are currently only loosely connected to the idea of space as a crucial military operating environment – a disconnect which has empowered U.S. adversaries and begun to constrain our mobility in that theater.

Thereafter, Mr. Gaffney returned to the topic of “New START.” The agreement, he maintained, is explicitly being described by the Obama administration as a vehicle for U.S. denuclearization. Yet the larger goal of “global zero” of which the new arms control deal with Russia is a part is flawed on many fronts; it is unachievable, insofar as U.S. denuclearization will incentivize cheating among U.S. adversaries, and has a delegitimizing effect on the idea of nuclear deterrence. New START, he concluded, is a triumph of Russian diplomacy, placing inordinate and disproportionate burdens on the U.S. side while giving the Kremlin both strategic advantage and freedom of action.

The final conference presentation was given by the Hon. Robert Joseph. Joseph emphasized that, while nonproliferation lies at the very center of the Obama administration’s foreign policy agenda, the methods it has embraced in pursuing this goal have been profoundly self-defeating. In particular, diplomacy and engagement with Iran have only served to embolden the Iranian regime, and provide it time to forge ahead with its nuclear effort. Citing this example and that of the “new START” treaty, Joseph concluded that ideology has replaced strategy in how the current administration deals with proliferation threats.