

U.S.-RUSSIA INK AGREEMENT ON MISSILE WARNING INFO

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The initiative announced last week by President Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin on the exchange of information on missile launches is an attempt to codify earlier agreements and demonstrate a positive result from the summit meeting, according to arms control experts.

The agreement builds on the 1971 Agreement on Measures to Reduce the Risk of Outbreak of Nuclear War Between the United States and the former Soviet Union, according to Spurgeon Keeny, former deputy director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

"This agreement is repackaging things that already exist," Keeny told Defense Daily in a telephone interview, "It [the 1971 agreement] appears to have a lot of what they're talking about now in it. The issue is to what extent the agreements have been implemented."

The new initiative calls for cooperation and sharing of early warning data on missile launches, as well as possibly expanding to include other nations in a multilateral agreement. The measures are an effort to increase confidence between the command authorities of the two countries in case of an accidental or misinterpreted launch.

Concerns over accidental or rogue launches have been heightened by recent economic hardships in Russia, as well as the proliferation of ballistic missile technologies to other countries like India, North Korea, Iran and Pakistan.

North Korea launched a Taepo Dong I missile last week with a range of over 1,200 miles. Such an unannounced launch could be dangerous if misinterpreted by U.S. or Russian missile watchers, Keeny said. In 1995, a scientific rocket launched from Norway was misinterpreted and caused the Russians to go to a full strategic alert that brought them to within minutes of firing missiles in response.

"I interpret this as an attempt to flesh out and institutionalize earlier agreements," Keeny said. "I think it's a positive development. One has to see the details to see how it will be worked out. This is an effort to have more facility to do this quickly and improve our confidence."

The details of the agreement, however, have not yet been fully worked out. Possibilities include sharing early warning sensor information and even operating a joint early warning center between the two countries. That raises the question of how much sensitive data the United States will release on their data collection methods.

"There are some technical issues in how you alert them, but this kind of thing [an accidental launch] is a serious matter, and I think we will do what we have to," Keeny said.

The agreement also dovetails nicely with the presidential summit and recent efforts to encourage the Russian military in its custody of nuclear weapons.

"All summits seek to come up with some positive result. Some of these agreements have roots in the past, but this [agreement] was to do some current business, in the context of the summit."

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