National Missile Defense and United States Domestic Politics

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At the 2000 presidential elections near a vigorous debate continues within the United States about the feasibility and effectiveness of a national missile defense (NMD) system, and whether the United States should deploy such a system. The discussion often revolves around the technical aspects of the proposed system, and its effect on global strategic stability and arms control. However, domestic political considerations will play a significant role in the decision-making process. This paper will briefly examine those domestic political factors, and discuss the benefits to the Republican Party as a result of the presidential election. The executive branch is responsible for Congress to amend or reject, in which case they will submit the proposal to the President. A Congressional approval for the national budget and its programs. While the President proposes a budget, Congress essentially controls the money, and as such can exert enormous leverage to support programs it deems worthy. As a practical matter, this division of powers compels both sides to seek a compromise. Like all programs, NMD is subject to budget constraints. The cold war ending and the Republican Party as strong on domestic issues, such as healthcare and worker's rights. While this is a simplified assessment, to some degree the struggle for domestic power between the two parties still revolved around how the voters would view the Republican Party's record on the war on terrorism, soft on defense, while the Democrats would attack their image of being warmongers. For example, President Lyndon Johnson's victory over Barry Goldwater in 1964 was in part attributable to his television commercial where he implied the election of Goldwater would result in a nuclear war. These partisan battles continue. Both Democratic and Republican politicians seek to capitalize on and exploit national missile defense in an effort to gain and consolidate political power. To the extent the American voting public focuses on arms control, each party wishes to appeal to public opinion, and preserve and expand its power accordingly. American domestic political considerations have frequently played a factor in the development of U.S. strategic policy. When President Ronald Reagan proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), the economic and public sentiment shifted in favor of it. Even though ThAAD military system was capable of winning the nuclear arms control front. President Reagan also sought Congressional support for the controversial MX missile program. While SDI was not part of the reason for the conservative effort to this mutual assured destruction (MAD) doctrine and the ABM treaty, SDI also provided with a positive policy initiative in the national defense arena, and a counter to the nuclear arms race.

The struggle between Republicans and Democrats to win the battle for public opinion regarding national missile defense continued into the 1990's. When President Clinton took office in 1993, his administration was committed to supporting ABM treaty, and he said it would spend less money on SDI, arguing a more moderate approach was necessary. In conclusion, an analysis of American NMD policy must look at the domestic political considerations driving the programs, along with NMD's technical and strategic issues. At the time of this writing, the presidential election is too close to predict. If George W. Bush wins, he would push more aggressively for NMD. Furthermore, if Republican control continues in Congress, a Republican President will have more ability to implement his NMD policies. If Al Gore wins the election, his ability to slow the push for NMD and limit its deployment configuration will depend on which party controls Congress. If the status quo (a Democratic President and Republican Congress) continues, domestic political pressures for some form of NMD will continue the drive toward deployment.

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