National Missile Defense and United States Domestic Politics

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At the 2000 presidential elections near a vigourous 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. At the same time, domestic political considerations will play a significant role in the decision-making process. This paper will briefly examine those domestic political issues, and as a result, the executive branch's decision to ask the Congress for permission to proceed with the deployment of a national missile defense system. The paper will conclude this decision was made due to the pressure from the Republican Party as it struggles with the nuclear freeze movement. And indeed, a December 1985 poll showed that 61 percent of the American Public who were aware of SDI supported it.

Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1983, public sentiment supporting a freeze of nuclear weapons at then current levels was gaining strength. For example, in 1982, more than 500,000 people marched in New York City to demand an end to the nuclear arms race. Reagan opposed such a freeze, arguing it would lock the United States into an inferior strategic position. The Reagan administration was concerned about losing the public support for the arms control front. Reagan also argued for the deployment of a national missile defense system. Despite the public opposition, the Senate Armed services Committee approved the National Missile Defense Act of 1999. In 2000, the Senate Armed Services Committee approved the National Missile Defense Act of 1999. The Act would authorize the development and deployment of a national missile defense system.

Throughout 1998, Republican and Democratic lawmakers debated the merits of NMD development and deployment, with, generally speaking, the Republican side pushing for development. In particular, the Republicans argued that the Clinton administration had failed to develop an effective NMD system. The Democrats, on the other hand, argued that the administration had been too quick to deploy an NMD system.

The struggle between Republicans and Democrats to win the battle for public opinion regarding national missile defense continued into the 1990s. When President Clinton took office in 1993, his administration announced its policy of deploying an NMD system. This policy was called the "Three-Plus-Three" plan, and it was intended to provide an effective NMD system by the year 2003. The plan was approved by the United States Congress and signed into law by President Clinton.

In an effort to deflect the Republican attacks that it was _soft on defense_, in 1996 the Clinton administration announced its Three-Plus-Three NMD plan. The plan proposed development of an NMD system in three phases, with each phase focusing on different aspects of the development process. The first phase would focus on developing the technology necessary to build an effective NMD system. The second phase would focus on building the infrastructure necessary to deploy an NMD system. The third phase would focus on deploying the NMD system.

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Conservative critics of the Three-Plus-Three plan attacked it on the grounds that it would not protect the United States from a ballistic missile attack. This legislation included a provision that would allow the President to terminate the program if it was determined that the NMD system was not effective. However, in 1999, in the face of overwhelming Congressional support, and Democratic fear that they would be vulnerable to Republican attack in the 2000 campaign, President Clinton announced his intention to deploy a limited NMD system in 2003.

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