National Missile Defense and United States Domestic Politics

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OVERVIEW

PARTICIPANTS

AGENDA

PAPERS

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As 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.

As a result of the division of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the United States Government, the President must seek 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 this give and take.

During the cold war, large portions of the American electorate viewed the Republican Party as strong on national defense and the Democratic 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 adheres to this general framework. Republican lawmakers often attacked Democrats as being _soft on defense_ while the Democrats attacked Republicans as _dangerous 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) 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. A Democratic Congress had passed a nuclear freeze resolution in 1982, and the Republican administration was concerned about losing the public?s support on the arms control front. President Reagan also sought Congressional support for the controversial MX missile program. While SDI was in part the result of conservative distrust of the mutually assured destruction (MAD) doctrine and the ABM treaty, SDI also provided Reagan with a positive policy initiative in the national defense arena, and a counter to 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.

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 1992, his administration indicated that it continued to support the ABM treaty, and that it would spend less money on SDI, arguing a massive space- based defense system was unnecessary. National missile defense was not the only foreign policy issue with domestic repercussions. For example, Clinton used NATO?s expansion into former Warsaw pact nations in Eastern Europe as a means to generate political support among American ethnic voters of Polish, Hungarian and Czech descent. The push for the expansion of NATO in the early-mid 1990?s also served to deflect attention from Clinton?s failed national health care program.

After President Clinton took office, the United States took renewed interest in theater missile defense systems (TMD), focusing on protection of U.S. forces from the threat posed by theater-range ballistic missiles. This renewed attention, in part arising from U.S. experience during the Persian Gulf War, resulted in continued focus on the U.S. Army?s Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. The Clinton administration?s decision to proceed with THAAD flight tests in 1995 was prompted, in part, by election of a Republican- controlled Congress in 1994. Conservative Republicans in particular attacked any efforts to restrict ABM development. Indeed, the Republican _Contract with America_

position paper called for the construction of a national missile defense, and aimed at _requiring the Defense Department to deploy antiballistic missile systems capable of defending the United States against ballistic missile attacks._ By emphasizing the THAAD program, the Clinton administration thus attempted to neutralize possible Republican attacks and efforts to weaken the ABM treaty.

Republican efforts to push NMD continued after 1994. In 1995, the Senate Armed Services Committee of the Republican-controlled Senate passed a resolution declaring that it was the policy of the United States to deploy a national missile defense system by 2003. President Clinton vetoed the bill containing this resolution, and the compromise bill stated the United States would _develop for deployment a multiple site_ defense, without a deadline for deployment. President Clinton vetoed that compromise language as well.

American conservatives then attacked the Clinton administration on missile defense in 1996, arguing to the public that Clinton?s alleged failure to embrace such a defense demonstrated a weakness in his commitment _to defend America._ However, as Clinton?s 1996 victory demonstrated, the NMD issue apparently did not make a difference in the election results.

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 withing three years, and, only if necessary, deployment within the next three years. This plan included further work on the THAAD program, but also proposed an NMD composed of 100 interceptors to be launched from a single deployment site. This program ostensibly aimed at countering the limited ballistic missile threat from a so-called _rogue state,_ such as Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Libya, (now called _states of special concern_) or an accidental launch from China or Russia. The timing of the program also allowed Clinton to defer any decision on NMD until well after the 1996 presidential election.

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. The Republican-controlled Senate Armed Services Committee proposed the National Missile Defense Act in 1997, requiring deployment of an NMD consisting of not 100, but hundreds of interceptors, including space-based weapons, based at several different launch sites. However, this bill ultimately failed to pass.

Throughout 1998, Republican and Democratic lawmakers debated the merits of NMD development and deployment, with, generally speaking, the Republican side pushing for more comprehensive development and faster deployment. For example, the Republican-controlled Congress added one billion dollars to the 3.7 billion dollars already designated for theater and national missile defenses. The debate in part revolved around American intelligence estimates of whether and when certain nations would pose an ICBM threat to the United States. In 1998, a Republican bill introduced in the Senate titled the _American Missile Protection Act of 1998_ stated it was U.S. policy to _deploy as soon as is technologically possible an effective NMD system capable of defending the territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack._ This legislation failed in the face of Democratic opposition.

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 signed into law the National Missile Defense Act of 1999, which calls for deployment of NMD _as soon as is technologically possible._ This legislation included compromise language which let both sides interpret the Act for their own purposes, including a provision inserted by the Clinton administration stating that any decision to deploy must consider NMD?s effect on international relations. It also allowed the Clinton administration to defuse a Republican political weapon in the upcoming election. One commentator went so far as to state that _NMD has more to do with defending Al Gore from George Bush than it

does with defending the U.S. from ballistic missiles._

Until recently, there is little evidence to suggest any particular concern on the American public?s part about NMD. In fact, one commentator has referred to the American public_s _demonstrated indifference_ to NMD. Regarding international affairs, the threat of terrorism was much more visible in the public opinion polls, polls tracked carefully by both parties. Whether this has changed is unclear. However, one commentator stated that NMD is now the _central defense and foreign policy question of the presidential campaign._ Thus the Republican and Democratic parties continue to jockey for political advantage. For example, one Republican Senator sent a fund raising letter to potential donors asking for a _gift_ of $25.00 or more to help _do what President Clinton will not_ and protect the U.S. from a ballistic nuclear attack.

Domestic political considerations may have exerted additional influence on the location of the proposed NMD site on Shemya Island, Alaska. Many have wondered whether Alaska is the best site for an NMD system, as it is far from the lower 48 states with their population centers and strategic delivery systems. However, Alaska?s Republican Senators are extremely powerful, and apparently no one dared anger them by suggesting that an NMD system not cover Alaska, cost or effectiveness notwithstanding.

Any attempt to understand the U.S. push towards NMD would be incomplete without an examination of the economics behind the technology. Between 1983 and the fall of 1999 the U.S. spent approximately 60 billion dollars on SDI, NMD and related programs. Current estimates of the cost of deploying an NMD system range up to 60 billion dollars. The major American defense contractors have a huge stake in the NMD program, with the four largest, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and TRW receiving over 2.2 billion dollars in missile-defense money over a recent period of time. These contractors compete fiercely to get their share of defense related business, including NMD contracts, and exert huge political influence on American domestic politics due to the money they spend and the employment they generate.

Boeing is the NMD Lead System Integrator Prime Contractor, responsible for the development and integration of all NMD elements. Lockheed Martin is the contractor for the NMD Payload Launch Vehicle and the prime contractor for the THAAD system. Indeed, on June 28, 2000 the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command awarded Lockheed Martin an approximate $4 billion contract to begin the Engineering and Manufacturing Development phase of the THAAD program. Raytheon is the prime contractor for the NMD intercept component of the Ground Based Interceptor, and TRW is responsible for the NMD Battle Management Command, Control and Communications system. During FY?s 1998 and 1999, approximately 60% of missile defense contracts went to these four contractors.

These contractors, and others, have lobbied legislators extensively to persuade them to support development and deployment of an NMD system, spending approximately 35 million dollars in 1997 and 1998. These companies further donated many millions of dollars to the candidates and parties they support. Over the last 5 years, more of this money has gone to the Republican party and its candidates. Additionally, a domestic think tank with considerable influence in Congress, the Center for Security Policy (CSP), has strongly advocated NMD development and deployment. Boeing, Lockheed Martin and TRW have contributed money to the CSP.

The Pentagon also desires to keep the private-sector defense industry strong, thus stimulating competition and reducing costs. The Pentagon does not want the industry to collapse due to lack of contracts, thus endangering the ability of the U.S. to develop new weapons systems. Thus the military has a vested interest in keeping new weapons systems in development. Furthermore, as military personnel often seek employment with the private defense industry, some critics have alleged a _revolving door_ and resulting conflicts of interest.

Additionally, some have criticized the contractors for alleged conflicts of interest stating that the contractors play a large role in testing the NMD technology. Since the contractors stand to gain billions of dollars in contracts if NMD is deployed or if development continues, these critics argue that the tests are not objective. The critics call for appointment of an independent panel to assess the merits of deployment.

Large American defense contractors wield enormous economic leverage domestically, due to the large amounts of money they can inject into the system. While the exact influence such lobbying and donations exerts upon U.S. missile defense policy is difficult to say, a serious analysis must factor them into the equation. In any event, along with the major contractors, a large network of subcontractors, business interests and labor unions will continue to assert their economic self-interest, press their legislators, and attempt to influence the NMD decision-making process.

U.S. presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore have stated different positions on NMD, with Bush advocating a vigorous, expanded NMD, and Gore calling for a more limited system. Mr. Bush indicated he supports a defensive system based on land, sea, and possibly in space, while Mr. Gore supports a smaller land-based system aimed at defending against accidental launch or an attack by one of the _states of concern._

Both the Republican and Democratic parties adopt a platform every four years which sets forth their policy objectives. The 2000 Republican platform uses NMD as a domestic political weapon, stating in part that _the current administration at first denied the need for an NMD system. Then it endlessly delayed, despite the constant concern expressed by the Republican Congress. Now the administration has become hopelessly entangled in its commitment to an obsolete treaty signed in 1972..._ The Republicans further state they will _seek a negotiated change in the ABM treaty that will allow the United States to use all technologies and experiments required to deploy robust missile defenses._

The 2000 Democratic platform counterattacked, alleging the Republicans support _an unproven, expensive and ill-conceived missile defense system that would plunge us into a new arms race._ The Democrats further advocate a _limited national missile defense system compatible with the Antiballistic Missile Treaty._ Thus, the two parties each seek to use NMD as a weapon in their struggle to win the 2000 election.

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 the election, he will push more aggressively for NMD. Furthermore, if Republican control of Congress continues, 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 pressures for some form of NMD will continue the drive toward deployment.

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