Michael Nacht

The Politics: How Did We Get Here?

After many years of being on the "back burner," it is increasingly apparent that a broad consensus is building among Washington policymakers to authorize the initial deployment of a national missile defense (NMD) system. This political turnaround is surprising given the decades-long debate about the wisdom of sustaining the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the unwillingness of Presidents Ronald Reagan or George Bush to seek withdrawal from this treaty. What has led to this pronounced shift in attitudes? It is instructive to understand the historical evolution of the political debate to appreciate both where we are and where we might be headed.

Historical Perspectives

It is a completely natural instinct to protect oneself against potential adversaries. The dynamic of measure, countermeasure, and countercountermeasure has always been at the heart of military affairs. Antisubmarine warfare capabilities and anti-aircraft systems have been central elements of modern military arsenals for more than a half-cen-

Michael Nacht is dean and professor of public policy in the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. From 1994 to 1997 he served as assistant director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

The Washington Quarterly • 23:3 pp. 87–94.

tury. After the United States and the Soviet Union began to deploy nuclear-armed ballistic missiles in the late 1950s and 1960s, it was not at all surprising that each side would in turn seek to acquire missile defenses against these nuclear threats. Indeed, it was the Soviet Union that first deployed an active ABM system around Moscow in the 1960s.

The Johnson-Nixon Years

Strategic writings in the 1960s pointing out that deployment of ABM systems could be "destabilizing" were embraced by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara during the Johnson administration. McNamara's basic argument, in rational and apolitical terms, was that if both Moscow and Washington deployed large numbers of nuclear-armed missiles, each side would be deterred from attacking the other as long as neither side believed it had an ability to disarm the other in a first strike. But if one side then began to deploy extensive ABM systems, in the name of its own defense, the other side could believe it was a provocative act. The reasoning goes as follows: A and B each have extensive offensive nuclear forces. Then A begins to deploy ABM systems. B believes that A plans to launch a first strike against B's nuclear forces and would then use its ABM systems to destroy B's residual retaliatory forces, thereby prevailing in a nuclear exchange.

McNamara believed, and argued to Soviet president Aleksey Kosygin at a U.S.-Soviet summit meeting in 1967 in Glassboro, New Jersey, that ABM system deployment was "destabilizing" in two respects: first, it would stimulate arms racing by each side to overcome the defenses of the other, and second, in a crisis, it could provoke a first strike by the side that did not have ABM systems. McNamara argued that "arms race stability" and "crisis stability" could both be preserved, ironically, if both sides were defenseless against nuclear attack. This reasoning gave birth to the notion of "mutual assured destruction" as the bedrock of deterrence in the nuclear age.

Although Kosygin rejected this reasoning at Glassboro, U.S.-Soviet negotiations in the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) led in

1972 to the signing of the ABM Treaty that limited both sides to modest missile defenses.

It is worth recalling this experience because it lies at the root of the current debate on missile defense. In the late 1960s, and through the ratification debate on the ABM Treaty, there was deep division within the U.S. strategic community (perhaps no more than a few hundred civilians and military leaders who paid attention to this issue) on whether this logic made sense. Senator Henry Jackson and his aide Richard Perle (later a high-ranking defense official in the Reagan administration) rejected McNamara's strategic logic. They argued that the United States should exploit its technological edge to protect U.S. cities and military targets from Soviet attack. They also doubted that Soviet officials would respect the treaty.

The ABM Treaty entered into force in October 1972 after a heated debate in the U.S. Senate, but the political wounds from these doctrinal differences never healed. There was then—and remains today—a large cadre of specialists who believe the entire notion of being defenseless in the nuclear age is totally misguided and highly dangerous. When the Soviet Union built up extensive nuclear forces in the 1970s and early 1980s, with the ABM Treaty in force, critics pointed to this evidence to support their case. Arms race stability, they argued, was in no way assured by being defenseless. Moreover, Paul Nitze and others claimed that the United States was in mortal danger of a "window of vulnerability" in which the Soviet Union might launch a "disarming first strike" against U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), long-range aircraft, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Being defenseless did not promote crisis stability either, it was argued.

The Reagan Years

When Reagan became president in 1981, he was committed to overturning this policy and launched the famous Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1983. The nuclear weapons laboratories, important segments of the aerospace industry, and senior civilian and military officials were

mobilized around the Strategic Defense Initiative Office (SDIO). The SDIO was to develop and deploy a space-based system that could destroy as many as several thousand Soviet ballistic missiles by striking them upon launch (in the "boost phase"), attacking those that survived in mid-course, and destroying what was left before they reached their targets (terminal phase). Critics of the ABM Treaty, on the one hand, applauded this hard-headed approach to dealing with the Soviet threat. On the other hand, supporters of the ABM Treaty were deeply alarmed that this initiative could even precipitate a Soviet-U.S. nuclear exchange with disastrous consequences.

Despite a tremendous budgetary, technological, and organizational effort, by the end of Reagan's second term, it was deemed not technically feasible to deploy such a system. Critics of SDI breathed a great sigh of relief and noted that Reagan did not exercise the supreme national interest clause to remove the United States from its obligations under the treaty. Despite much heated debate, the ABM Treaty survived the Reagan two-term presidency. Nonetheless, supporters of SDI claimed, and still claim today, that the defense initiative stimulated such a budgetary response in Moscow that it contributed greatly to their economic problems and was a key cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union.[1]

The Bush Years

When Bush replaced Reagan in 1989, and especially after the collapse of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney downgraded the SDIO to the Ballistic Missile Defense Office (BMDO). Its budget and political profile were greatly reduced and its mission changed to primarily research. Bush, however, in fact *advanced* Reagan's ideas of Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) and reached the START I agreement with President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 that promised major reductions in the deployed number of strategic nuclear warheads. There was no talk of ABM Treaty withdrawal or abrogation. Indeed, with the waning of the Cold War, military attention shifted away from nuclear forces and related systems. Each military service needed budgetary support for enhanced conven-

tional forces to wage several major regional conflicts simultaneously. Therefore, enthusiasm for missile defense programs declined within the military services.

What was unanticipated was the effect of the Persian Gulf War on the logic of missile defense. Saddam Hussein used Scud B missiles to attack U.S. forces and allies in Saudia Arabia and Israeli civilian targets. As a result, it became widely accepted across the political spectrum that what was needed was not space-based defenses against a Soviet threat, but land and sea-based defenses against regional missile threats. With the leadership of Senator Sam Nunn, then chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Representative Les Aspin, then chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, both houses of Congress passed overwhelmingly the Missile Defense Act of 1991. Research and development began on theater missile defenses (TMD) that would protect U.S. forward-deployed forces and our allies.

In the last year of the Bush administration and throughout the two terms of the Clinton presidency, there has been widespread (although not universal) support for these TMD programs. The U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force have all been funded to work on this problem. The Army land-based theater high-altitude area defense (THAAD) system, the Navy area-wide and theater-wide systems using Aegis cruisers, and the Air Force airborne laser programs and subsequent modifications all remain active despite some testing failures. The United States is also working with Israel on the Arrow system for Israeli defense and on European-based programs. It has further enhanced the Patriot system, originally designed for air defense and rushed into service during the Gulf War as a TMD system.

The Clinton Years

U.S. TMD initiatives triggered concern in Russia about its relationship to the ABM Treaty. President Bill Clinton, despite the criticism of primarily Republican skeptics, agreed in late 1993 to begin Russian-U.S. negotiations on missile defense "demarcation" to clarify the nature of TMD deployments and their relationship to the treaty. Because the Soviet Union

(one of the two original parties to the ABM Treaty) no longer existed, the United States agreed to negotiate not only with Russia but also with the other nuclear successor states of the Soviet Union (Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan). In the fall of 1997, a demarcation agreement was reached that permitted deployment of currently planned U.S. TMD systems. Critics argued that this agreement was wholly misguided because the Clinton administration was striving to preserve a treaty that is now completely out of date with a party that no longer exists.

The Resurgence of National Missile Defense

During the first Clinton term, the executive branch was far more cautious toward NMD. Several national intelligence estimates (NIEs) prepared for the president claimed that no "rogue state"—regional powers with hostile intent toward the United States, notably North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya—was likely to be able to mount an effective missile threat against the U.S. homeland for at least 15 years. The administration responded by mounting a "three plus three" program in which three years would be spent assessing the technical feasibility of an NMD program. If, after three years, it was determined that such a system could be deployed and if it was also judged that the threat warranted it, a decision could be made to deploy the system three years hence.

Buttressed by defense critics of the administration, several prominent members of Congress—including Senators Thad Cochran, Jon Kyl, Trent Lott, and John McCain, as well as Representative Curt Weldon—argued that this approach was too little and too late. Then, in 1998, these critics received two important measures of support. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld chaired a bipartisan committee of experts that issued a report in the summer claiming that the NIEs were incorrect and that rogue states could directly threaten U.S. targets within 5 years, not 15. Right after the report was issued, North Korea launched a missile test that traversed Japanese territory. These two developments altered congressional thinking on this issue and eventually led to a change in Clinton's position. He has now agreed to

authorize deployment of an NMD system against rogue states as soon as it is technologically feasible.

Major Considerations in the Current Debate

Supporters of NMD deployment argue:

1. The rogue state threat is real. The United States will have limited warning time once North Korea or Iran tests a missile system. We should put in the field whatever we have as soon as we have it; a partial defense is better than none.
2. The costs (several billions of dollars) are a tiny fraction of the defense budget and a small price to protect U.S. lives, property, and military assets from such attacks.
3. By deploying such systems quickly, the United States will maximize its freedom of action in regional crises or conflict situations. The United States would then not be deterred from conventional military involvement for fear of being vulnerable to missile attack from a rogue state.
4. The systems are not designed for use against either Russia or China, and we have told them so in great detail. If Russia cannot accept this pledge and is unwilling to renegotiate the ABM Treaty, it is no great loss because the treaty was never more than an illusion of security. As for China, the leadership has already decided to modernize its nuclear forces and is not responding to U.S. NMD programs. Eventually, we may need an anti-Chinese NMD system anyway as part of our efforts to defend Taiwan against Chinese attack. Our European allies may be nervous about these developments, but they are always nervous and will ultimately go along.

Critics of NMD deployment argue:

1. The systems have not proven technologically feasible. Some of the tests appear to have involved "cooperation" between target and interceptor to facilitate a successful result. Even if technologically feasible, the systems can be easily defeated by offensive saturation, by

decoys and other means of "fooling" the system, and by blinding the sensors on which the system's logic is based.
2. The several billion dollars in funding will continue to grow, robbing needed conventional-force programs of important budgetary support.
3. The United States is working to improve relations with both North Korea and Iran that would, it is hoped, lead to a moderation in their hostility toward the United States. Deployment of these systems does not serve these political purposes, especially because the systems are not likely to be effective anyway.
4. Deployment of NMD will mean the end of the ABM Treaty and a resurgence of a hostile U.S.-Russia strategic relationship that is not in either of our interests. Such a development would only retard Russian progress toward democratization and a true market economy. Deployment of NMD systems, coupled with TMD deployments in East Asia, will greatly exacerbate U.S.-China relations without enhancing U.S. security. Moreover, the Europeans will see these initiatives as a unilateralist effort to "decouple" U.S. security from its allies, stimulating European defense programs and policies taken without U.S. consultation. In sum, argue the critics, the U.S. will deploy an NMD system that does not work and in turn exacerbates relations with Russia, China, and our European allies.

Given that the presidential election campaign is in full swing, it is not surprising that this national security issue, as others, could be subject to the vicissitudes of U.S. domestic politics. Some claim that Clinton is likely to support at least initial deployment of the NMD program later this fall, in part to protect Vice President Al Gore from criticism on this issue by his Republican challenger. A few prominent Democratic senators, notably Joseph Biden, ranking minority member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, have urged that the decision be delayed until the next administration takes office. Others claim that the Republicans do not want to give Clinton and Gore any political cover on this issue. If the president requests funds for Phase I of the program, they predict that it will be defeated by the Republicans. The Republi-

can majority will argue that funding for a full-scale, three-phase system is warranted immediately and that to approve Clinton's request will reduce the likelihood that what is actually needed will be supported.

The NMD issue has yet to reach the political consciousness of most Americans. Foreign and defense policy issues generally have had a minor role in the past two presidential election campaigns. But Governor George W. Bush has consistently claimed that he will raise the "rebuilding of the U.S. military" as a key element of his campaign. Surely NMD will fit squarely in this strategy.

On the industrial front, NMD programs are looming as important new funding sources for key players in the aerospace industry. One can expect support for NMD from those organizations and individuals who stand to gain financially from an effort that could rise rapidly in budgetary support in the next decade.

There are two large unknowns in the NMD political equation. First, what is the probability of a crisis during 2000 in which missile defense issues play a role? Second, in the absence of such a crisis, how will the U.S. voter respond to a debate on these issues? Neither question is easily answered.

Slowly but surely we are all trying to adjust to the complexities and uncertainties of the contemporary era. This era is marked by the information revolution, economic globalization, the resurgence of ethnic conflict, rogue states whose behavior we are trying to moderate, and relations with Russia and China that are at the same time competitive and cooperative. This is a difficult and demanding environment for the United States to assess threats and countermeasures. The collective judgment of the public—from focus groups to the national election—will play a key role in shaping the future direction of the NMD effort.

Note

1. This claim is serious and worth detailed research to determine the degree of its validity; to this author's knowledge, such research is now being undertaken as part of the Cold War History Project of the Smithsonian Institution.