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By Dr. Keith B. Payne
President, National Institute for Public Policy
Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University

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3031 Javier Rd., Suite 300 • Fairfax, VA 22031 • (703) 698-0563

National Missile Defense: Why? And Why Now?

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The United States is moving toward the deployment of a BMD system of interceptor missiles and sensors designed to protect all fifty states from long-range ballistic missile attack. Such a system, now called National Missile Defense (NMD), has been the subject of three distinct rounds of fierce debate in Washington since the 1960s.

Until very recently, the United States consistently chose not to deploy NMD. The NMD debate of the late 1990s, however, is concluding with a political consensus for deployment. The question of interest here is why NMD, and why now? How is it possible that during the final months of the Clinton Administration a political consensus in favor of NMD deployment reins?

Several basic developments have converged at the end of the millennium to create momentum in favor of NMD sufficiently strong to gain the support of the majority in Congress and to overcome the Clinton Administration's ideological opposition to NMD. These developments are: the changed nature of the ballistic missile threat; the corresponding changes in U.S. NMD goals and technical requirements; the movement in U.S. thinking about the effectiveness of deterrence for protecting against missile threats; and, serious reconsideration of the 1972 ABM Treaty, a treaty dedicated to constraining NMD severely.

A comparison of the present NMD debate with those of the past illustrates the significance of these developments. Previous NMD debates occurred during the Cold War and understandably focused on U.S.-Soviet enmity. The Soviet long-range missile arsenal constituted a formidable technical challenge for NMD. Effective protection for American cities, if feasible, would have required an enormous and costly NMD system. These technical and budgetary realities were sufficient to limit support for the program, particularly within the military and Congress.

In addition, Washington had come to rely quite comfortably on nuclear deterrence as the proper way to address the Soviet missile threat. Over the decades of the Cold War pertinent military and civilian officials had come to believe that nuclear deterrence, managed properly, was a reliable tool for preventing Soviet missile attack. And, the prevailing theory of deterrence, commonly known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), was based on the mutual vulnerability of U.S. and Soviet societies to nuclear retaliation, a concept not sympathetic to NMD. Indeed, in 1972 Washington signed the ABM Treaty largely to codify the “stability” supposedly guaranteed via mutual societal vulnerability.

The political consensus now favoring NMD was forged under circumstances very different from those extant during past NMD debates. First, the ballistic missile threat against which NMD now is expected to play is not remotely comparable to that posed by the Soviet Union. The more modest missile

threat of concern now come from “rogues” such as North Korea, Iraq, and Iran—a threat substantiated by the findings of the Rumsfeld Commission and North Korea’s August 1998 test of a missile with the potential for ICBM-range. The obvious emergence of a rogue missile threat has intensified interest in NMD, while the relatively modest size of that threat has eased past concerns about cost and technical feasibility.

In addition to these developments, a new perspective on the reliability of deterrence has helped to move Washington toward a consensus on NMD. Unfortunately for NMD prospects, part of American strategic culture for decades has been great overconfidence in Washington’s capability to deter attack. Although such overconfidence in deterrence is folly, it has until recently been a matter of accepted wisdom in Washington, and easily juxtaposed to the case for NMD: why defend if you can deter reliably?

Fortunately, the Gulf War and the various post-Cold War crises with Iraq, Serbia, North Korea and China have encouraged a more sober assessment of what may reasonably be expected from deterrence. Government reports increasingly acknowledge that the deterrence of regional challengers may not follow Cold War patterns and may simply fail. This reversal in views about the reliability of deterrence has been extraordinarily significant to the current NMD debate. A generally accepted proposition now is that because the deterrence of missile attack can not be considered reliable, the United States must have some defense.

Serving as a hedge against the prospect of deterrence failure, however, is not the only newly-appreciated role for NMD. It now is viewed widely as having an important political purpose: helping to deny regional challengers the capability to deter and coerce the United States with missile threats. NMD increasingly is recognized as a necessary ingredient in any effort to counter the emerging rogue missile threat and correspondingly to limit the prospects for the deterrence and coercion of America's leadership by regional challengers.

Why NMD and why now? In large measure the answer is because a general consensus has emerged that: the rogue missile threat is serious and imminent, but sufficiently modest that NMD is practicable and affordable; and, in light of a sober estimate of the reliability of deterrence, NMD has the potential to satisfy important security requirements, i.e., providing a hedge against deterrence failure and protecting Washington against coercive missile threats from other-wise second-rate regional posers.

A final factor of significance involves the ABM Treaty. The Treaty originally was a reflection of U.S. deterrence policy. Accepted U.S. strategic thought posited that deterrence stability was the fruit of mutual vulnerability; and the ABM Treaty was intended to codify that vulnerability and stability. Until recently, it has been treated as sacrosanct.

The logic of continued willful U.S. vulnerability to missile attack, and a Treaty designed to ensure that vulnerability, however, has not fared well in the context of the various post-Cold War changes discussed above. With

Washington's greatly increased appreciation of the need for limited NMD, its feasibility and affordability, assaults on the previously sacrosanct Treaty have mounted. Even Clinton Administration State Department appointees strongly committed to the ABM Treaty have stated that the Administration will pursue negotiations with Russia to modify the Treaty, if a decision to deploy NMD is made, and if the system to be deployed requires Treaty modification.

This change in how the Treaty is regarded, from being venerated as an icon to being viewed widely as an out-of-date obstacle to be changed or removed, is profound in and of itself. It also is a reflection of the broader changes that have increased the general appreciation of the requirement for limited NMD.

How Russia plays out its hand with regard to the ABM Treaty will be critical to NMD's future. The official Russian position concerning the ABM Treaty is one of implacable opposition to U.S. NMD and any Treaty modification. This position is largely a reflection of the ideological rigidity and ignorance of the Russian leadership and Duma on the subject: to oppose anything proposed by Washington is seen as a sign of patriotism and strength in Moscow at this point.

Nevertheless, more reasonable and pragmatic Russian opinion does exist. Some in the Russian leadership, for example, recognize that Russian rigidity regarding the Treaty, could compel Washington to choose between withdrawing from the Treaty in order to deploy limited NMD, or continuing to remain vulnerable to all missile threats in deference to a Cold War agreement with a

country that no longer exists: at this point, at least, it appears that if such a decision is forced on Washington, it will choose withdrawal and limited NMD. This is a choice that Russians most knowledgeable on the subject understand and do not want to force upon the United States. They consider unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the Treaty to be the worst possible outcome for Moscow—maintaining some type of ABM Treaty limitations on the United States via negotiations ultimately is preferred to seeing the United States move off unilaterally with no restrictions. Consequently, it is possible, even likely, that if Moscow is faced with the stark choice between either agreeing to modify the Treaty or seeing the United States withdraw, it will decide to engage on the matter.

In summary, the answer to the question of why a consensus for NMD deployment has been established, after so many years of intense debate and opposition, involves a complex mixture of changes in the international security environment and domestic opinion about strategy. While that consensus appears relatively stable, the prospect for limited NMD deployment could still be derailed for a season by an overly solicitous attitude toward Moscow (or Beijing), or by some spectacular failures of NMD technology. Even so, the variety of factors driving the political consensus in favor of NMD, most notably the continuing pace of missile and WMD proliferation, are beyond control. In short, the “objective conditions” (to borrow a Russian expression) behind the NMD consensus show no sign of abating, and ultimately point to a decision by

President Clinton or his successor in favor of limited deployment. Ronald Reagan should take a bow.