What Drives the Development of US Missile Defense and Space-Based Weapons? The Role of US Domestic Interest Groups

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Whereas much attention is devoted to negotiating norms and formal agreements for the peaceful use of outer space, domestic factors that push for the development of space-based weapons receive minimal attention. Despite serious doubt about the effectiveness of missile defense and the technical feasibility of space-based weapons, the United States has spent well over $130 billion on research and development of them, including at least $10 billion currently. This article examines four domestic drivers that may explain why such investment persists: the defense perspective and ideology of the Republican Party; the belief that US satellites may require space-based protective weapons; the huge investment of the military contractor corporations, including their efforts to influence legislation and cultivate contacts; and the private advocacy groups that support US military domination of space. A number of countervailing drivers exist to mitigate against development of these weapons, with perhaps the most powerful factor restraining space-based weapons development being their wildly high costs. Keywords: US politics, missile defense, space-based weapons.

Missile defense (MD) and the associated development of space-based weapons (SBW) must be among the most peculiarly enduring weapons systems in the US military arsenal. It is the only major weapon system that has never been fully tested under realistic conditions and where there remains serious doubt as to whether it can do the job asked of it. At best, it may provide only fragmentary protection from an incoming missile attack, begging the question whether it’s worth the yearly multibillion-dollar investment. Yet that hasn’t stopped the United States from investing at least $132 billion over the past twenty-five years in MD/SBW with no end in sight. Even in the midst
of the second-worst economic downturn in US history, the Barack Obama administration sought nearly $10 billion for MD, and the Pentagon continues space weapons research and development (R&D).

Many observers legitimately ask why, in the face of MD’s dubious effectiveness, investment and development in MD/SBW continue? This article offers some answers to that question. It first recognizes that MD is now firmly embedded in the political economy of US defense policy and planning. As a matter of law, the Defense Act of 1991 mandates that the Department of Defense (DoD) “develop for deployment by the earliest date allowed by the availability of appropriate technology . . . an antiballistic missile system.” Implementation of the act assured the continued expansion, initially spawned by President Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), of large, entrenched government and private bureaucracies dedicated to MD/SBW. These bureaucracies include the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), the Air Force Space Command, the Defense Research Projects Agency (DARPA), and the Army Space and Missile Defense Command (Johnson-Freese 2009, 20). It would also include special interests in Congress, largely in the House and Senate appropriations and armed services committees. On the private side of the ledger, US defense contractors and their employees stand as a powerful interest group sustaining the pressure for continued MD/SBW development.

Within this political economy can be identified at least four general drivers that, in combination with one another, push MD and SBW development: (1) a particular theoretical/ideological orientation of the Republican Party toward US defense requirements; (2) US commercial and military dependence on satellite assets and their vulnerability; (3) a dynamic on Capitol Hill benefiting the financial interests of defense contractors, the political interests of members of Congress, and certain bureaucratic interests within the DoD; and (4) well-funded private think tanks or other interest groups that publicly advocate for MD and SBW.

**The Theoretical/Ideological Orientation**

*The New Right and Mutual Assured Destruction*

Missile defense and nascent weapons in space programs have their roots in Cold War debates about nuclear deterrence theory (Scoblic