

# The ABM Puzzle: An Introduction to Politics inside Government

On September 18, 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara rose to deliver an address entitled “The Dynamics of Nuclear Strategy” to a meeting of United Press International editors and publishers in San Francisco. He stressed that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had increased their security in any way by deploying strategic nuclear weapons, and he suggested that the United States had bought many more weapons than it needed only because of a groundless fear that the Russians would step up their arms production. Having sketched this general background, McNamara turned to a subject that was then in the headlines—namely, the possibility of American deployment of an antiballistic missile (ABM) system.

He pointed out that the United States had substantially improved its technological capability. But he emphasized that even an advanced ABM system could easily be defeated if the Soviet Union simply fired more offensive warheads or dummy warheads than there were defensive missiles capable of dealing with them. Proceeding with that line of argument, he asserted:

Were we to deploy a heavy ABM system throughout the United States, the Soviets would clearly be strongly motivated to increase their offensive capability so as to cancel out our defensive advantage.

It is futile for each of us to spend \$4 billion, \$40 billion, or \$400 billion—and at the end of all the spending, and at the end of all the

deployment, and at the end of all the effort, to be relatively at the same point of balance on the security scale that we are now.<sup>1</sup>

Until then the Johnson administration had been resisting substantial pressure to deploy an ABM. The secretary of defense, however, did not conclude his statement there; rather, he took another tack. He argued that it was important to distinguish between an anti-Russian ABM and an ABM system designed to defend the United States against emerging Chinese nuclear capability. Reviewing the arguments in favor of a deployment against China, he announced, “We have decided to go forward with this Chinese-oriented ABM deployment; and we will begin actual production of such a system at the end of this year.”<sup>2</sup> Before concluding, McNamara returned to his earlier theme:

There is a kind of mad momentum intrinsic to the development of all new nuclear weaponry. If a weapon system works—and works well—there is strong pressure from many directions to procure and deploy the weapon out of all proportion to the prudent level required.

The danger of deploying this relatively light and reliable Chinese-oriented ABM system is going to be that pressures will develop to expand it into a heavy Soviet-oriented ABM system.

We must resist that temptation firmly, not because we can for a moment afford to relax our vigilance against a possible Soviet first strike, but precisely because our greatest deterrent against such a strike is not a massive, costly, but highly penetrable ABM shield, but rather a fully credible offensive assured destruction capability.

The so-called heavy ABM shield—at the present state of technology—would in effect be no adequate shield at all against a Soviet attack but rather a strong inducement for the Soviets to vastly increase their own offensive forces. That, as I have pointed out, would make it necessary for us to respond in turn; and so the arms race would rush hopelessly on to no sensible purpose on either side.<sup>3</sup>

Why had Robert McNamara used a speech that was largely anti-ABM in tone and substance to announce an ABM deployment? Some Washington reporters speculated that he had been overruled at the last minute; what he meant to be an anti-ABM speech had been converted by others in the administration into a vehicle for announcing an ABM deployment. Others argued that the speech should be taken at face value: the administration had come to

1. McNamara, “The Dynamics of Nuclear Strategy,” p. 448.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 450.

3. *Ibid.*

the conclusion that an ABM against Russia was not desirable but that one against China was necessary.

Those in the audience and the country who had followed the issue wondered how the secretary's speech related to the annual budget message delivered by President Lyndon Johnson in January 1967. The president had asked for funds to deploy an ABM system but had stated that he would defer a decision to start construction pending an effort to begin strategic arms limitation talks with the Russians. At that time the president was vague about the purpose of the ballistic missile defense but stated that the funds might be used to deploy an ABM "for such purposes as defense of our offensive weapons systems."<sup>4</sup> McNamara, in his speech, had briefly mentioned the defense of Minuteman missiles only as a possible add-on to the ABM deployment against China.

The purpose for which the administration was deploying its ABM system was further clouded in the coming weeks. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and leading senators, including Richard Russell, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, described the ABM deployment as the beginning of a large anti-Russian system, even though McNamara had warned against attempting one. McNamara himself continued to describe the system as a defense against China; the president said nothing. As the first steps toward deployment were made, it appeared that the initial construction was no different from what it would have been if the purpose were to protect American cities against a large Russian attack.

These puzzles have usually prompted an all-inclusive question that is assumed to have a single answer: why did the United States decide to deploy an anti-Chinese ABM system in the fall of 1967? In trying to explain foreign policy decisions, most observers assume that decisionmakers are motivated by a single set of national security images and foreign policy goals. Supposedly, decisions reflect those goals alone, and actions are presumed to flow directly from the decisions. Thus, "explanation" consists of identifying the interests of the nation as seen by its leaders and showing how they determine the decisions and actions of the government.

With this approach, the explanation offered for the American decision to deploy an ABM against China would be that the American government decided that its interests in the Far East required a Chinese-oriented ABM system but that a system against the Soviet Union made no sense because of the technological difficulty of building a system against a militarily sophisticated opponent. Sometimes such explanations are sufficient; they provide

4. Johnson, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1967*, bk. 1, p. 48.

all that anyone needs to know or wants to know when his interest in an issue is limited. Often such explanations are the best that can be constructed, given the data available. This is true not only of the decisions and actions of foreign governments, particularly ones with a closed decision system, but also, unfortunately, of many contemporary American decisions. In cases where someone seeks more detailed and satisfactory answers, such explanations are highly inadequate. They often require positing a very unusual set of interests to explain decisions and actions. In the case of the ABM, one would have to conjure up a set of interests that explain why different officials of the American government made conflicting statements about whether or not a large ABM system against the Soviet Union was a good idea and whether or not the system to be deployed would be a first step toward an anti-Russian system.

There is no question that the reality is different. The actions of the American government related to foreign policy result from the interests and behavior of many different groups and individuals in American society. Domestic politics in the United States, public attitudes, and the international environment all help to shape decisions and actions. Senators, representatives, and interest groups are involved to varying degrees, depending on the issue. The relevant departments of the federal bureaucracy are involved, as is the president, at least on major issues. The participants, while sharing some images of the international scene, see the world in very different ways. Each wants the government to do different things, and each struggles to secure the decisions and actions that he or she thinks best.

Here we focus predominantly on part of this process—that involving the bureaucracy and the president as he deals with the bureaucracy. *Bureaucracy*, as the term is used here, refers to civilian career officials and political appointees, as well as to military officers. For some issues, distinctions between these groups need to be made and will be made, but most of what we have to say about the interests and maneuvers of the bureaucracy applies to career officials, political appointees, and military officers alike. Our attention is directed primarily to political and military rather than economic issues.

Since our goal is to describe the national security decision process, particularly that part of it where organizational or personal interests are brought to bear on the issue at hand, we begin with a discussion of participants. Who is involved? What interests do they have? How do those interests affect their stands on particular issues?

Part 1 deals with these questions, concentrating on those parts of the bureaucracy concerned with political-military affairs: the White House

(including the National Security Council), the State Department, and the CIA and the Defense Department. The discussion of the role of shared images about what the national security requires is followed by a discussion of organizational and presidential interests. We then explore the factors that determine how a participant develops a stand on an issue.

Part 2 considers the process by which participants and organizations struggle to bring about the decisions that they want. It considers how issues arise and are shaped by the rules of the game. The degree to which participants plan their maneuvers is considered, and that discussion is followed by a discussion of information and arguments and the process by which presidential decisions are made. Finally, Part 2 explores sources of power in the bureaucracy and the kinds of decisions that emerge. The focus is on issues that work their way up through the bureaucracy, ultimately requiring a decision by the president.

Part 3 turns to the generally ignored question of what happens after the government makes a decision. Here we trace the process by which presidential decisions become government actions. The reader will have to keep in mind that the events described in each section often occur simultaneously or in quick succession.

Part 4 explores how Congress views foreign policy issues, and it attempts to apply the same bureaucratic approach used in the rest of the book to Congress. At the end of the book, in Part 5, we return to the ABM case to show how the approach used throughout provides a framework for considering four puzzles that arose with regard to the ABM decisions:

—Why, in January 1967, did President Johnson ask Congress to appropriate the funds to deploy an ABM system but state that he would defer a decision to initiate the deployment pending an effort to get the Soviets to engage in talks on limiting the arms race?

—Why was the decision to deploy an ABM announced at the end of a speech whose main purpose was to explain why an ABM defense against the Soviet Union was impossible and undesirable?

—Why did Secretary of Defense McNamara describe the system as one directed against China, while the Joint Chiefs of Staff and senior senators described it as a first step toward a full-scale defense against the Soviet Union?

—Why was the system authorized for deployment designed and deployed as if its intent were to protect American cities against a large Russian attack?

The purpose of this analysis—and of the book as a whole—is to help the reader understand how decisions are made and to predict likely courses of behavior. The book provides only part of the answer, however, since it focuses only on that part of the decisionmaking process that involves the bureau-

cracy and the relation between the bureaucracy and the president. Since Congress became increasingly involved in the executive branch policymaking process after the Vietnam experience, we have included a chapter that explores Congress through the same bureaucratic prism used to understand the executive branch. However, the role of public opinion is not treated in depth. Furthermore, not every national security decision becomes subject to the pulling and hauling described in the following chapters. The book seeks to explain elements of the foreign policy decision process that, for one reason or another, are often overlooked or at least not taken into account systematically. The concluding chapter suggests that the analysis has important implications for U.S. foreign policy. In the end, readers will have to judge for themselves the utility of the approach.