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Trends. Deadlines and Missile Defense

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A controversy over deadlines has sullied the waters of discourse over the feasibility of a United States Government (USG)-funded national missile- defense system that would be limited in scope. The controversy comprises the relative merits of a political deadline based on upcoming elections and partisan conflict among political parties and of a scientific deadline based on appropriate tests, testing data, and analysis of that data. Some analysts would even add a third type of deadline to the brew--e.g., a threat deadline based on weapons and strategic policy developments of real and putative USG adversaries. Then there's a fourth deadline Issue--how deadlines affect other deadlines. For example, deciding to go forward to build a missile defense this summer would probably obligate the USG to give formal notice that it was withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in November.

The real controversy over deadlines should be over the notion of deadlines itself. A psychology of immutable lines in the sand, of crossing or not crossing the Rubicon, belies a reality of continual and continuous phenomena that must temper the rigidity of any "go-no go" decision. Deadlines can be re-looked, changed, and re-interpreted in the face of incoming information. The best missile defense--if it is built at all--will be founded on a plethora of deadlines, each more ethereal than immutable. (See Becker, E. (February 15, 2000). Missile test is rushed, Pentagon official says. *The New York Times*, p. A23; Braam, C., & Malott, R.W. (1990). "I'll do it when the snow melts": The effects of deadlines and delayed outcomes on rule-governed behavior in preschool children. *Analysis of Verbal Behavior*, 8, 67-76; Dollinger, S.J., & Reader, M.J. (1983). Attributions, deadlines, and children's intrinsic motivation. *Journal of General Psychology*, 109, 157-166; Nevin, J.R., & Ford, N.M. (1976). Effects of a deadline and a veiled threat on mail, survey responses. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 61, 116-118; Seers, A., & Woodruff, S. (1997). Temporal pacing in task forces: Group development or deadline pressure? *Journal of Management*, 23, 169-187.) (Keywords: Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, Missile Defense, Treaty.)