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Keep Missile Defense on Track in the Senate

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The Senate Armed Services Committee's version of the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2008 (S. 1547) contains two provisions that will serve to delay the fielding of an effective missile defense capability. The first eliminates funding for a test bed for missile defense systems in space, and the second establishes operational testing requirements in order to continue development of the missile defense system. To help protect the American people, U.S. soldiers deployed abroad, and America's friends and allies from missile attack, the Senate should affirm its support for fielding missile defense systems in space and for the spiral development process for missile defense, which is necessary to field the complex missile defense system.

A Space-Based Missile Defense. The Bush Administration's missile defense budget proposes $10 million in FY 2008 as initial funding to establish a space test bed.[1] Funding for this program is envisioned to reach $124 million in FY 2013, for a total of $290 million from FY 2008 to FY 2013. The funding proposal is categorized as one of several "capabilities investments" that are designed to address requirements beyond FY 2013.

Even though the Bush Administration's proposal to begin work on establishing a space test bed is very limited and in keeping with a slow, incremental approach, it has been attacked by missile defense skeptics on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Their aim is to force the U.S. to adopt a position that prohibits it from developing—much less deploying—missile defense interceptors in space under any circumstance and for all time.

This opposition is being driven, at least in part, by a desire to "prevent the weaponization of space." Arms control advocates are currently focused on this issue and base their proposals on the assertion that space is not already weaponized,[2] which is true only in a very limited sense.[3] The fact is that space was weaponized when the first ballistic missile was fired, because ballistic missiles travel through space on their way to their targets. The threat that these weapons pose to U.S. security and the U.S. population is undeniable. The superior effectiveness of space-based interceptors in countering ballistic missiles is based on the fact that ballistic missiles transit space. As a result, space-based interceptors are ideally located to intercept ballistic missiles in the boost phase, when they are most vulnerable.

The Senate should reject the assertion that space-based ballistic missile defense interceptors would constitute an unprecedented move by the U.S. to weaponize space. It should do so by recognizing that space is already weaponized and identifying the advantages of fielding missile defense interceptors in space that target threatening missiles that transit space.

A constellation of space-based missile defense interceptors would provide missile defense to the

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U.S., U.S. troops deployed abroad, and U.S. friends and allies. Participants in the Independent Working Group on Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, and the Twenty-First Century determined that a substantive program for space-based missile defenses would require $100 million in FY 2008, $500 million in FY 2009, and $1 billion in FY 2010 to create the space test bed.[4] This approach should yield a capable development test bed in three to four years if it is put in the hands of a small, competent management team focused on reviving the demonstrated technologies of the Brilliant Pebbles program of the early 1990s.

A Dead End for Missile Defense? The Department of Defense is using a spiral development process to advance missile defense technology and systems. This means that it is putting developmental systems in the field and improving them incrementally. The spiral development process is essential to the missile defense program because the eventual missile defense "architecture" is a system of systems that must be built in order to be tested.

The Senate Armed Services Committee, however, has chosen to ignore this reality. The Committee would deny the Department of Defense access to funds for the acquisition or deployment of operational long-range missile defense interceptors in Europe until the Secretary of Defense certifies that the interceptors have a high probability of success obtained through operational tests.[5] A similar provision would prohibit the deployment of more than 40 long-range missile defense interceptors in Alaska unless the system has demonstrated a high probability of effectiveness through "operationally realistic end-to-end flight testing."[6]

Supporters of these provisions are likely to advertise them as just "fly before you buy" common sense. In reality, this is an effort to prohibit the procurement of additional missile defense components until current ones have passed an unrealistic and perhaps impossible slate of end-to-end operational tests. The problem is that such tests depend on the fielding of the additional components in order to constitute the end-to-end system to be tested. These restrictions are akin to a requirement that the Department of Defense may not deploy the first satellite in a constellation of satellites until it has conducted operational tests that demonstrate that the entire constellation works as a whole. These restrictions will grind the overall missile defense program to a halt because the system, as a system of systems, requires that components must be built in order to be tested.

The Senate must reject such restrictions, which could severely delay the fielding of an effective missile defense. Instead, it should consider the substance of an amendment to the House's national defense authorization bill offered by Representative Pete Sessions (R-TX). That amendment stated that the President would retain the power to put developmental missile defense systems on operational alert.[7] The Sessions amendment could be modified to state that the Department of Defense would not be restricted from using funds for the deployment of long-range missile defense interceptors that would support end-to-end and operationally realistic testing of the system, and that the President's power to put developmental missile defense systems on operational alert shall be maintained.

1. U.S. Department of Defense, Missile Defense Agency, "Missile Defense Agency Fiscal Year 2008 (FY08) Budget Estimates," 07-MDA-2175, January 31, 2007, at *www.mda.mil/mdalink/pdf/budgetfy08.pdf*.
2. Jeffrey Lewis, "What If Space Were Weaponized? Possible Consequences for Crisis Scenarios," Center for Defense Information, July 2004, at *www.cdi.org/PDFs/scenarios.pdf*.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
4. Independent Working Group on Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century, *2007 Report* (Cambridge, Mass.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2006), at *www.ifpa.org/pdf/IWGreport.pdf*.
5. Senate Armed Services Committee, "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008," S. Rpt. 110-77, June 5, 2007, pp. 140–142.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
7. *Congressional Record*, May 16, 2007, pp. H5271–H5272.

Conclusion. The Senate Armed Services Committee's version of the National Defense Authorization Act contains two provisions that undermine progress in missile defense. The first curtails the development of a space test bed, which offers the most promise for providing an effective defense. The second creates a procedural dead end for missile defense by requiring operational tests of the system prior to the acquisition of all the components that are necessary to conduct such tests.

If these provisions become law, the American people will be deceived. The rhetoric out of Washington would lead the American people to believe that their government is committed to defending them against missile attack. The reality, however, will be that they are being provided a defense of limited effectiveness and subject to significant delays. The Senate needs to make good on its promise to field an effective defense against ballistic missiles.

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