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Gates' Proposed Missile Defense Cuts: Confusion and Contradictions

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In an April 6 press briefing at the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced sweeping changes in defense modernization.¹ Included in this announcement were proposed changes to the nation's missile defense program.

In most instances, the changes to the missile defense program are at odds with the current and future missile defense needs of the United States and Secretary Gates's own stated principles regarding these needs. As a result, Congress and the American people need to understand why there are serious contradictions in Secretary Gates' announced plan.

Contradictions in the Gates Plan:

Contradiction 1: Missile Defenses Are Necessary to Fighting the Wars America Is in, but Secretary Gates Proposes Cutting the Missile Defense Budget by \$1.4 Billion. Secretary Gates is fond of saying that he is focused on re-balancing the Department of Defense's programs "in order to institutionalize and finance our capabilities to fight the wars we are in today"²—a point he reiterated at the April 6 press conference.

Today's wars are the result of the fragmented, post-Cold War threats to U.S. and allied security. This fragmented threat environment calls for a U.S. strategic posture that is more defensive in nature, particularly against the clear, present, and growing ballistic missile threat rather than the retaliation-based strategic posture designed to deter the Soviet Union during the Cold War.³ Nevertheless, Secretary Gates chose to de-emphasize missile defense by reducing its budget by \$1.4 billion in fiscal year 2010.

Thus, the first task for Congress is to restore the \$1.4 billion in missile defense funding that Secretary Gates has proposed to be stripped from the budget. In taking this step, Congress should state explicitly that it is doing so because defeating missile attacks on the U.S. and its allies is essential to fighting and winning the wars the U.S. is engaged in now and for the near term with the disparate forces of rogue regimes and terrorist elements around the world.

Contradiction 2: While Iran Has Launched a Satellite and North Korea Is Testing Missiles with Longer Ranges, Secretary Gates Is Emphasizing Defenses Against Short-Range Missiles. On February 3, Iran successfully launched a satellite. In doing so, Tehran demonstrated that it is developing the capability to field long-range ballistic missiles.⁴ North Korea, on April 4, launched a rocket that delivered its payload some 2,000 miles away in the Pacific Ocean—although it appears that the launch was also intended to place a satellite in orbit.⁵

These two launches indicate that that both of these menacing regimes are getting closer to being able hit U.S. soil with ballistic missiles. Nevertheless, Secretary Gates restructured the missile defense program by focusing on defenses against shorter-range missiles.⁶

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*Contradiction 3: The Restructuring Proposal Acknowledged the Need to Develop Boost-Phase Missile Defenses but Scaled Back the Airborne Laser Program.*⁷ The Department of Defense has recognized the need to maximize the capabilities of a comprehensive missile defense system by having a layered missile defense architecture. Such architecture would target attacking missiles in the boost phase, mid-course phase, and terminal phase of flight.

The missile defense program is fairly advanced in mid-course and terminal defense missile defense interceptors, but the boost-phase capability is less developed. The Airborne Laser Program is designed to provide speed-of-light boost-phase intercepts of ballistic missiles. Having acknowledged that it is important to advance boost-phase systems, the restructuring plan responds by scaling back a promising technology that is focused on providing a boost-phase capability.

Contradiction 4: The Restructuring Plan, Having Scaled Back Boost-Phase Programs, Then Terminates the Multiple Kill Vehicle (MKV) Program for Strengthening Midcourse Defenses. The primary strength of a boost-phase defense option is that it destroys missiles before they can release multiple warheads and countermeasures designed to overwhelm or fool midcourse defenses. Having scaled back these boost-phase programs, the pressure on the mid-course systems is increased.

One option for responding to this increased pressure was the MKV program to put many kill

vehicles on one interceptor—thereby permitting the engagement of many targets produced by the attacking missile in the mid-course phase of flight. Nevertheless, the restructuring proposal terminates the MKV program.

Contradiction 5: The Restructuring Does Nothing to Obtain the Most Robust Missile Defense Capability That Would Be Obtained Through the Development of Space-Based Interceptors. An inherent characteristic of ballistic missiles is that all but the very shortest range systems fly through space. As a result, space-based interceptors offer the most complete and flexible coverage against ballistic missile attack.⁸

Yet the restructuring plan announced by Secretary Gates fails to advance what will obviously be the most effective missile defense option. According to the recently released report of the Independent Working Group, a space-based interceptor system could be tested within three years for an estimated cost of \$3 billion–\$5 billion.⁹

A Glimmer of Hope in the Restructuring Plan. Despite the many shortcomings of Secretary Gates' missile defense restructuring plan, it does offer one avenue for significant progress in defending the U.S. and its allies against missile attack: increasing funding for the sea-based Standard Missile-3 program. The exact amount of the increase was not clear because it was lumped together in a \$700 million package with other programs.¹⁰

1. United States Department of Defense, "DOD News Briefing with Secretary Gates from the Pentagon," April 6, 2009, at <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4396> (April 7, 2009).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. Baker Spring, "Congressional Commission Should Recommend a 'Damage Limitation' Strategy," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2172, August 14, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg2172.cfm>.
4. James Phillips and Baker Spring, "Iran's Satellite Launch Underscores Growing Military Threat," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2270, February 4, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm2270.cfm>.
5. Bruce Klingner, "North Korea Throws Down Missile Gauntlet," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2365, April 4, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2365.cfm>.
6. United States Department of Defense, "DOD News Briefing with Secretary Gates from the Pentagon."
7. General James Cartwright (USMC), vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, appeared with Secretary Gates at the briefing and spoke to this issue, see *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. Independent Working Group, *Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century: 2009 Report* (Cambridge, Mass.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2009), pp. 26–31.
9. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

The report of the Independent Working Group explains the inherent adaptability of the broader Aegis weapons program and the Standard Missile-3 to the missile defense mission.¹¹ If the additional funding is applied correctly and sustained beyond fiscal year 2010, the Standard Missile-3 force can be expanded quantitatively and improved qualitatively to engage longer-range missiles at earlier points in the flight trajectories. Institutionally, the

Navy should be given both the funds and the authority to pursue expanded capabilities for the Aegis/Standard Missile-3 system, including the ability to defend against anti-ship ballistic missiles.

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10. Department of Defense, "DOD News Briefing With Secretary Gates From the Pentagon," p. 3.

11. Independent Working Group, *Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, & the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 24–26.