

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2590
August 17, 2009

Obama Missile Defense Proposal: Numbers Matter

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The Obama Administration's fiscal year 2010 proposal for missile defense scales back the number of ground-based midcourse defense (GMD) interceptors to be fielded in Alaska and California from the planned 44 to 30.¹ The President's proposal also puts the program for fielding an additional 10 such interceptors in Poland on hold. Nevertheless, Defense Secretary Robert Gates still believes that the 2010 proposal still leaves America's ability to defend against a long-range missile threat from a rogue country "in a pretty good place."²

Gates's assertion should cause Members of Congress to ask questions. In light of the effect these cuts will have on the portion of the missile defense program dedicated to countering long-range missiles, Gates's confidence is puzzling. Specifically, it is important for Congress to examine the following implications of the fiscal year 2010 cuts.

The Iranian Threat. The emerging Iranian ballistic missile threat appears to be discounted. The Bush Administration's final proposal regarding the overall ballistic missile defense program divided the program into "blocks" for advancing both the technology and the number of fielded systems.³

As it relates to countering the emerging long-range missile threats from rogue states, specifically North Korea and Iran, Block 1 is dedicated to defending the U.S. against North Korean missiles, and Blocks 3 and 4 are dedicated to defending the U.S. and Europe against Iranian missiles. Block 1 defines the requirement for countering long-range North Korean missiles as the 30 interceptors in Alaska and California that are retained in the Obama Administration's program. Block 3 would

have delivered 14 additional interceptors in the U.S. but for the Obama Administration's announcement. Likewise, Block 4 would deliver the 10 GMD interceptors to Poland.⁴

Intentionally or not, the Obama Administration's decision to scale back the number of interceptors in the U.S. from 44 to 30 and to put the 10 interceptors in Europe on hold is consistent with a determination that the Iranian threat is not real. Congress needs to ask itself whether this is prudent—leading observers have concluded that Iran has likely caught up to North Korea in terms of developing missile technology and may now be surpassing it.

Readiness. Having 30 interceptors fielded in the U.S. is assumed to mean that all 30 will be available to defend the U.S. at any given time. It is true that the military—with adequate warning—will be able to "surge" U.S. missile defense capabilities. Nevertheless, there is still a significant chance that the U.S. will be in a position where it cannot rely on all of the 30 interceptors in the Obama Administration's program in the face of long-range missile attack.

Senator Mark Begich (D-AK) has rightly raised questions about this disturbing possibility.⁵ Begich has made available the Missile Defense Agency's description of problems with GMD interceptors in Missile Field 1 at Fort Greely, Alaska, and how Mis-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm2590.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

sile Field 2, also located at Fort Greely, will resolve these problems and potentially increase the overall readiness of the long-range missile defense system.

Space-Based Interceptors. It is assumed that the Obama Administration is going to fill any gaps in U.S. and allied vulnerability to long-range missile strikes with follow-on systems to the GMD interceptors. This is a dangerous assumption. While future sea-based interceptors derived from the Navy's Standard Missile-3 missile defense interceptors could be given the capability to intercept long-range missiles, it is far from certain that the Obama Administration will take this step.⁶ What is certain, however, is that the Obama Administration is not going to support the development of even more effective space-based interceptors.

The Obama Administration has requested a \$577 million increase in research and development funding for sea-based missile defense, which it claims is in part for countering long-range missiles.⁷ The sea-based program is to field roughly 220 anti-missile interceptors through 2015, but it is unclear what number of those will be capable of countering long-range missiles.⁸

On the other hand, the Administration has mounted no visible opposition to a provision in the House Defense Appropriations Bill to cut \$50 million out of the program. Further, the Obama Administration has moved to end the Multiple Kill Vehicle program. This program was slated to assist in the fielding of new generations of Standard Missile-3 interceptors. The termination of the program could both delay and make more expensive the

effort to give the sea-based missile defense system the ability to counter long-range missiles.

The logical alternative for follow-on systems to counter long-range missiles is space-based interceptors.⁹ In this case, 1,000 interceptors located in orbit would provide a robust defense against rogue state missile attack. Yet the Obama Administration's missile defense program provides no funding for the development of space-based interceptors.

Playing Catch Up. The U.S. missile defense program needs to catch up to the evolving rogue state missile threat. In large measure, this requires improving missile defense technology that was severely hampered for roughly 30 years by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the former Soviet Union. Having withdrawn from the treaty in 2002, the U.S. is free to pursue a full array of technology options.

Catching up to the threat, however, also requires a certain number of missile defense interceptors and supporting systems. Advanced technology can ease the pressures to field higher numbers of interceptors, but the numbers still need to be large enough to field an effective defense for the United States and its allies. As it relates to systems for countering long-range missiles in particular, Congress needs to insist that the Obama Administration's program includes enough interceptors.

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1. U.S. Department of Defense, "DOD News Briefing with Secretary Gates from the Pentagon," April 6, 2009.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Missile Defense Agency, "Fiscal Year 2009 (FY 09) Budget Estimates Overview," January 23, 2008, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 13, 15.
5. Senator Mark Begich, "Alaska's Strategic Role in the Defense of the United States and the Vital Role of Missile Defense," presentation to The Heritage Foundation, July 22, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/press/events/ev072209b.cfm>.
6. Independent Working Group, *Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, and the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2009), pp. 24–26.
7. U.S. Department of Defense, "Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Request: Summary Justification," May 2009, pp 3-35–3-36.
8. Rear Admiral Alan B. Hicks, "Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense," presentation to the George C. Marshall Institute, August 3, 2009, at <http://www.marshall.org/article.php?id=734> (August 14, 2009).
9. Independent Working Group, *Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, and the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 26–31.