

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3167
February 22, 2011

Medium Extended Air Defense System: Continued Funding Needed

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According to the most recent news, the U.S. Department of Defense has decided to stop funding for the Medium Extended Air Defense System (MEADS), a ground-based terminal ballistic missile defense (BMD) system developed jointly by the United States, Italy, and Germany. MEADS is supposed to replace aging Hawk and Patriot ballistic missile and air defense systems in the United States and Germany and the Nike Hercules air defense system in Italy.

The proposed curtailment of funding is a mistake because it undermines allied cooperation in missile defense at a time when NATO has declared missile defense to be a core competency of the alliance. NATO's strategic concept, released during the Lisbon summit in November 2010, states that the alliance will "develop the capability to defend our populations and territories against ballistic missile attack as a core element of our collective defence, which contributes to the indivisible security of the Alliance."¹

Unique Capabilities. The MEADS program is designed to protect the United States' homeland, allies, and forward-deployed troops against a wide range of threats, including the next generation of tactical ballistic missiles. Compared to the Patriot system, MEADS offers greater flexibility, a 360-degree fire control system, and surveillance radars. The radars provide commanders on the battlefield with improved situational awareness and enable them to react faster. The United States will not be able to achieve the capabilities offered by MEADS with any combination of the current terminal-phase BMD system.

MEADS's capabilities are necessary in an era when the ballistic missile threat is growing. North Korea and Iran have some of the world's most aggressive ballistic missile programs. These two countries not only cooperate on advancing these programs, but also share ballistic missile technologies with non-state terrorist groups. Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said during his confirmation hearing before the Senate in 2007: "In view of the threats we face today and will face in the future, I believe the United States should deploy components of the ballistic missile defense system as soon as they become available even as we improve their operational effectiveness." Cutting MEADS goes directly against the spirit of his statement.

Too Close to Completion to Terminate. According to the Department of Defense, funding in fiscal years (FY) 2011–2013 enables the completion of the limited integration of the MEADS system.² The United States will have invested \$4 billion by the end of the process. For a total cost of \$974 million in FY 2012–2017 (\$162.3 million per year), MEADS can enter the production phase in 2018.

All three participating nations deemed the MEADS design mature enough to enter fabrication

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3167>

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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and testing. The first MEADS launcher was delivered to MEADS International on December 9, 2010, and the first MEADS Battle Manager was delivered on December 20, 2010. Both items are being tested at Pratica di Mare air base in Italy.

In the current fiscal environment, canceling the program in its prototype stage—after significant amounts of research and development resources have been devoted to the program—would be strategically and fiscally irresponsible. Moreover, maintaining the aging and less capable Hawk and Patriot systems and extending their service lives would require significant additional costs.

Political Significance. While MEADS is not a NATO-wide project, all three parties are members of NATO. At a time when protection against the ballistic missile threat is a core element of NATO's strategy, MEADS would offer the capability and opportunity to draw from the expertise gained during the development and production phases to develop a NATO-wide Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defense System.³

Next Steps. The United States should reverse its decision and provide funding for production of MEADS to replace the Patriot and Hawk systems. A more advanced capability is essential for addressing the growing ballistic missile threat and expanding alliance cooperation in addressing this threat.

At the same time, Italy and Germany should make it clear that it is in the interest not only of their countries, but also of the NATO alliance to produce this capability. The U.S. and NATO cannot afford to let MEADS atrophy while regimes such as those in Iran and North Korea seek to join the nuclear club and expand and improve their ballistic missile arsenals.

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1. NATO, "Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation," November 19, 2010, at <http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf> (February 16, 2011).
2. U.S. Department of Defense, "Medium Extended Air Defense System (MEADS) Fact Sheet," February 11, 2011, at http://www.acq.osd.mil/docs/U%20S%20MEADS_Decision_Fact_Sheet_Feb_11_2011.pdf?transcriptid=4648 (February 16, 2011).
3. Sally McNamara and Baker Spring, "After Lisbon, NATO Must Get Missile Defense Right," Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 3065, November 24, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/11/After-Lisbon-NATO-Must-Get-Missile-Defense-Right>.