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Time to Rethink Missile Defense

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Despite the Bush administration's investment of an estimated \$60 billion since 2001, U.S. national missile defense continues to be an unnecessary and counterproductive enterprise. Testing objectives consistently are not met, cost overruns and scheduling delays are rampant, and relations between the United States and Russia are worse than at any time since the end of the Cold War, thanks in no small part to squabbling over the proposed third missile defense site in Europe.

With the U.S. government on autopilot until January 2009, it falls to the next president and Congress to set realistic expectations about what national missile defense can and cannot do. Three essential changes should be made immediately to shake off the misguided policy-making of the Bush years and set U.S. missile defense back on a productive course.

1. Shift resources away from expensive, unproven and unnecessary systems aimed at countering future long-range threats, and reallocate funding to higher priority systems aimed at existing short- and medium-range missiles.

According to the U.S. intelligence community, a state seeking to strike the U.S. homeland with a nuclear weapon would find it far simpler and less expensive to employ either ship-launched, short-range missiles or some form of non-missile means, such as a container entering a U.S. port.

American troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan or in bases across the world are not threatened by intercontinental missiles, but by short- and medium-range missiles, of which Iran and North Korea possess plenty.

Iran and North Korea, the *raison d'être* of America's intercontinental missile defense programs, are likely a decade away, at the earliest, from developing nuclear-armed intercontinental missiles. Thus, short- and medium-range missiles constitute the clear and present danger to the United States, not intercontinental missiles.

2. Restructure the extensive resources of the U.S. government to effectively combat the ballistic missile threat.

In exempting it from normal acquisition, testing and reporting requirements, the Bush administration gave the organization responsible for developing missile defenses, the Missile Defense Agency, unprecedented decision-making flexibility. This allowed the agency to avoid providing full cost estimates of its systems while deploying interceptor missiles not rigorously tested under realistic battlefield conditions.

The next administration should dissolve the Missile Defense Agency and transfer the various systems back to the military services that originally oversaw them before the agency was created.

3. Spend greater political capital pursuing diplomatic engagement to reduce the missile threat.

Deterrence, containment and diplomacy have been and will continue to be far more effective weapons against ballistic missiles than interceptors.

During the Cold War, the United States successfully negotiated reductions in the number of U.S. and Soviet missiles and bombers, as well as the elimination of intermediate-range missiles from each country's respective arsenals. There is no reason this approach cannot be repeated successfully today.

While the Bush administration should be commended for negotiating an end to Libya's nuclear program and making progress on denuclearization talks with North Korea, it remains adamantly opposed to direct diplomatic engagement with Iran and has shunned efforts to negotiate deeper, binding and verifiable nuclear weapon reductions with Russia. Such an a la carte attitude to diplomacy has not made America safer.

Executing these three changes will not be easy, as the status quo has the support of key constituencies inside and outside of government. However, with strong presidential and congressional backing, they could go a long way toward ensuring America's missile defense programs are focused on real threats, remain cost-effective, and are deployed as a complement - not an alternative - to deterrence, containment and diplomacy.

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