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Ten Years Later, a Successful Demonstration of a Sea-Based Terminal Defense Against Ballistic Missiles

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In 1995, The Heritage Foundation's Missile Defense Study Team proposed to Congress a comprehensive plan for developing and deploying an effective global defense against ballistic missiles.[1] The panel was chaired by the former director of the Strategic Defense Initiative, Ambassador Henry F. Cooper, and among its recommendations was a proposal to evolve the existing AEGIS weapons systems onboard Navy surface ships for air defense into a missile defense system. Last month, the Navy demonstrated the wisdom of this approach by successfully testing modified versions of the AEGIS system and its accompanying Standard Missile-2 Block IV surface-to-air missile against a target ballistic missile off Hawaii.[2] It downed the target missile in its last stage of flight, called the terminal phase. The Heritage panel predicted this success in its 1995 report:

> The earliest, least expensive, and politically least intrusive way to achieve a global defense [against ballistic missiles] is to build on the nearly $50 billion the U.S. has already invested in the Navy's AEGIS system. The AEGIS system has been deployed on Navy cruisers and destroyers to provide defenses against aircraft. The system can be upgraded and the ships armed with a modified Standard surface-to-air missile. The Navy system will initially provide protection against missile attacks for only a limited area, with the Navy Lower Tier program.[3]

Policy Choices Put the Navy Lower Tier System on Hold

The Clinton Administration opposed this obvious, effective, and inexpensive near-term approach to missile defense for reasons related to arms control, not technical shortcomings with this approach. The Clinton Administration's overarching policy was to preserve and strengthen the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM)

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Treaty with the former Soviet Union. This policy precluded progress on progressive modifications of the Aegis Weapons System and the Standard Missile because the Clinton Administration interpreted ambiguous language in the Treaty that barred giving other systems – in this case an air defense system – an anti-missile capability as applicable to sea-based missile defenses under certain circumstances. The Clinton Administration's determination allowed continued testing of the system only if it was "dumbed down." Specifically, it precluded the sharing of anti-missile targeting data with the interceptor from off-board radar and sensors. This effectively halted progress until the end of President Clinton's second term in January 2001.

Prior to President Bush's first term, Ambassador Cooper and his fellow panel member Admiral J.D. Williams urged Congress and the Department of Defense to revisit the issue of evolving the AEGIS weapons system and the Standard Missile-2 Block IV into an effective missile defense system.[4] This appeal was rebuffed because of the Missile Defense Agency's preference for advancing ground-based defenses at the expense of sea-based and space-based options.[5] Consistent with this bias against the sea-based option, Under Secretary of Defense Pete Aldridge announced the cancellation of the sea-based terminal defense program, then called the Navy Area program, on December 17, 2001.[6] This action was justified on the basis that the program was too costly and not performing well.

Successful Test of Sea-Based Terminal Defense Proves Program Critics Wrong

If Under Secretary Aldridge's criticism was based more on performance concerns than cost, then last month's test proved those concerns to be unfounded. According to the Missile Defense Agency, the combined effects of the modified Standard Missile-2 Block IV's hit-to-kill and blast fragmentation kill capabilities produced an outcome in which "the threat missile was completely destroyed."[7]

The charge that the sea-based terminal defense option would be excessively expensive has also been shown to be overblown. According to the Navy, the test assets were drawn from existing Navy programs, and therefore no new program was established for this capability. In fact, procurement of the system's components is complete, and existing funding supports operations and the requirements for sustaining the system. The recent test was conducted in response to direction from the Deputy Secretary of Defense in 2003 after the cancellation of the Navy Area program and was financed by the Navy at a total cost of just $25 million in research and development funds.[8]

The Need for Congressional Guidance

The terminal defense system successfully tested by the Navy last month provides an immediate option for protecting U.S. coastal areas against short-range missiles launched from ships. This is the conclusion of a recent report by an independent panel of experts on missile defense.[9] This is because the Standard Missile-2 Block IV is readily available. The Director of the Missile Defense Agency, Lieutenant General Henry Obering, is committed to talking with the Navy and Combatant Commanders about putting this kind of missile defense capability to sea.[10] Congress, however, should not leave it to the Missile Defense Agency to determine how to proceed.

Rather, Congress should directly fund the Navy to continue testing the terminal defense system it demonstrated last week and to provide modified versions of the Standard Missile-2 Block IV to the fleet as soon as possible. Further, it should direct the Department of Defense to field the system in a manner that will provide a limited defense of U.S. coastal areas against ship-launched, short-range ballistic missiles and

applicable areas of allied territories against short-range missiles launched from land or sea.

Conclusion

When it takes more than ten years to allow a weapon to demonstrate its utility, it can undermine the confidence of the American people in the political leadership's commitment to national security. This is particularly the case when the delays are the result an irrational commitment to an irrelevant arms control agenda or the petty bureaucratic preferences of those managing alternative programs. The nation could have had a sea-based terminal defense against ballistic missiles years ago. The question now is, will it be too late? Only Congress can reduce that risk. It can do so by directing that this capability be put to sea as soon as possible and providing the necessary funds directly to the Navy to achieve that outcome. Otherwise, the American people will have every right to question their faith in the political leadership's commitment to national security.

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[1] Missile Defense Study Team, "Defending America: A Near- and Long-Term Plan to Deploy Missile Defenses, The Heritage Foundation, 1995.
[2] Missile Defense Agency, "First at-Sea Demonstration of Sea-Based Terminal Capability Successfully Completed," May 24, 2006.
[3] Missile Defense Study Team, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
[4] Henry F. Cooper and J.D. Williams, "The Earliest Deployment Option – Sea-Based Defenses," Inside Missile Defense, September 6, 2000.
[5] For Ambassador Cooper's detailed criticism of the Missile Defense Agency's "biased" approach toward the development of competing basing modes for missile defense, see Ambassador Henry F. Cooper, letter to Lieutenant General Ronald Kadish, July 16, 2001.
[6] "Aldridge Kills Navy Area Missile Defense Program," *Defense Daily*, December 17, 2001, at http://www.defensedaily.com/VIP/common/pub/dd/2001/dd12170109.html (June 1, 2006).
[7] Missile Defense Agency, *op. cit.*
[8] Program budget information was provided to the author by the Navy on June 6, 2006.
[9] "Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, and the Twenty-First Century," Report of the Independent Working Group on Missile Defense, Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Washington, D.C., 2006, pp. VIII-9-VIII-
[10] Missile Defense Agency, *op. cit.*