

Congressional Budget Office Projects Missile Defense Costs

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Fulfilling a research request made by senior Senate Democrats last year, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) released a report January 31 estimating that separate ground-, sea-, and space-based missile defenses would each cost tens of billions of dollars to complete.

The nonpartisan CBO reported that deploying a ground-based defense would total \$23-64 billion between 2002 and 2015, depending on the number of missile interceptors involved. A stand-alone sea-based system would run \$43-55 billion to reach operational capability by 2015, and an independent space-based laser system would cost approximately \$56-68 billion between 2002 and 2025. The \$7-9 billion already appropriated for the ground- and sea-based systems between 1996 and 2001 was not included in the CBO numbers.

Once the systems are deployed, CBO predicted that the annual cost for operating a ground-based defense of 100 missile interceptors after 2015 would be about \$600 million, while upkeep of such a system numbering 375 missile interceptors would be around \$1.4 billion. Maintaining a sea-based system after 2015 would cost about \$1 billion per year, and keeping a space-based laser system functioning after it was deployed by 2025 would require an estimated \$300 million each year.

The Bush administration is seeking to deploy layered missile defenses that might include all of these systems in order to maximize the chances of shooting down a ballistic missile during its entire flight. CBO warned against adding the separate figures together to arrive at an overall price tag for a layered system because, if deployed together, the systems could share some components, sensors, and research and development, thereby cutting costs.

CBO also expressed difficulty with calculating missile defense costs in general, claiming there was “substantial uncertainty” between existing programs and what the Bush administration might ultimately deploy. In addition, the report stated that “no detailed deployment plans or schedules exist” for most of the systems that CBO was asked to assess.

CBO offered no cost estimates for two systems, a sea-based boost-phase system and a revived “Brilliant Pebbles” system. CBO explained that it could not make a “credible” estimate on the sea-based boost-phase system because it was still in a “conceptual stage,” and it reported that the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization claimed in June 2001 that there were no plans to “reconstitute” the Brilliant Pebbles program, an initiative proposed by the first Bush administration that called for deploying 500-1,000 missile interceptors in space. But the CBO report also noted that the current administration is researching space-based interceptors and wants to conduct a space-based test around 2005 or 2006.

Responding to the report on January 31, Senators Tom Daschle (D-SD), Kent Conrad (D-ND), and Carl Levin (D-MI) called on the Bush administration to provide “detailed information on its missile defense plans” so Congress could compare missile defense costs with other defense programs. The senators worried that pursuit of such “costly” systems could divert funds away from programs aimed at countering threats they said are more likely and urgent than a ballistic missile attack.

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