

Strategic Missile Defense: A Reality Check

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By Greg Thielmann, Senior Fellow May 21, 2009

The United States has spent over one hundred billion dollars to try to create a capability to intercept the strategic ballistic missiles of first Russia, then China, and now those that North Korea and Iran may deploy in the future. At first glance, this investment appears to be a logical response to the most dangerous vector of nuclear attack. Yet strategic missile defense never yielded a leak-proof defense during the Cold War and has not discouraged the active pursuit of ballistic missile programs since. Missing the most likely contemporary security threat to the United States—terrorist groups acquiring and using nuclear, radiological, or biological weapons—strategic missile defense has increased the overall threat by fostering Russian and Chinese offensive force enhancements and complicating negotiated reductions in offensive ballistic missile arsenals that would lower threat assessments all around.

Highlights

- Advances in both offensive and defensive technologies have not significantly altered the cost-exchange advantages held by strategic offensive forces.
- Just as the U.S. Safeguard anti-ballistic missile system fell victim to cost-effectiveness criteria and competing priorities in the mid-1970s, the new U.S. administration is shifting resources away from strategic missile defense programs. As traditional acquisition rules and operational test requirements are restored to strategic defense program management, this trend is likely to continue.
- The target of U.S. strategic ballistic missile defense efforts has shifted radically from Russia and China in the 1970s to North Korea and Iran today. But contrary to the claims of some, strategic missile defense efforts offer no disincentives to missile development by Pyongyang and Tehran.
- Moreover, U.S. strategic missile defenses cannot mitigate the new threats from terrorist groups and are likely to continue spurring quantitative and/or qualitative improvements in the offensive ballistic missile forces of Russia and China.

- The rationales for, and capabilities of, current strategic missile defenses are not as advertised.

Currently deployed ground-based midcourse defense (GMD) interceptors in Alaska and California are not adequate to defend against future North Korean and Iranian missiles with even simple countermeasures.

The GMD system that the Bush Administration proposed to deploy in Poland and the Czech Republic is intended primarily to protect the United States from possible future Iranian systems, but it could not defend southeastern Europe, which is already within range of existing medium-range Iranian missiles.

While the United States seeks to reassure China and Russia that limited U.S. strategic missile defenses are not threatening, improvements to make existing systems more credible undermine these assurances.

If states are deterred from contemplating use of their missiles, it is, as before, because of the near certainty of U.S. military retaliation, not the possibility of missile interception.

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Strategic Missile Defense offers no real disincentive for rogue regimes such as North Korea or Iran to develop or use ballistic missiles, nor does it offer any protection against the more acute threat of terrorist groups smuggling weapons of mass destruction into the United States. Instead, the aggressive pursuit of strategic missile defense makes it more difficult to constrain the potential offensive nuclear threat from Russia and China.

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