East Coast Missile Defense: A Rush to Failure

Volume 4, Issue 4, June 10, 2013

This week, the GOP-controlled House of Representatives will debate and vote on its annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which, among other things, would provide up to $250 million to build a missile defense site on the U.S. East Coast by 2018. This is a bad idea for a number of reasons, and would ultimately lead to a rushed, ineffective system wasting billions of taxpayer dollars.

If the full House approves an East Coast site, which is likely, the Senate Armed Services Committee, which marks up its bill this week, should not. Like last year, the Senate's cooler heads should oppose a new missile defense site that the Pentagon does not want.

The Pentagon: We Don't Need Another Site

The Pentagon says that there is no military requirement for an East Coast site. At a May 9 Senate Armed Services Strategic Subcommittee hearing, Madelyn Creedon, Assistant Defense Secretary for Global Strategic Affairs, said that the East Coast is already "well protected" by the 30 missile defense interceptors now based in Alaska and California, and the administration's plan to field another 14 interceptors in Alaska by 2017 "provides additional protection" against "anything from North Korea as well as anything from Iran, should that threat develop." Iran does not yet have a long-range missile capable of reaching the United States.

The Pentagon: We Can't Use Additional Funds

Even though the Defense Department does not support an East Coast site, last year Congress directed the Pentagon to explore options for where such a site might be located. In May 8 testimony before the House Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee, Missile Defense Agency director Vice Adm. James Syring said he does not need additional funding in fiscal year 2014 because his agency already has funds to assess possible locations, which will be narrowed down to three by the end of the year. After that, an environmental review would last up to two years, he said. Rather than deciding now that the system should be deployed, Congress should wait for the Pentagon to finish its review.

The System Would Not be Effective Against Real-World Threats

To field an East Coast site by 2018, a rush by any measure, the Pentagon would have to use the same technology now deployed on the West Coast, the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system. But the existing technology needs to be scrapped, not replicated. The GMD system has not been "successfully" tested since 2008, with two failures in 2010.

According to a 2012 National Research Council report, the GMD system "has serious shortcomings, and provides at best a limited, initial defense against a relatively primitive threat." The NRC report recommends replacing the GMD system with an entirely new technology, which could take a decade or more to develop.

Moreover, the GMD system has not been proven effective at distinguishing real threat warheads from decoys or debris. As Pentagon Director of Operational Testing Michael Gilmore testified May 9,
"If we can't discriminate what the real threatening objects are, it doesn't matter how many ground-based interceptors we have; we won't be able to hit what needs to be hit."

A Third GMD Site Would Be Expensive

The United States has already spent about $40 billion on the (ineffective) GMD system on the West Coast. The Congressional Budget Office has conservatively estimated that a new site would cost $3.6 billion over five years. The NRC report says that the total 20-year cost for a new system at two sites would be $19-25 billion.

Given current fiscal realities, requiring the Pentagon to buy a weapon system it does not need would force it to cut other, higher priority goals, such as solving the discrimination problem. Building a costly third GMD site using outdated, ineffective technology to counter a long-range missile threat that does not exist is not in the best interests of U.S. national security.

Missile Defense Cooperation Is a Bipartisan Goal

In addition, the House NDAA would prevent any executive agreement dealing with missile defense, presumably including agreements to share missile defense information with Russia. This is self-defeating, because the United States stands to benefit from missile defense cooperation.

For example, U.S.-Russian missile defense cooperation could include the sharing of missile launch early-warning information. The Pentagon has been interested in gaining access to data from Russian radars located northwest of Iran, such as the Voronezh radar in Armavir, that could provide useful tracking information to NATO on an Iranian missile launch toward Europe.

Given that early-warning data sharing would improve the United States' and NATO's ability to detect missile launches, it is puzzling that some in Congress oppose providing early warning, detection, and tracking information to Russia. Moscow is highly unlikely to provide this information to the U.S. and NATO unless there is a two-way flow of data.

Despite the concerns of some in Congress that the Obama administration might provide classified information about missile interceptor systems to Moscow, U.S. officials have been clear that they have no such plans. On May 9, Vice Adm. Syring said in response to a question,"I have not declassified any information to give to Russia and I have not been asked to declassify any information to give to Russia." At the same hearing, Creedon said "we have no ability to share any classified information with Russia nor any intent to share any classified information with Russia."

Moreover, U.S.-Russian efforts to cooperate on missile defense have enjoyed bipartisan support, with roots in the Reagan administration's offer to share missile defense technology with the Soviet Union. In 2004, the George W. Bush administration began seeking a Defense Technical Cooperation Agreement (DTCA) with Russia. This agreement would have addressed a broad range of cooperative research and development activities, including missile defense.

Further Bilateral Reductions Are In the U.S. National Interest

The House NDAA also proposes to block implementation of the 2010 New START Treaty between the United States and Russia, as well as further reductions beyond New START. Once again, this is self-defeating as nuclear arms reductions, with a long bipartisan tradition, serve to increase U.S. national security.

It was President Ronald Reagan who, in 1986, shifted U.S. policy away from ever-higher nuclear stockpiles--which peaked at about 30,000 nuclear warheads--and started down the path of reductions that continues today. U.S. and Russian arsenals have now been reduced by more than two-thirds, and the world is safer for it.

If the House NDAA provisions to block funding to implement New START were to become law, Russia would likely halt its nuclear reductions as well, risking the treaty's collapse. This would allow Moscow to rebuild its nuclear forces above the treaty ceiling of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads and
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Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

increase the number of nuclear weapons aimed at the United States.

Moreover, the inspection system established under the treaty could collapse, depriving the U.S. of crucial data exchanges and on-site inspections of Russian forces, undermining transparency and strategic stability.

At the same time, the House NDAA would prohibit further nuclear arsenal reductions unless approved by the Senate as part of a treaty. While a treaty may be the ideal way, depending on circumstances, to implement further arms reductions, there are other ways.

For example, in 1991 President George H.W. Bush announced unilateral reductions in U.S. tactical nuclear weapons and did not seek congressional approval. Similarly, President George W. Bush reduced the U.S. nuclear stockpile by more than 50 percent, saying in 2001, "We don't need arms control negotiations to reduce our weaponry in a significant way."

B61 Is Already Overfunded

The House bill would provide $581 million for the B61 Life Extension Program (LEP), $44 million above the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA)'s fiscal 2014 request, which is already a 45 percent increase over fiscal 2013.

Instead of increasing funding for the B61, Congress should scale it back. NNSA is planning to extend the service life of 400 B61 gravity bombs for an estimated cost of $10 billion, or $25 million per bomb. But NNSA's gold-plated plan would replace hundreds of parts in each bomb that do not need to be replaced now. NNSA has a cheaper option for the B61 LEP that would cost just $1.5 to 2 billion, or 80 percent less, and replace only the parts that need replacement due to aging. There is no reason to spend the extra $8 billion, especially as some NATO allies are calling for the bombs deployed in Europe to be removed and given that the 180 B61s stored in Europe are not militarily useful or necessary today.

Time to Stop Playing Games

It is time to stop playing political games with U.S. nuclear weapons policy. Continued, verified reductions of excessive U.S. and Russian arsenals will enhance U.S. security by reducing the nuclear threat.

As the Pentagon said in January, "It is possible that our deterrence goals can be achieved with a smaller nuclear force, which would reduce the number of nuclear weapons in our inventory, as well as their role in U.S. national security strategy."

Gen. James E. Cartwright, the retired vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and commander of U.S. nuclear forces in the George W. Bush administration, said last year that U.S. deterrence requirements could be achieved with a total arsenal of 900 strategic nuclear warheads.

The major threats the United States faces today, such as proliferation, terrorism or cyber attacks, cannot be addressed with nuclear weapons. Rather than demanding American taxpayers cough up yet more money for programs that we don't need, Congress needs to focus on more cost-effective solutions that address the nation's future defense requirements.--Tom Z. Collina

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Posted: June 10, 2013