

NMD Test Delayed Until July; Review to Start in June

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A crucial test of the proposed limited national missile defense (NMD) scheduled for June 26 will slip until at least early July and possibly as late as the end of August. Despite the testing delay and accusations that data revealing the system can be easily defeated have been fraudulently covered up, the Pentagon will start its deployment readiness review June 20. President Bill Clinton, who has found little support abroad for the proposed defense, is to decide on whether to deploy the system after the Pentagon completes its review.

Originally scheduled for April 27 and then pushed back until June 26, the next NMD intercept attempt of a dummy warhead, the third of a planned 19, will now be in early July. Pentagon officials attributed the latest delay to a wiring problem on the interceptor. If further delays occur, the test could be postponed until after mid-August. The United States has an agreement with the Marshall Islands to suspend testing activities at the Kwajalein Atoll, where the test U.S. missile defense interceptors are launched, for approximately a month, starting July 12, to protect local fishermen.

When the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO), which oversees U.S. missile defense programs, revealed the first delay on March 21, BMDO Director Lieutenant General Ronald Kadish said it would be "prudent to adjust the schedule for the deployment readiness review." Initially planned for June, the review would be pushed back to start in July to permit a 30-day analysis of the then-June 26 test, according to Kadish.

However, a BMDO spokesperson said the Pentagon review is now set to begin on June 20 with no firm end date. "The review will go on until someone determines we're ready to make a recommendation [on whether the system is ready for deployment] to the secretary of defense," the spokesperson explained. The effect of another delay in the next intercept test on the review is "a speculative question," the spokesperson said.

Testing Data Questioned

A longtime critic of missile defenses, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Professor Theodore Postol sent a letter May 11 to the White House calling on the president to appoint an independent team of scientists to review the NMD program, alleging that the defense could be easily penetrated and that BMDO and private contractors had manipulated testing data to hide this fact.

Analyzing BMDO data from the system's first flight test, Postol charged that the defense's exoatmospheric kill vehicle (EKV), which is designed to collide with incoming warheads, could not distinguish between warheads and decoys. Using on-board infrared sensors, the EKV attempts to discriminate between warheads and decoys by examining how light from each object fluctuates over time. But Postol claimed the testing data revealed that light signals from the decoys and warheads "fluctuated in a varied and totally unpredictable way," thereby rendering some of the incoming objects "essentially indistinguishable" from one another.

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According to Postol's letter, BMDO dealt with this problem by arbitrarily rejecting and selecting data to prove the system could work as advertised. As proof that BMDO knowingly covered up the system's shortcomings, Postol noted that the number of objects to be used in subsequent flight tests was reduced from a planned 10 to the actual use of only two—the dummy warhead and one decoy.

The White House deferred a response to the Pentagon, which subsequently classified Postol's letter as secret. On May 18, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon deemed the request for an outside review as "premature at this stage." BMDO issued a short statement calling Postol's conclusions "wrong" and charging the professor with neglecting other system elements, such as radar systems and space-based sensors, which will help the EKV discriminate between decoys and warheads. "For obvious security reasons, we do not discuss the capabilities of the system and how they deal with countermeasures," the BMDO statement concluded.

The American Physical Society, a leading scientific and research organization, had observed in an April 29 statement that how the missile defense handles countermeasures is a "key factor" in whether the system will work. While not taking a position on NMD itself, the society described the program tests to date as "far short of those required to provide confidence in the 'technical feasibility' called for in last year's NMD deployment legislation." Clinton signed legislation on July 22, 1999, that declared it U.S. policy to deploy an "effective" missile defense "as soon as is technologically possible."

International Support Weak

During a visit to Washington, Javier Solana, the secretary-general of the Council of the European Union and former NATO secretary-general, reiterated May 1 that Europeans worry that U.S. NMD plans could lead to a decoupling of U.S. and European security. He also counseled Washington to proceed with its anti-missile plans in a way that does not strain relations with Russia and create a "major crisis."

In separate Washington visits, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine said U.S. decision-makers must take European concerns into account. Both ministers called on the United States to consider the impact NMD deployment could have on future arms reductions. Vedrine, who also questioned the threat driving U.S. defense plans, added that he knew concerns about the global effects of NMD were not "a specifically French point of view."

While Vedrine and Fischer stopped short of voicing outright opposition to U.S. NMD plans, Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy and Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh urged Washington to "refrain from deciding on a new missile defense system" in an editorial published in Europe.

Despite continued U.S. disavowals that the system is aimed at China, which has only some 20 ICBMs able to strike the entire United States, Beijing repeated its concerns with U.S. NMD plans and implied the system could provoke a Chinese force buildup. A senior State Department official, noting that the proposed U.S. missile shield would defend only against a small number of missiles, said May 11 that regardless of U.S. NMD plans, Washington suspected Chinese nuclear forces would "expand in a way that would make this system less threatening to China."

The U.S. intelligence community is preparing a report on the international implications of a U.S. missile defense deployment that reportedly warns the shield could spur missile buildups by China, India, and Pakistan and increase global missile proliferation. Scheduled for delivery to the White House in June, the report will likely build on a September 1999 National Intelligence Estimate that warned missile defenses would prompt countries developing missiles to respond by "deploying larger forces, penetration aids and countermeasures."

U.S. diplomacy in winning overseas acceptance of its NMD has primarily focused on gaining Russian agreement to amend the 1972 ABM Treaty, which prohibits missile defenses capable of protecting a

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country's entire territory from strategic ballistic missile attack. Throughout May, high-level Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, reaffirmed Russian objections to amending the treaty and warned Washington that its unilateral withdrawal from the accord, which would require six-months notice, would lead to Russian withdrawal from other arms control agreements.

Confronting continued steadfast Russian opposition to its NMD plans, U.S. officials downplayed prospects for Clinton and Russian President Vladimir Putin to arrive at an ABM agreement during their June 3-5 summit in Moscow. U.S. National Security Adviser Samuel Berger said May 25 that he had no expectation the ABM issue would be resolved but that the summit would provide a good opportunity for exchanging views on the problem. A day later, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright simply described U.S. and Russian differences as being "too wide" for the issue to be resolved now.

In deciding later this year whether to deploy the missile defense, Clinton has repeatedly said his decision will rest on four criteria: the system's technological readiness, the maturity of the threat, cost, and arms control considerations.

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