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Secrecy on Missile Defense Grows

Pentagon Shelves Timetables, Cost Estimates; Critics Say Oversight Imperiled

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As the Pentagon boosts spending and intensifies development of a national antimissile system, it is also taking steps to shield the program from Congress and the public as well as traditional oversight measures within the Defense Department.

In recent months, defense officials have exempted missile defense projects from the planning and reporting requirements normally applied to major acquisition programs. They have stopped providing Congress with detailed cost estimates and timetables for antimissile systems. And they have announced plans to restrict information about targets and decoys used in flight tests of the most advanced option under development, the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense.

The moves come against the formal demise Thursday of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, allowing the United States for the first time in 30 years to pursue a nationwide antimissile system -- and to do so by whatever means it wishes. Driving home the point, Pentagon officials plan to break ground in Alaska on Saturday for six interceptor missile silos at Fort Greely, about 80 miles southeast of Fairbanks.

The new missile site is portrayed by the Pentagon as primarily a "test bed" for gauging how interceptors and command and control networks withstand the Alaskan cold. But defense officials have made no secret of their intention to be able to use the site as an operational antimissile system should the need arise. The facility is scheduled for completion by September 2004, just as the next presidential election campaign -- and Bush's expected run for a second term -- will be peaking.

Citing the Pentagon's heightened guardedness about its antimissile programs, Democratic lawmakers and other missile defense skeptics accuse the administration of trying to pull a veil over a development effort long troubled by test failures and cost overruns. Without the kind of standard reports and disclosures used in the past to assess missile defense programs, critics argue, it will be harder to hold the administration accountable for the additional billions of dollars it is investing in the effort.

"These are disturbing trends," said Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.), chairman of the Armed Services subcommittee on strategic weapons. "You get the suspicion this is as much to avoid scrutiny of the program as to shield it from adversaries."

Pentagon officials counter that they are not trying to cover up anything. They say the experimental nature of the missile defense effort and the need for flexibility warrant exemption from traditional requirements and make it virtually impossible to generate meaningful cost estimates or production schedules.

Additionally, as the tests become more sophisticated and use more advanced decoys, officials say, concerns about national security dictate disclosing fewer specifics about system capabilities.

"The charge of excessive secrecy is wrong," said Lt. Gen. Ronald Kadish, who oversees the antimissile programs as director of the Missile Defense Agency. "Key decision-makers in the department will have more than adequate information to act on, and Congress will have all it needs when times come for decisions."

During its first 17 months in office, the Bush administration has embarked on an expansive program for testing various technological approaches to missile defense -- land- and sea-based interceptors, airborne lasers and space-based weapons. In place of President Bill Clinton's plan for a relatively simple architecture, consisting of land-based interceptors aimed at knocking down enemy warheads in midcourse, Bush envisions a multilayered defense encompassing all three major phases of flight -- boost, midcourse and terminal.

Nonetheless, the ground-based midcourse option remains the furthest along in development.

After missing two of its first three intercept attempts under Clinton, the land-based system has scored hits in all three attempts under Bush and has been able to hold closer to schedule, with the next test slated for August. Even so, the system still faces substantial technical hurdles, including development of effective means for distinguishing real warheads from decoys.

It was to foster greater flexibility that Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in January granted Kadish extraordinarily broad discretion to set performance goals and measure progress. Instead of trying to define a fixed system to meet a specific missile threat, Rumsfeld and his aides adopted a more open-ended course, marked by such new buzzwords as "spiral development," "evolutionary acquisition," "block approaches" and "capabilities-based" systems.

Kadish has offered assurances that the Missile Defense Agency will police itself even more rigorously than before and will receive oversight within the Pentagon from a panel of top-level civilians.

But Democrats counter that the new liberties afforded the agency -- and the increased silence around it -- circumvent the checks and balances designed to give Congress and others sufficient information to form technical and budgetary assessments. While acknowledging the experimental nature of much of the missile defense work, critics argue that the intent of the law was nonetheless to compel the Pentagon to come up with plans and projected milestones -- and not seem to be spending money blindly.

Questioning each of the service chiefs in March, Sen. Carl M. Levin (D-Mich.), the Armed Services committee chairman, elicited testimony revealing that none of the four-star officers had been consulted on the Pentagon's missile defense budget for fiscal 2003.

"The committee is concerned that under the new Missile Defense Agency organization, the military services have not been afforded the opportunity to provide the proper guidance and advice on the missile defense budget," panel members concluded in their report on the 2003 defense authorization bill last month.

In its bill, the committee included language that would require the Pentagon to provide cost estimates, development schedules and planned procurement timetables for the four biggest programs -- the ground-based midcourse system, a sea-based version, the airborne laser and an intermediate-range Army system called Theater High-Altitude Area Defense. The bill also would mandate the

Pentagon's chief test evaluator to conduct an annual operational assessment of the missile defense programs, and would direct the service vice chiefs to review cost and performance criteria for the programs.

"It wouldn't be such an issue if it weren't such an expensive program," said Philip E. Coyle III, the Pentagon's chief test evaluator during the Clinton years. At \$7.8 billion in fiscal 2002, the Bush administration is spending 47 percent more than the Clinton administration did in its final year.

Democrats make no secret that behind their press for more budget information is a strategy of getting the administration to scale back its programs. But they argue that the absence of detailed reporting affects not just the missile defense effort; it also calls into question the validity of the Pentagon's projections for overall defense spending, masking the likely need for cuts in other programs in order to afford missile defense.

Senate Democrats won committee approval of cuts of \$812 million in the administration's requested \$7.8 billion for missile defense in 2003. The Senate report cited items that were duplicative (such as multiple requests for "systems engineering and integration"), premature (a second prototype airborne laser aircraft) or undefined (sea- and space-based "critical experiments" in boost-phase defenses).

The full Senate has yet to vote on the reductions. Meanwhile, the House has approved about \$21 million more for missile defense than the administration sought, setting the stage for a likely conference battle.

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