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# For N. Korean Missile, U.S. Defense Is Hit or Miss

By Peter Spiegel, Times Staff Writer  
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WASHINGTON — The Bush administration has spent nearly \$43 billion over the last five years on missile defense systems, but with North Korea poised to launch its most advanced missile yet, U.S. government assessments and investigative reports indicate little confidence in the centerpiece portion of the program.

Eleven ground-based interceptors in Alaska and at Vandenberg Air Force Base in Central California, the cornerstone of the administration's new system, have not undergone a successful test in nearly four years and have been beset by glitches that investigators blame, at least in part, on President Bush's order in 2002 to make the program operational even before it had been fully tested.

**ADVERTISEMENT** In all, the interceptors hit dummy missiles in five out of 10 tests, but these were under controlled conditions that critics say do not reflect the challenges of an actual missile launch.

A little-noticed study by the Government Accountability Office issued in March found that program officials were so concerned with potential flaws in the first nine interceptors now in operation that they considered taking them out of their silos and returning them to the manufacturer for "disassembly and remanufacture."

"Quality control procedures may not have been rigorous enough to ensure that unreliable parts, or parts that were inappropriate for space applications, would be removed from the manufacturing process," the report says.

Since Bush took office in 2001, the ballistic missile defense system has been one of the administration's most controversial military priorities, advancing an array of programs designed to down enemy missiles in various stages of flight.

In recent days, Pentagon officials have remained coy about the capabilities and alert status of the system, leading to speculation that they may be preparing to try to shoot down the North Korean missile, believed to be the first trial of a long-range Taepodong 2. The missile is thought to be capable of reaching U.S. bases in Japan, the U.S. territory of Guam and possibly Alaska or Hawaii.

The problems in the ground-based system, as well as the ongoing expense of the war in Iraq, have not damped the administration's enthusiasm for the program. The Pentagon has requested



Missile defense tests

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\$10.4 billion for missile defense in next year's budget, which would be its largest annual grant to date. And according to the GAO, the Pentagon plans to spend \$58 billion, or 14% of its research budget, on missile defense over the next six years.

The vast majority of funding has gone to the ground-based interceptor system, designed to take out long-range missiles as they arc toward a target. Interceptors are rockets that have missile-seeking devices to destroy incoming weapons.

In addition to the interceptors, nine at Ft. Greely in Alaska and the other two in California, the system includes a series of complex radar upgrades and a sophisticated command system that enables all the components to interact.

The ground-based system has received most of the attention and funding. But missile defense systems based on Navy ships equipped with sophisticated Aegis radars, which have proved more successful in testing, have been winning a growing share of the funding, at least in part because of the ground-based devices' failures.

The U.S. military's most high-profile involvement in any North Korean launch is likely to come from the Aegis-equipped destroyers that patrol the coastal waters off the Korean peninsula. But the purpose of the radars is to track enemy missiles rather than to shoot them down.

The U.S. first sent a destroyer with Aegis radars upgraded for tracking ballistic missile launches into international waters near North Korea in October 2004, when the guided missile destroyer Curtis Wilbur was deployed as part of the Navy's first missile defense mission.

None of the destroyers are equipped with rockets that can shoot down enemy missiles, said Dave Kier, who oversees the Aegis missile defense system for prime contractor Lockheed Martin. Instead, they are used to feed real-time data on missile launches to the U.S. Strategic Command, the Pentagon division responsible for all missile defense systems.

Three larger Navy cruisers — the Shiloh, Lake Erie, and Port Royal — are equipped with antimissile rockets, but they are not expected to be directly involved in any response to North Korea's possible launch.

These rockets are being developed to combat shorter-range rockets rather than intercontinental ballistic missiles such as the Taepodong 2.

For its part, the Shiloh is scheduled to undergo a test to shoot down a decoy missile launched from Hawaii today. Unlike the ground-based system, cruisers have hit their targets in six of seven previous tests.

Pentagon officials said today's test had been scheduled for months and was not related to the current standoff with North Korea.

Because of the repeated misses by the ground-based system — including back-to-back attempts just over a year ago in which the interceptors failed to launch — Air Force Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering, director of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency, suspended all ground-based tests early last year.

He ordered two separate teams — one internal and one run by three outside experts — to investigate the glitches. In December, an interceptor missile was launched without problem, but



it was not aimed at a dummy missile.

In spring, Obering signed off on a new test schedule for the ground-based system. The first test was planned for summer, and a spokesman said the move was a sign that Obering now believed the interceptors were back on track.

During testimony on Capitol Hill last month, Obering said that although the system was not yet on alert, "if we had to use the system in an emergency, I fully believe that it would work."

But the Government Accountability Office study and a similar study issued in February by the Pentagon's internal Operational Test and Evaluation office, a department created to take independent looks at the military's biggest weapons programs, paint a far less optimistic picture.

The annual Pentagon report says "there is insufficient evidence to support a confident assessment" of the latest components installed in the system. The report does, however, praise Obering for overhauling the program.

The GAO is even more skeptical in its assessment, saying that even though individual technologies involved in knocking a long-range missile out of the sky have been tested, the agency has yet to prove that the full system works.

Much of the trouble, both the GAO and Operational Test and Evaluation Office reports argue, can be tied to the administration's decision to push the system into operation even as it was being developed. In December 2002, Bush ordered the Missile Defense Agency to develop a limited capability in Alaska by 2004, a process that authorized the Pentagon to field components before they were fully tested.

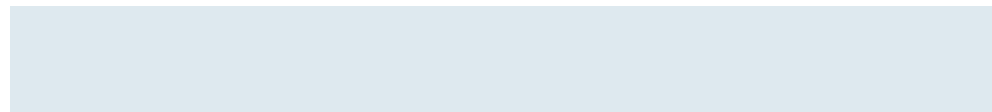
Both the Missile Defense Agency and the GAO have laid some of the blame on Boeing, the ground-based program's lead contractor. Obering docked Boeing \$107 million in bonuses last year for the failures, though both the company and the Defense Agency say relations have improved since the move in February. A Boeing statement said the company had revamped and improved its oversight processes, but the GAO was still projecting significant cost overruns.

The most troubling failure appears to be potential glitches in the interceptors. The Government Accountability Office said officials involved in the ground-based system recommended that the Missile Defense Agency remove the first nine interceptors entirely, after concerns that the rockets may contain parts that are not "adequately reliable" or "appropriate for use in space."

The agency has agreed to take them out of their silos to check the parts, but not before the missiles go through scheduled upgrades next year. That would mean that the first test since the hiatus, which will be the first at Vandenberg, will involve a suspect interceptor missile.

"It's not a perfect system; it never will be," said one person familiar with the issues involved, speaking on condition of anonymity while discussing internal deliberations. Officials are debating whether the system now is good enough to provide "a high probability" of success, he said.

"They're some who think that it is, and some think it isn't."



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