

OPINION

Missile defence: a necessity not a luxury

North Korea's recent missile launches only reinforce the necessity and urgency of evolving the missile defence system, argues John Holly



The recent ballistic missile launches by North Korea only serve to underscore the absolute necessity for the US to field effective and viable missile defence systems to protect both our homeland and our deployed forces.

History has taught us time and again that reliably predicting the future is a difficult task. Yet President Bush's decision to deploy a limited missile defence to defend the US homeland was certainly a propitious act. Announced in December 2002, this system joined together sea- and ground-based components to provide a limited defensive capability against a country exactly like North Korea.

The recent failure of North Korea's recent failure of a Taepo Dong 2 launch only bought a little more time before the next event. What if the next one is successful? What if it is launched on a trajectory toward the US? Their decision to launch in the face of strong diplomatic efforts and threats of sanctions from multiple countries only reinforces the unpredictability of this regime.

So if diplomatic initiatives and sanctions cannot preclude them from proceeding, what options are available? Until late 2004 the only viable response was offensive military action. Yet today, with a limited missile defence capability, leaders can defend the homeland while considering a broad range of diplomatic and military options. So, when the president made the decision to deploy a limited missile defence system he took an unprecedented step toward expanding away from a small set of leadership options focused on overwhelming military retaliation in response to an attack on the homeland, to a much broader collection of alternatives previously not available.

It is fascinating to watch the shifting debate by

critics of missile defence over the past decade. In 1999-2002, critics blatantly stated that the complexity of "hitting a bullet with a bullet" made an effective missile defence simply too difficult to be feasible. However, after a string of successful Patriot PAC-3 missions, Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence tests and five successful intercepts by the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system, the debate shifted from the technical feasibility to the difficulty of the targets that were being engaged in the GMD programme. However, a review of the facts for the GMD flight tests revealed that the tests were conducted against very sophisticated targets that were increasingly more complex with each mission and in the presence of countermeasures. As the facts surrounding the tests began to emerge, the critics focused on the actual conduct of the flight tests. Recently I read an article casting doubt on the flight tests because a beacon was on the target vehicle. The author suggested that the beacon aided in the intercept solution – it does not – it is a range safety item.

Now the criticism shifts to system cost and the adequacy of the tests. Due to cost and range constraints, most tests are single events conducted in a one-on-one scenario. Critics draw their options from the results of discrete test events. One-on-one tests do not necessarily represent actual firing doctrine for an incoming attack. Consequently, a single anomaly in performance is treated by critics as a catastrophic event. However, in an actual attack, the operational commanders may employ multiple interceptors against a single target. Critics serve a useful function, but they need to get their facts straight. Now the debates focus on adequacy of testing. While I personally advocate more testing, I do not advocate absolute perfection as the standard for measuring success.

If our new standard for fielding weapons is perfection in all test events, then we have fielded our last weapon. Few remember the string of flight test failures encountered by Werhner von Braun and his team of rocket scientists in the initial development of the US missile and space programme. The US missile defence system is arguably the most complex system fielded to date.

A presidential decision to deploy a missile defence system explicitly stated it was limited in nature and would be the initial step in an evolving capability. Never was the initial deployment intended to be the end-state.

Yet, the two aborted flight tests by the ground-based system (December 2004 and February 2005) raised cries for programme cancellation and reallocation of funding away from the ground-based system. The reasons for these aborted launches were a single excessively stringent software parameter and sea-salt corrosion of the silo support arms that did not retract properly - conditions not found in the interior of Alaska where the interceptors are operationally deployed. While there is no excuse for either of these events, both served to correct the problems and improve the overall design. Yet in both of these aborted flight tests, the reconstruction of intercept solutions generated by the fire-control system would have resulted in high probability of intercept missions.

Many believe that ballistic missile defence is still too costly to pursue; but what is the price of an attack against Seattle? After 9/11 the US saw the devastating impact of a single terrorist event against a city. Yet, with irrefutable evidence of many countries not necessarily friendly to the US, aggressively pursuing a ballistic missile programme capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction, critics continue to challenge the return on investment to the taxpayer. The return of a single intercept of an inbound ballistic missile is clearly worth the cost in lives saved as well as avoidance of adverse economic impact.

What are the North Korean accuracy requirements? I can postulate that precise accuracy is not a requirement. No matter the actual difference between impact location and aim point, North Korea will claim success. They will have achieved their goals through demonstration of a real offensive ballistic missile capability.

North Korea's recent launches only reinforce both the need and urgency of evolving the missile defence system. These launches directly impacted the world economy. Steep increases in gas prices and drops in the international stock markets precipitated by the North Korean launches were real. The world has changed and ballistic missiles are a dominant choice today and will be more so in the future.

Clearly the missile defence system deployed today is not perfect; nor was it intended to be. Yet it offers a limited defensive capability where none previously existed. In doing so, it provides a new dynamic on the international stage. The debates will always exist because reasonable people can disagree; but the debate must always be put in the proper context. The proliferation of ballistic missiles has changed the world; but so too has the fielding of an initial defensive capability.

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