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Countering North Korea's Missiles: The Missile Defense System the U.S. Should Have

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Since early May, North Korea has been preparing for a potential missile launch, which now appears imminent. In response, Americans are debating how the United States should respond to such a launch. At this point, several facts are clear. First, the North Korean threat underscores the importance of a comprehensive national missile defense system, capable of defending America and her allies. Second, North Korea – or any rogue nation which refuses to abide by the customs of civilized society – should not be allowed to engage in threatening, unannounced missile launches. Finally, some have suggested the United States should launch a preemptive strike at the North Korean missile launch pad. This course of action may indeed be justifiable if it was determined that the launch was threatening—if, for example, a nuclear warhead was placed on the missile.

Short of such an explicit threat, the U.S. should take the middle ground by engaging its missile defense system. Within seconds of a North Korean launch, American sensors could analyze the missile's trajectory and determine whether purpose—most likely either a satellite deployment or an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). If the launch appears to be of an ICBM, the United States should use its missile defense system to destroy the missile.

According to news reports, the Department of Defense has already put the nation's developmental missile defense system in operational status in response to the North Korean preparations. This is a wise response because the military must be prepared to defend any threat to the lives and property of

Americans posed by North Korea's prospective missile launch, whether that threat comes in the form of an intentional attack or as a consequence of an errant flight. Likewise, the U.S. will need to fulfill its treaty obligations to its allies such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea if North Korea's actions threaten their sovereignty or vital interests. In order to enhance its defensive options, the U.S. needs to intensify its efforts in building a missile defense system.

The defensive option provides a middle ground between preemptively destroying a missile launch site and waiting to retaliate after the loss of life and destruction of property. The U.S. military could destroy a launch site prior to launch, but this would be difficult, although not impossible, to justify. Moreover, a preemptive strike could lead to a large-scale military conflict. Nevertheless, if the Bush Administration could convincingly demonstrate that North Korea had mated its missile to a nuclear warhead and was, therefore, intending to launch a purposeful attack, then the preemptive option would be warranted and necessary. A retaliatory response, on the other hand, accepts the potential loss of life and property and assumes, perhaps inaccurately, that a North Korean action warrants retaliation. Arguing that the U.S. should undertake

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military retaliation in response to destruction resulting from what is later shown to be an errant missile test is problematic. A retaliatory strike, like a preemptive strike, also carries the significant risk of a broader military conflict.

A Very Limited Defense. Congress and the American people, however, need to understand that the missile defense system, particularly for countering long-range missiles of the sort North Korea is reportedly prepared to launch, represents a very limited capability. First, the missile defense system is still in development, and it has an embedded operational capability because the system has to be built in order to test it. Second, there are only eleven ground-based interceptors—nine fielded in Alaska and two in California—capable of intercepting long-range missiles. According to the Director of the Missile Defense Agency, Lt. General Henry A. Obering, in his March 9, 2006, testimony before the Strategic Forces Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, the Navy is seeking to field up to 20 Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptors on four Aegis ships by the end of this year. These missiles, however, are currently designed to counter medium-range missiles. These interceptors are backed by a variety of sensors and radar to detect and track missiles in flight and a command and control network for operating the system.

Given the very limited capabilities of this defense, the ability of the system to intercept and destroy a North Korean missile in flight does not provide an assured defense, even under circumstances favorable to the defense. If the North Korean missile is a long-range missile headed toward Alaska or the West Coast, the ground-based interceptors in Alaska and California are capable of performing an intercept. If the long-range missile is launched toward U.S. ally Australia, the ground-based interceptors are not well positioned to perform an intercept. If the missile turns out to be a medium-range missile and is launched over the ocean—for example, in the direction of the U.S. territory of Guam or U.S. ally Japan—the SM-3 missile has the theoretical capability of performing an intercept. The actual capability depends on the location of the ship carrying SM-3 interceptors at the time of the North Korean missile launch, and so it is impossible to

state precisely the likelihood of success. Nevertheless, an intercept attempt is appropriate when it is likely that the unimpeded launch is threatening to the U.S. or jeopardizes the supreme interests of a U.S. ally.

The Abandoned Global Protection against Limited Strikes Plan. Congress and the American people may understandably be uncomfortable with the limited missile defense capabilities available today. Today's missile defense capabilities could be much stronger. On February 12, 1991, the Director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, Ambassador Henry F. Cooper, and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, Stephen J. Hadley (now National Security Advisor to President Bush), provided a briefing to the press and public on the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS) missile defense plan. The plan was based on the analysis of the trends in the development and deployment of ballistic missiles throughout the world at that time. In hindsight the basis of the plan is justified by North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities today. At least a portion of the significant elements of the GPALS missile defense architecture would be operational today if Congress and the Clinton administration had not abandoned the plan in 1991.

GPALS would have been capable of defending against up to 200 individual missile reentry vehicles. The architecture would have included a family of defensive interceptors for countering short- and medium-range missiles, ground-based missile defenses for countering long-range ballistic missiles launched at U.S. territory in far larger numbers than the 11 available today, as well as being operational, a broader and more robust sensor network and command and control system and a constellation of space-based interceptors called Brilliant Pebbles. The Brilliant Pebbles interceptors would have provided a defense against most short-range and all long-range ballistic missiles. Further, the constellation would have had the theoretical capability of countering long-range missiles launched from anywhere in the world against any target in the world. The actual capability ultimately depended on the numbers and deployment pattern of the interceptors. Taken as a whole, this architecture would have

also allowed multiple shots at the kind of missile North Korea is prepared to test. The acquisition cost of GPALS system was estimated in 1991 to be approximately \$41 billion in 1988 dollars.

Even if the full numbers of each element of the GPALS architecture were not deployed today, it would still cover the full scope of potential targets of a North Korea missile attack, including U.S. territory and the territory of U.S. friends and allies. This includes a missile carrying countermeasures and decoys designed to overwhelm the defense. The confidence level in countering a single missile would be far higher than it is today.

Conclusion. A defensive option against missile attack is essential to a balanced U.S. military posture in facing the kind of threat posed by North Korea today. It provides the president with a wider variety of military options in a world where both

nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems are proliferating and future events are difficult to predict. The other military options available to the president, specifically the preemptive and retaliatory options, are currently robust. The defensive option, however, continues to lag.

If the North Koreans launch a threatening ICBM, the president should act in defense of the country and shoot it down. Moreover, it is long past time for this Congress to take the steps that its predecessor and the Clinton administration should have taken in the early 1990s and put a missile defense architecture similar to GPALS in place. North Korea has provided a reason why this is necessary.

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