
CRS Report for Congress

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National Missile Defense and Alaska

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Summary

In mid-July 2001, the Bush Administration announced that it would seek funding to develop a Ballistic Missile Test Bed, which would be used to prove various aspects of a national missile defense¹ capability. The test bed would be oriented in the Pacific and would make use of early warning radars at Beale Air Force Base (California) and Cobra Dane at Shemya Island, and use the Kodiak Launch Facility in Alaska to launch targets and interceptors. The test bed could also include up to five ground-based silos at Fort Greeley Alaska. If directed, the BMD test bed could provide a basis for a contingency missile defense capability against long-range ballistic missile threats as early as about 2004. The concept for possible deployment of a limited missile defense system was developed previously by the Clinton Administration. The recent proposal already has generated considerable controversy in Congress and overseas. This report will be updated as necessary.

Background. The development and deployment of a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system to protect the United States against attacks from long-range, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) has been a controversial issue in the debates over defense budgets and programs for almost two decades. Since 1983, when the Reagan Administration began an intensive research and development program, Congress has appropriated about \$60 billion to examine a wide range of missile defense concepts and technologies.

Questions about the scale, timing, and nature of an NMD system to protect the United States have been at the forefront of this debate. In addition, the debate often has hinged on changing perceptions of the nature of the threat to the United States itself. The Reagan Administration favored deployment of a widespread or global system, with a

¹ Such a system would be designed to protect the United States against limited accidental or deliberate long-range ballistic missile attack, especially from Asia. Many Members and others have sought for such a deployment in the near-term and to ensure that any deployed system include protection of all 50 states.

significant number of space-based elements, to counter missile attacks that might arise from any quarter of the globe. For the most part, the extensive Soviet ballistic missile force was viewed as the driving threat behind this effort. Congress, however, cut Administration budget requests and placed other restrictions on these efforts, which resulted in a much scaled back missile defense research and development initiative.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Bush Administration and some Senate leaders advocated a more limited national missile defense concept that would comply with existing arms control agreements, namely the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.² Again, for the most part, the driving threat for a more limited system was the Soviet missile arsenal. But the difference this time was that, as the Soviet Union collapsed, policymakers and analysts grew concerned over the possibility that an unauthorized or accidental missile launch could occur. In addition, the 1991 Persian Gulf War demonstrated to many that other countries, hostile to the United States, could threaten or attack U.S. interests.

The Clinton Administration entered office at a time when concerns over an out-of-control, collapsing Soviet Union were decreasing relative to a few years earlier. There was now less worry over an accidental or unauthorized Russian missile strike against the United States. At the same time, however, came new, unsettling revelations about the nature and scope of Iraqi missile programs and development of weapons of mass destruction. Similar programs, also seen by some as threatening, were underway in other countries such as Iran and North Korea. The Clinton Administration determined that a continued, strong NMD research and development effort was needed. In a more controversial move, however, the Administration, including the intelligence community and the U.S. military, determined that development of a new ballistic missile threat could be identified with sufficient time to allow deployment of an effective NMD system. The Administration called its strategy the 3+3 plan. It called for 3 years of NMD research and development through the year 2000 to be followed by a deployment decision if: 1) it were deemed warranted by the intelligence analysis of an emerging threat and; 2) the prospective NMD system was technically ready. Actual deployment, according to this plan, could then occur three years later in 2003 under this plan.

In January 1999, however, the Administration determined that the missile threat was maturing more quickly than it had anticipated. In this sense, the Administration validated criticism it had received from the 1998 Rumsfeld Report.³ But the technology for an NMD system was considered not ready for deployment by 2003 without considerable risk. Thus the Administration affirmed a June 1998 General Accounting Office (GAO) report and a

² The 1972 ABM Treaty and its 1974 Protocol limits the United States and Soviet Union to a single NMD site with up to 100 ground-based interceptors, associated ground-based radars, sensors, and communications. Space-, air-, and sea-based NMD components are not permitted. The United States chose to deploy its single site around an ICBM field near Grand Forks, North Dakota. The Soviet Union deployed its single site around Moscow. The U.S. system was operational for 6 months in 1975-1976 before military planners deemed it cost ineffective and Congress ended its support largely because of cost considerations.

³ Created by Congress (P.L. 104-201), the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States (the Rumsfeld Report), issued its report on July 15, 1998. The report indicated the threat was “broader, more mature and evolving more rapidly” than estimated by the intelligence community and that the community’s ability to estimate such threats was declining.

February 1998 Welch panel report⁴ (reaffirmed in a second report in November 1999) that concluded there were very high risks associated with deploying an NMD system by 2003. The NMD program was therefore restructured in January 1999 to reduce technology risks so that deployment might occur in 2005. In September 2000, President Clinton decided to postpone deployment to the next Administration primarily on grounds that the technology was not ready.

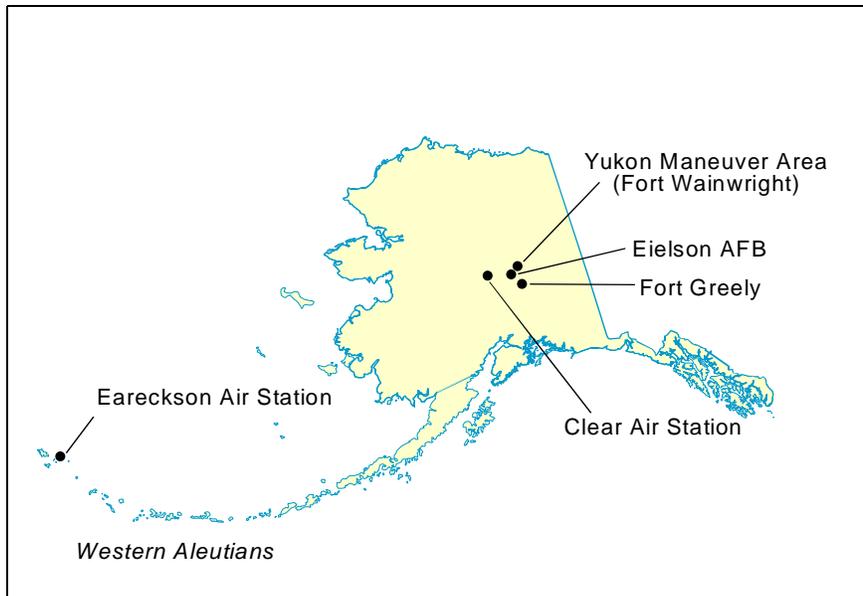
The Alaska Option. In November 1998, the Administration filed a Notice of Intent in the *Federal Register* that the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO) would begin to hold public scoping hearings in conjunction with its plan to conduct an environmental impact analysis of potential locations for elements of an NMD system (*Federal Register* 63915-16). Thus far, these sites are only in Alaska and North Dakota.

The ABM site at Grand Forks, North Dakota has received the most attention for some time. This is because remnants of the original site (in caretaker status since 1975) are still there and the north central U.S. location is viewed by many as optimal for an overall defense of the country – it might better protect the major popular centers such as the East Coast, but might not protect such states as Alaska and Hawaii. Others note that we still have obligations under the ABM Treaty that restrict U.S. deployment options to North Dakota. Nonetheless, besides the expected North Dakota locations, the Notice of Intent included a number of sites in Alaska that many maintained would be better suited to defend all 50 states against the most likely limited missile threats, especially originating from Asia.

Alaska was identified in Defense Department and other studies as offering perhaps some important benefits over a site in North Dakota. First, Alaska is seen as closer to many of the threats of most concern--namely, those that might originate in Asia, such as China or North Korea. In particular, such proximity to potential threats is viewed as reducing the technical demands of an NMD system; missile interceptors would be closer to their targets and could provide an earlier opportunity for interception. A key objection, pointed out by some, however, is that Alaska is not suited for other perceived missile threats from countries such as Iran, Iraq, India, and Pakistan; missiles that might be launched from these countries would largely circumvent Alaska. Second, there appears to be broader statewide political support for deployment of an NMD site in Alaska relative to bringing back an ABM site in North Dakota. Even so, Congress (led in the Senate by Senator Conrad) has urged the Department of Defense to keep the North Dakota option open. Environmental concerns that still could be raised over deploying an NMD system in Alaska in and around National Park lands could further change this calculus, however.

The graphic below identifies some of the sites mentioned in consideration of Alaska for the ground-based interceptors, battle management and command and control elements, an In-flight Interceptor Communication System, and an X-Band Radar. All these sites are

⁴ This panel, headed by former Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Larry Welch warned that the BMD flight test program as a whole was “inconsistent with the difficulty of the task” and further described the flight test schedule as “a rush to failure.”



Adapted by CRS from Magellan Geographix. Used with permission.

on installations and property controlled by the Defense Department.

The public scoping hearings were held to gather information from interested parties regarding specific environmental concerns. This input was considered in a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that was published in late September 1999. The draft EIS states there could be an NMD deployment of up to 100 interceptor silos at one of the locations under consideration in Alaska or North Dakota, or up to 100 interceptor silos at both one site in Alaska and one site in North Dakota. The final EIS was completed in mid-2000.

Congressional Interest. Several factors raised congressional interest in NMD broadly, and support of near-term deployment in particular. These include differing views over the current and future threat from weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery on ballistic missiles, substantive differences over where and how best to deploy a limited NMD system, and competing political interests regarding the benefits of new defense installations.

Members of Congress hold a range of views regarding ballistic missile threats to the United States. Many Members are pessimistic about the nation's ability to anticipate a direct missile threat to the United States. They cite what they consider to be major intelligence failures in Iraq (i.e., the unexpected post Persian Gulf War discovery of an extensive nuclear weapons program), in South Asia (i.e., recent underground nuclear tests by India and Pakistan), and in North Korea (i.e., recent missile tests over Japan). Many are therefore unwilling to risk potential or uncertain threats to the United States with what they view as indefinite NMD program development. They may be willing to accept the costs and technical risk associated with near-term NMD deployment. Nonetheless, such views have not prevailed in part because of threats of a presidential veto.

For a few years now, some defense experts have said privately that a ground-based NMD site in the north central United States might not defend all of the United States, given the likely state of NMD technology. Those who accept the premise that a future

threat could be determined with sufficient time for deployment also believe that the passing of time permits development of increasingly effective NMD technologies. So when deployment is required, the most effective system would be available. This might include, at some future date, defense of the entire United States from even a single site.

A dilemma for proponents of near-term NMD deployment is that current technology largely is untested and could quickly become outdated if deployed. Moreover, deployment of a system today might preclude deployment of a more effective system later because of the added cost considerations. Hence, a potential solution that has received much attention is to deploy a very limited site in Alaska. Proponents argue that the Alaska option has the benefit of being closer to potential missile threats that might arise out of East Asia and hence provide an effective defense of all 50 states; ICBMs launched from Asia toward the U.S. mainland would pass over or near Alaska and be subject to interception.

Moreover, the Alaska NMD option appears to have strong political support from the state and from its congressional delegation. In May 1997, the Alaska Legislature passed a resolution calling on the President to “take all actions necessary,” including deployment of an NMD system to protect Alaska from missile threats “on an equal basis with the continental United States.”

On the other hand, Senator Conrad of North Dakota, for instance, has worked to ensure that a North Dakota NMD deployment option remains under serious consideration. Also, Congress, during the FY 2000 defense authorization process, reaffirmed this interest by requiring the Pentagon to look more closely at the two potential sites.

Cost Issues. There is no consensus cost figure for deploying a national missile defense system. This is true today as well, even though the system under consideration is relatively small compared to that proposed during the Reagan Administration.

For several years, the Clinton Administration estimated that a limited NMD system would cost \$9 billion to \$11 billion to develop, test, and deploy. In January 1999, the Administration indicated these costs was closer to \$13 billion. Since then, the price tag increased significantly to more than \$30 billion. Currently, there are no cost estimates available for what the Bush Administration envisions for the Test Bed or the contingency deployment.

ABM Treaty Concerns. Many in Congress and overseas strongly support continued adherence to the ABM Treaty. This raises several challenges to deployment of an NMD site in Alaska. First, the Treaty allows such deployments only around either an ICBM field or the nation’s capital; a deployment site in Alaska is not permitted. Second, the Grand Forks, North Dakota site still is technically accountable as an ABM site under the terms of the ABM Treaty. In fact, there is a Dismantlement Protocol to the ABM Treaty that would require some extensive, and perhaps expensive, dismantling of that site. Third, some still object that current NMD deployment concepts would violate a central purpose of the ABM Treaty: “each Party undertakes not to deploy ABM systems for a defense of the territory of its country and not to provide a base for such a defense, and not to deploy ABM systems for defense of an individual region except as provided” by the Treaty. (*Article 1*)

In January 1999, the Administration acknowledged that NMD deployment would likely require modifications to the ABM Treaty and stated its intention to begin discussions with Russia. And again in September 1999, the Administration announced that it was pursuing agreement on a proposed Alaska deployment with Russia. These efforts did not result in any agreement.

Many others in Congress and the Bush Administration, believe the ABM Treaty is a relic of the Cold War that needs to be abandoned because it serves as a technical impediment to developing and deploying an effective NMD system. To date, however, both the United States and Russia have made clear political commitments to abide by the terms of the ABM Treaty. ABM Treaty opponents who wish to move forward with using Alaska as an ABM Test bed or deployment site will likely have to address a strong negative Russian response and pressure from most U.S. allies and friends who continue to favor the Treaty.