U.S. Missile Defense Policy
Prepared Remarks by Dr. Robert M. Soofer
Strategic Forces Subcommittee
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Chairman King, Ranking Member Fischer, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee on Strategic Forces to discuss U.S. missile defense policy. For most of the post-Cold War period we have enjoyed a relatively stable bipartisan consensus on the role for missile defense in U.S. national security policy. But that wasn't always the case.

Few national security issues provoked more debate during the Cold War than missile defense. The argument hinged on how one perceived the relationship between missile defense and strategic stability. One school of thought held that preserving mutual vulnerability by limiting missile defenses was key to stability during a crisis and essential for avoiding an "action-reaction" arms race. The other school of thought, as strongly held as the first, argued that protection against nuclear missile attack was not only a moral imperative, but that even imperfect defenses could contribute to deterrence of nuclear attack by complicating an adversary's prospect of launching a successful disarming first strike.

Congress was divided on the matter from the outset. In 1969 the Nixon Administration requested funding for the Safeguard ABM system – a light defense designed to protect U.S. land-based retaliatory forces against Soviet attack, protect American cities against China, and provide security against accidental attacks from any source. The Senate vote was 50 to 50 during an attempt to eliminate funding for the system, with Vice President Spiro Agnew casting the deciding vote in favor of Safeguard.

The 1972 ABM Treaty, which limited each side to two ABM sites, *seemed* to settle the issue in favor of the mutual vulnerability school, at least until President Reagan reopened the debate in 1983 with the Strategic Defense Initiative. This committee witnessed some heated debates during those years, and while these two schools still exist to some extent, the end of the Cold War brought with it the opportunity to reach common ground on missile defense policy and programs.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union the focus of U.S. missile defense policy shifted from building defenses against near peer powers to addressing the emerging threat to the homeland posed by smaller, more unpredictable regional actors – rogue powers in the popular vernacular. With a return to great power competition, U.S. missile defense policy must also cope with China and Russia's growing regional missile capabilities meant to prevent the United States from reinforcing its allies during a regional conflict. By centering on regional missile defense and homeland protection against rogue regimes (rather than Russia) policy makers have been able to avoid the bitter Cold War debates about strategic stability.

U.S. policy for homeland and regional missile defense

The U.S. maintains two somewhat different policies for homeland and regional missile defense that sometimes leads to confusion about our policies and intentions.

Maintaining an "advantageous homeland defense posture against limited ballistic missile threats," as noted in the 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review, has been the guiding principle of U.S. missile defense policy across Republican and Democratic administrations since the end of the Cold War. Protection of the homeland against ballistic missile attack by regional actors such as North Korea and Iran is a goal shared by Congress as well.

With respect to Russia and China, the United States continues to rely on its nuclear forces (as it did during the Cold War) to deter nuclear threats against the homeland. It is not U.S. policy to build missile defenses against these much larger and technologically sophisticated threats to the homeland.

To address missile threats to U.S. deployed forces and allies, our policy has been to strengthen regional missile defense capabilities against the full range of potential threats while working cooperatively with allies to help them better defend themselves. We don't rely only on missile defense systems, but rather pursue a comprehensive and layered approach that includes deterrence, active and passive defenses, and attack operations to destroy offensive missiles prior to launch.

I would like to address three issues that could kindle debate over missile defense policy this year: 1) funding for the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI); (2) employing the SM-3 missile in support of the homeland defense mission; and (3) the relationship between missile defense and arms control.

NGI and Homeland Missile Defense

To stay ahead of the North Korean ballistic missile threat to the homeland, the Obama Administration added 14 ground-based interceptors (GBIs) to the 30 fielded by the Bush Administration and sought to enhance the Ground Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system through a redesigned kill vehicle (RKV) for the GBI. The Trump Administration altered the acquisition approach to include a fully modernized interceptor (both rocket and Kill vehicle) called the Next Generation Interceptor and planned to add an additional 20 NGI/GBIs to the 44 deployed currently in Alaska and California. The Biden administration has approved NGI development to proceed, with Secretary of Defense Austin telling Congress that *"with its emphasis on missile defense and more sophisticated sensors, our budget will also help counter the increasing ballistic missile capabilities of nations like North Korea and Iran."*

Some national security experts and Members of Congress have criticized the cost, efficacy, and necessity for NGI or the GMD system more broadly, arguing that North Korea could easily overwhelm planned upgrades and future deployments. Other critics are concerned

that the expansion of US missile defense capabilities, meant to pace the North Korean threat, could eventually upset strategic stability with Russia and China.

I would offer the following points in response.

First, while we believe North Korea intends to grow its ICBM force in the coming years, our intelligence agencies cannot know with any great certainty the pace of this growth. Today, it is reasonable to assume that an additional 20 ground-based interceptors, combined with a new kill vehicle and improved reliability of the GMD system, may be sufficient to stay ahead of the threat. We would hope also to eliminate a number of North Korean ICBMs on the ground, easing the burden on GMD (though the prospects of defeating mobile missiles prior to launch remains a daunting challenge).

Second, the costs, while significant, must be understood in context. In Fiscal Year 2021, the funding for NGI ($858 million) is about 8.2 percent of the total MDA budget and will be approximately one-quarter of one percent of DoD's budget over FY21-FY26. NGI total program costs amount to approximately 0.18 percent of DoD's budget from FY20-FY30. Combined NGI and GMD funding will account for about one-half of one percent of the DoD budget across FY21 to FY26. These are not unreasonable sums to protect the nation against North Korean and potentially other rogue state ICBMs.

Third, proceeding with NGI, and homeland defense more broadly, is important for a U.S. grand strategy that, according to the White House, seeks to *"promote a favorable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and its allies, inhibiting access to the global commons or dominating key regions."* Adversary offensive missile capabilities are meant to coerce the United States, to limit our freedom of action, to discourage us from supporting our allies or countering regional challengers, and, ultimately, to weaken our alliances. Modernizing and expanding our homeland defense underpins President's Biden's "push to revitalize our ties with friends and partners." An important element of renewing alliances is convincing allies that the United States is prepared to run risks on their behalf. Strengthening US homeland defenses provides that confidence by reducing our own vulnerability to North Korean reprisals. *After all, why would our allies expect us to come to their defense if we are not first willing to provide for our own defense*?

Finally, Russia and China are likely to complain about improvements to US homeland defenses even while each continues to modernize its own suite of missile defense systems. Russia deploys 68 nuclear tipped ground-based interceptors for the protection of greater Moscow and hundreds of regional air and missile defense systems, a missile defense posture which exceeds the U.S. in some respects. It is also actively selling its regional missile defenses to nations across Eurasia. China possesses regional air and missile defense systems and has conducted tests of a mid-course defense system against intermediate-range ballistic missiles. President Putin, too, has said that U.S. missile defense won't be able to stop Russian missiles, which include nuclear air- and sea-launched cruise missiles which can under-fly the GMD system. While there may be some in Russia who genuinely worry about U.S. missile defenses,

Russian leaders more likely use the issue for domestic political reasons and to sow dissention between the U.S. and its allies.

Layered Homeland Defense and the SM-3 missile

As part of its review of missile defense policy, the Trump administration examined whether existing technologies or current weapon systems could contribute to the missile defense mission. One of those approaches included the prospect of employing the SM-3 block IIA missile as an underlayer "to offer an additional defensive capability to ease the burden of the GBI system and provide protection for the U.S. homeland against evolving rogue states' long-range missile capabilities." Congress was apparently thinking along the same lines when it directed the Department of Defense to conduct a test of the SM-3 against a simple ICBM target by the end of 2020. That test took place last November, resulting in a successful intercept.

While the SM-3 IIA missile deployed on Aegis capable ships will continue to play an important regional defense role, the interceptor may be able to provide a modest, additional layer of protection for the homeland against North Korean ICBMs in an emergency or during a crisis. The ship would have to be in the right place near our coast at the right time, and given its smaller size compared to the GBI, the interceptor would not provide coverage for the entire United States. Moreover, the SM-3 would not be capable against the more complex Russian and Chinese ballistic missiles armed with penetration aids and decoys – nor would it defend against air and sea-launched cruise missiles.

Russia and China have registered their concerns about this development, as has the arms control community, which fears this potential expansion of U.S. homeland defense will spark an arms race or even increase the likelihood of nuclear war – in other words, upset strategic stability.

However, given the limited number of SM-3 IIA missiles programmed over the next five years, as well as the interceptor's inherent technological limitations against complex Russian and Chinese missiles, it is unlikely this capability will upset strategic stability for the foreseeable future, if ever. As President Putin himself has noted, by the end of this year, 90-percent of Russia's nuclear forces will be modernized and, in his words, "capable of confidently overcoming existing and even projected missile defense systems."

Some have suggested that Russia's "novel" nuclear systems are a response to U.S. missile defense plans and that the recent SM-3 test will only exacerbate this. But there is an alternative explanation. According to Rose Gottemoeller, former New START chief negotiator, Putin *"is after nuclear weapons for another reason – to show that Russia is still a great power to be reckoned with. These exotic systems have more of a political function than a strategic or security one."*

More likely, an improved SM-3 missile, even in limited numbers, will contribute to collective efforts to meet the challenges posed by the North Korean regime, thereby enhancing

regional and international strategic stability. In the final analysis, we simply cannot give Russia or China a veto over the protection of the United States against rogue state threats.

Missile Defense and Arms Control

Another important policy consideration is the relationship between missile defense and future nuclear arms control negotiations. There is a sort of conventional wisdom, stretching back to the early days of the Cold War, which suggests that reductions or limits on offensive nuclear forces are made possible through limits on missile defenses. A corollary principle is that it is "wholly impossible" to reach arms control agreements while pursuing missile defenses. This conventional wisdom is wrong, or at least more complicated than currently understood.

In the first instance, the 1972 ABM Treaty did not curtail the arms race; rather, the Russians added some 10,000 nuclear warheads between 1972 and 1984, leading a prominent arms control theorist, Thomas Schelling, to observe in 1985 that "since 1972, the control of strategic weapons has made little or no progress."

History shows that missile defense and nuclear arms control are not incompatible. Even though the United States has been pursuing missile defenses seriously since the mid 1980s, and withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, Russia and the United States have together drawn down their nuclear forces by some 85 percent from Cold War highs. If Russian leaders were seriously alarmed about U.S. missile defenses they would not have agreed to these reductions or, more recently, to extend the New START treaty for another five years.

To be sure, Russia will want to include missile defense in any future nuclear arms control negotiations or strategic stability talks. We should offer no concessions, but rather hear them out and explore ways to reassure the Russian side, through transparency, technical cooperation where practical, and other confidence building measures, that U.S. missile defenses pose no threat to Russia's formidable nuclear forces.

Conclusion

Homeland and regional missile defenses provide protection for the nation, its deployed forces and allies, and are critical enablers of a U.S. grand strategy that relies on alliances to maintain a favorable balance of power and a peaceful world order.

For about 2-percent of annual defense appropriations, missile defense provides the United States the freedom of action to respond to crises, to shore-up allies, to deter adversaries and, if necessary, to defeat them and limit damage should deterrence fail.

Deterrence, to be successful, requires the demonstration of resolve. Missile defense is a very tangible measure of U.S. resolve. Failure to do what is necessary to protect this nation against North Korea, a country with one of the lowest ranked economies in the world, could call

into question U.S. resolve and commitment in the eyes of ally and adversary alike. This would damage U.S. strategic capability and have serious implications for America's broader foreign policy objectives.

I thank the committee for its time and look forward to questions.

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