

Flaws Found in U.S. Missile Shield

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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WASHINGTON — Secret U.S. Defense Department studies cast doubt on whether a multibillion-dollar missile defense system planned for Europe will ever be able to protect the U.S. from Iranian missiles as intended, congressional investigators say.

Military officials say they believe the problems can be overcome and are moving forward with plans. But proposed fixes could be difficult. One possibility has already been ruled out as technically unfeasible. Another, relocating missile interceptors planned for Poland and possibly Romania to ships on the North Sea, could be diplomatically explosive.

The studies are the latest to highlight serious problems for a plan that has been criticized on several fronts. Republicans say it was hastily drawn up in an attempt to appease Russia, which had opposed an earlier system.

But Russia is also critical of the plan, which it believes is really intended to counter its missiles. A series of governmental and scientific reports has cast doubt on whether it would ever work as planned.

At a time when the military faces giant budget cuts, the studies could prompt Congress to reconsider whether it is worthwhile to spend billions for a system that may not fulfill its original goals.

The classified studies were summarized in a briefing for lawmakers by the Government Accountability Office, Congress' nonpartisan investigative and auditing arm, which is preparing a report. The GAO briefing was not classified.

Military officials emphasized that the interceptor, intended to protect the United States, is in the early stages of development and that its capabilities are not known. They said the U.S. is already protected by other missile defense systems.

Even if European-based interceptors are unable to directly defend the United States, they say, the devices would protect not only European allies and U.S. troops stationed on the continent but also U.S. radars there that are necessary for all U.S. missile defense plans.

Missile defense has been a contentious issue since President George W. Bush sought to base long-range interceptors in central Europe to stop missiles from Iran.

Some Democrats criticized the plans, saying they were rushed and based on unproven technology. Russia believed the program was aimed at countering its missiles and undermining its nuclear deterrent.

While it might seem logical for the U.S. to want to have a defense against Russian missiles, it's not so simple. A new missile defense system aimed at Russia could undermine the balance between the nuclear powers, prompting Moscow to add to its arsenal and build up its own defenses.

It would undermine prospects for further cuts in nuclear weapons, a priority for President Barack Obama, and could also hurt U.S.-Russian cooperation on other issues of international importance.

Obama reworked the plans soon after taking office in 2009, saying the threat from long-range Iranian missiles was years off. His plans called for slower interceptors that could address Iran's medium-range missiles.

The interceptors would be upgraded gradually over four phases, culminating early next decade with those intended to protect both Europe and the United States.

The plans have gained momentum in Europe with the signing of basing agreements in Poland, Romania and Turkey and backing by NATO.

But Russia, which initially welcomed the plan, now strongly opposes it, especially the interceptors in the final stage. Russia fears that those interceptors could catch its intercontinental missiles launched at the U.S.

It is that fourth stage that is now at issue. The GAO investigators said the classified reports by the Missile Defense Agency concluded that Romania was a poor location for an interceptor to protect the U.S.

It said the Polish site would work only if the U.S. developed capabilities to launch interceptors while an Iranian missile was in its short initial phase of powered flight.

But the administration is not pursuing that capability because it does not believe it is feasible, one senior defense official said.

The military has considered deploying interceptors on ships, but the Navy has safety concerns that have not yet been resolved.

The suggestion of attempting intercepts from ships in the North Sea would likely aggravate tensions with Russia. That could put the system right in the path that some Russian ICBMs would use, reinforcing Russia's belief that it, not Iran, is the target of the system.

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