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Questions On Missile Defense Plans

Scientists' Report Questions Technology's Effectiveness

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An extensive study by a national group of scientists raised serious doubts yesterday about the likely effectiveness of some weapons that President Bush is pursuing in his drive to develop a system for defending the United States against ballistic missile attack.

The study, by a 12-member group under the American Physical Society, the largest U.S. association of physicists, focused on a category of weapons intended to knock down enemy missiles soon after launch in their "boost phase."

It concluded that while the boost-phase approach might provide some defense against longer-burning liquid-fueled missiles, such a system would push the limits of what is technically possible. Even more critically, the study found, boost-phase weapons would likely prove entirely ineffective against faster, solid-fueled missiles that potential adversaries -- notably, North Korea and Iran -- are projected by U.S. intelligence analysts to possess within the next 10 to 15 years.

The study did not deal with the central part of Bush's program -- a plan to install land-based interceptors in Alaska and California that would soar into space and obliterate enemy warheads arcing through their "midcourse phase" of flight. But Pentagon officials have acknowledged limitations to this scheme and spoken of the need to supplement it eventually with boost-phase weapons.

Delivering its findings in a 400-page report, the APS study group stopped short of calling the administration's expanded work on boost-phase technologies a waste of money. At a news conference in Washington, group members declined to be drawn out on the implications of their analysis, saying the purpose of their nearly three-year study had been simply to address technical issues.

"We just wanted to bring the facts forward," said Daniel Kleppner, a physics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and co-chair of the study group.

But the group's lengthy critique is certain to complicate administration efforts to win congressional support for boost-phase systems, on which Bush planned to spend nearly \$1 billion in 2004 out of a total \$9.1 billion proposed budget for missile defense. Appropriations committees in both chambers of Congress already have voted to slash by half or more a Bush request for \$301 million to begin developing land- or sea-based boost-phase interceptors.

Another boost-phase program known as the Airborne Laser, which involves mounting a laser in a Boeing 747 jetliner and zapping missiles, is further along in development and expected to receive the \$626 million that Bush has sought for it. But weight problems and other technical glitches have bedeviled the program and forced delays in the first intercept attempt, now scheduled for 2005.

The Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency issued a statement yesterday saying agency officials had not "had an opportunity to digest" the APS study but remained "confident" about the administration's course. "We continue to believe that boost-phase technology has great potential for playing a vital role

in a layered missile defense," the statement said.

Boost phase refers to the first three or four minutes after launch in which a missile's burners remain lit. Flaming plumes make the missiles easier to detect by overhead satellites.

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