



Forum for American Leadership

Don't Hand North Korea a Win in the Missile Defense Review

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The Biden Administration is considering a proposal to abandon pacing U.S. homeland ballistic missile defenses against even the rogue state threat from North Korea. This is especially risky and should be rejected in favor of the longstanding bipartisan missile defense policy, a realistic policy regarding denuclearization of North Korea, and U.S. alliance commitments. Instead, the United States should design a homeland missile defense system that – at a minimum – keeps pace with the North Korean nuclear threat in order to effectively extend deterrence and assure allies.

The Risks of Nuclear Blackmail by North Korea:

- Kim Jong Un's long-term goal is the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under Kim family rule. While Kim Jong Un is not suicidal, there is an enduring risk of a North Korean nuclear attack against the U.S. homeland.
- North Korea possesses dozens of nuclear warheads and missiles capable of reaching the United States. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs are expanding, even without ongoing nuclear tests and long-range missile launches.
- The Defense Intelligence Agency in its 2021 "North Korean Military Power" report [explained](#) that North Korea uses "its nuclear and conventional military capabilities to compel South Korea and the United States into policy decisions that are beneficial to North Korea."
- The Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community, released on April 9, 2021, [stated](#) that Kim Jong Un "views nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent against foreign intervention."
- A credible U.S. homeland missile defense against North Korea is crucial to thwarting Kim's strategy because it removes Kim's ability to blackmail the United States with a threat to the homeland. And if deterrence were to fail, a capable homeland missile defense capability could save countless American lives.
- Further, without a credible homeland missile defense, our allies in South Korea and Japan may fear that the United States will not come to their aid in the event of an attack or invasion if Kim is able to hold the U.S. homeland hostage.
- Kim will see any policy choice by the Biden Administration to weaken U.S. missile defense as a unilateral U.S. concession that only validates his efforts to expand North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs.
- Additionally, policies to limit missile defense, accompanied by an effort to focus on an arms control agreement instead of denuclearization, will signal to Kim that the United States has accepted North Korea as a nuclear state. Tehran will be more likely to follow Pyongyang's pathway to a nuclear weapon.

Background on U.S. Ballistic Missile Defenses:

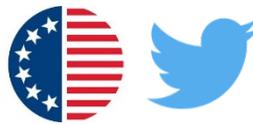
- The Obama administration in 2013 determined that 44 Ground-based Interceptors (GBIs) were necessary to meet the requirement to defend the homeland against the ballistic missile threat from rogue states.
- The Trump administration sought to increase the number of deployed GBIs based on the evolving rogue state threat.
- But, as a result of delays in issuing its policy, and technical challenges with earlier modernization programs (e.g., the Redesigned Kill Vehicle), the Trump Administration was not able to field a homeland defense capability beyond the 44 GBIs it inherited from the prior Administration.
- Instead, the Trump Administration initiated the plan to field 20 Next Generation Interceptors, increasing the total number of interceptors to 64, but not until approximately 2031.
- At the same time, failure to invest in homeland missile defense is catching up with us. In a [June Congressional hearing](#), the Director of the Missile Defense Agency said that there would be a time in the not-so-distant-future when the total number of Ground-based Interceptors required to protect the American people will dip below the current number of 44 GBIs.
- Meanwhile the threat – rogue state and beyond – has not sat still.
- According to U.S. Northern Command and senior DOD civilians, North Korea [could overwhelm](#) the homeland missile defense system by 2025 if the United States does not commit to improving the system.
- This 2025 capability gap means additional modernization may be required before the Trump Administration's Next-Generation Interceptor program arrives.

Recommendations for the Biden Missile Defense Review:

- U.S. ballistic missile defense policy has been hotly debated since before the U.S. withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002 in practically every respect save one: the U.S. shall defend the homeland from ballistic missile attack by rogue states, such as North Korea and Iran.
- A decision to abandon that policy and no longer counter the rogue state threat – as arms control advocates have urged (see [here](#) and [here](#)) – would upset more than 20 years of bipartisan defense policy.
- The United States should design a homeland missile defense system at minimum to keep pace with the North Korean nuclear threat, and any potential Iranian nuclear threat, in order to effectively extend deterrence and assure allies. At the same time, the rising nuclear threat posed by Russia and China [should drive a fundamental reappraisal](#) of the decision not to pursue missile defense capability against peer and near-peer states.
- Homeland missile defenses designed to keep pace with the North Korean threat enhance the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent. Allies understand that if Washington can deter, and if necessary, defend against a North Korean nuclear attack with minimal risk to the U.S. homeland, the U.S. will have greater freedom to intervene on allies' behalf.

- And most importantly, a failure to invest in additional and more capable homeland missile interceptors would allow the North Korean regime to acquire the ability to credibly threaten the U.S. homeland missile defense system, leaving American families highly vulnerable to North Korean nuclear missiles and subjecting the U.S. to North Korean blackmail and coercion. To permit this to happen would be a moral and strategic failure of the nation's political and military leaders. It would also gift a significant concession to Russia and China, who have been urging the United States to limit its missile defenses even while advancing their own.

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