

Commentary

Diplomacy, sanctions, missile defense: Use this triad against North Korea

By Lt. Gen. Dan Leaf (ret.)

Feb 21, 2018



A military parade is held in Pyongyang, North Korea, on Feb. 8, 2018. The event was highlighted by intercontinental ballistic missiles. (KRT via AP Video)

On Feb. 11, 2018, The New York Times editorial board published [an article](#) assailing the “dangerous illusion of missile defense.” In summary, the piece asserted that the recent failure of a missile defense test illustrates shortcomings in the system:

- U.S. President Donald Trump is overstating the effectiveness of existing and proposed capabilities.

- Rushing missile defenses, to fielding without realistic testing, to perfection has resulted in a system that is not foolproof.
- North Korea has demonstrated the ability to reach the U.S. mainland.
- While we need missile defenses, sanctions and nonproliferation enforcement are the real way to control North Korea's ambitions.

The “dangerous illusion” referenced in the title is apparently excessive faith and investment in the missile defense system attributed to the Trump administration. To counter that illusion, the authors imply there should be less investment, stating that there are “real questions about whether the program is sustainable.” However, testing to perfection prior to fielding is an approach that would guarantee that we lag far behind emerging offensive threats.

It is time for a rational assessment of means available to the United States to deter and defend against North Korean (and other limited scale) missile attacks while understanding each plays an important role:

Means #1: Diplomacy

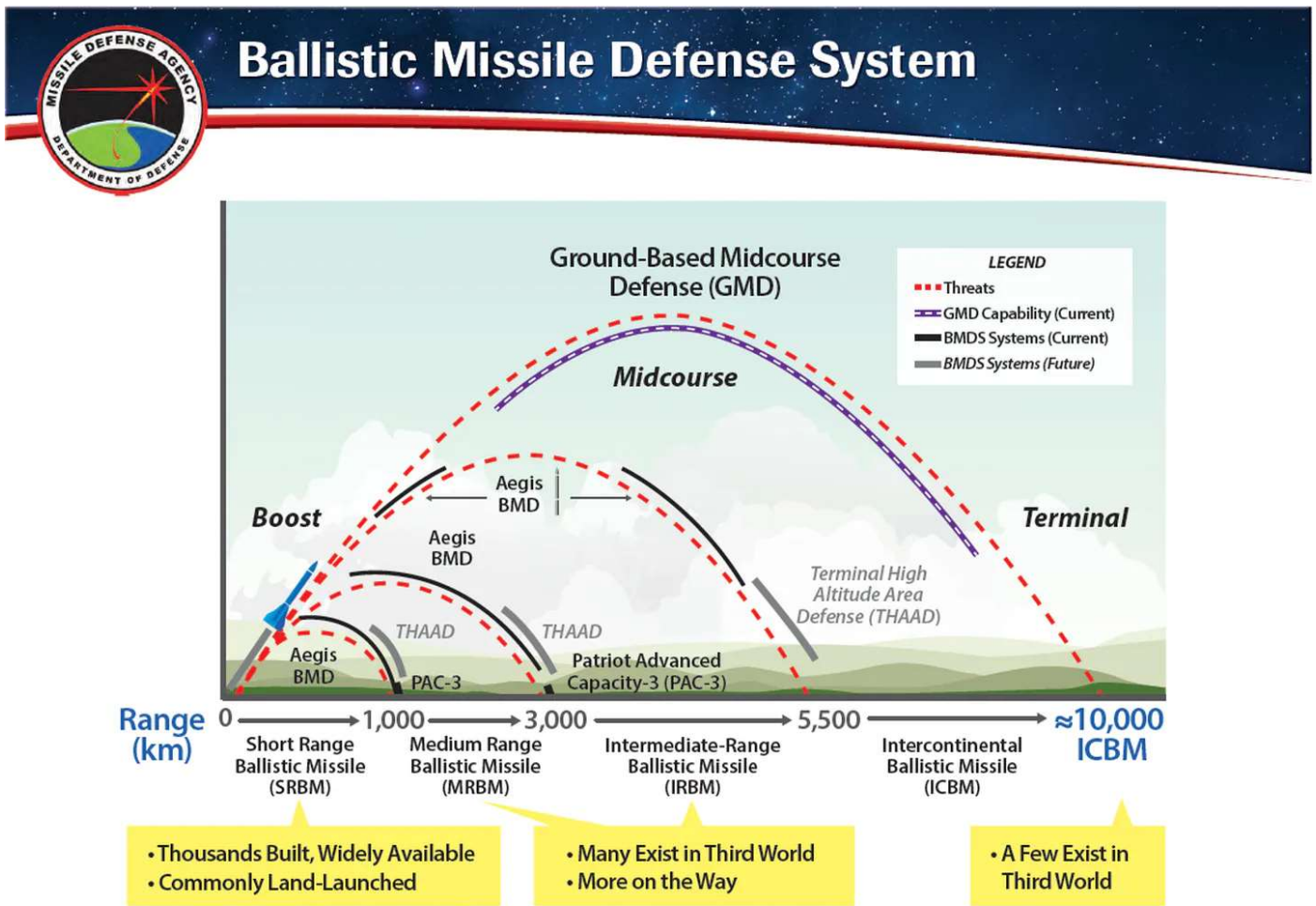
Interestingly, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis has been a vocal advocate of a diplomatic approach to compelling North Korea to comply with international norms. Recent events have raised hopes for a diplomatic solution, at least between the two Koreas. Those hopes must be tempered by realism — North Korea has a long history of duplicity in diplomatic interaction, and diplomacy takes time.

Means #2: Sanctions

Punitive measures alone will not solve the North Korea problem, but they are necessary for multiple reasons. It would be the height of folly to expect sanctions to be the answer, however. Even if other nations, such as China, fully support the current harsh sanctions, North Korea will continue to find ways around them through arms trafficking and cyber-robbery of banks and bitcoins.

Means #3: Missile defense

Often described as a hit-to-kill approach, comprehensive missile defense is much more complex than the end game as illustrated in this U.S. Missile Defense Agency slide.



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www.mda.mil/about/enviro_cis.html

(U.S. Missile Defense Agency)

Short-, medium-, intermediate-range and intercontinental missiles must be sensed before and after launch to facilitate intercept. None of this is easy, and it doesn't come cheap. But it does provide the only protection against a North Korean ballistic missile launch.

As the U.S. Department of Defense charts the course for future missile defense development, it should take note of two recent examples of rapid advancement: China and North Korea. Both were rife with failures but led to long-term success and development of surprising capability.

As vice commander at Air Force Space Command and as deputy commander at [U.S. Pacific Command](#), I marveled at China's ability to power through setbacks in minimum

time and relentlessly pursue advanced capability.

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By **Matthew Bodner**

Recent North Korean tests have shown a leadership willing to test in volume, and one that is uncharacteristically tolerant of failure, according to an [earlier article](#) in The New York Times. Our missile defense interceptors follow a similar path. New interceptors fail tests, and we fix the problems and test again until we have confidence they will succeed. The MDA has an [impressive record](#) of testing, correcting failures and improving the system.

Admittedly, perfection is more important in defensive capabilities than with an offensive weapon. The United States cannot afford to let a single nuclear warhead through. The missile defense architecture accounts for that with overlap and redundancy. Commanders would launch multiple interceptors at any incoming threat, and immediately fire another interceptor if one did not launch properly.

The MDA is also developing kill-assessment capabilities that would allow for another shot if the first interceptor misses. This is far different than the methods used in singular test scenarios. While [test failures are never good news](#), they are part of progress and should not deter a pursuit of capability that is at least as relentless as our adversary's pursuit of offensive weapons.

A final consideration in missile defense development is deterrent value. Any adversary, including North Korea, is likely to initiate an attack only having calculated a reasonably high probability of success. Developing, testing and fielding credible missile defense is a critical element of the combination of diplomatic, legal and military efforts needed to counter the threat currently posed by North Korean nuclear weapons, and to be prepared to address subsequent risk from Iran and other rogue nations.

Are missile defenses perfect? Of course not, and they never will be. No complex military capability is. But that is no reason to give up or concede victory to North Korea on the battlefield. We must use all of our tools effectively to protect the United States and our allies from North Korea's ballistic missiles.

Retired Lt. Gen. Dan Leaf served in the U.S. Air Force as a fighter pilot. He last served on active duty as deputy commander of U.S. Pacific Command and was vice commander of Air Force Space Command. He later returned to public service as the director of the Defense Department's Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. He is currently the managing director of Phase Minus 1, a conflict resolution and security consulting company.

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