

Military Defends New European Missile Shield

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WASHINGTON: A week after the Obama Administration announced it would not continue with the European missile shield planned by the previous administration, high-ranking military personnel defended the shift Thursday before critical Senators who said they learned about it from the media.

"I think the way that this was rolled out is problematic," Claire McCaskill, D-Missouri, said, holding her hands high in the air. "We were not notified at all that this was coming."

Both Democrats and Republicans of the Senate Armed Services Committee voiced their disapproval over the lack of transparency in developing the new plans, which administration and military members portrayed as cheaper, more flexible, and more reliable. They also said it can be deployed to protect Europe sooner.

Lawmakers also complained that the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic were notified in midnight phone calls hours before the official announcement was made last week.

Undersecretary of Defense Michele Flournoy blamed news leaks and faulty reporting for why the announcement was made before Congress was notified.

Military personnel assured Senators that a missile defense plan wasn't killed.

"We are not scrapping missile defense. Rather, we are strengthening it and delivering more capability sooner," Lt. Gen. Patrick O'Reilly said.

The United States has been seeking to deploy a missile shield....

Under the previous plan, proposed by the Bush Administration, 10 interceptor missiles were to be deployed at ground sites in Poland, supported by a radar field in the Czech Republic and in Southeastern Europe. It would have been operational between 2017 and 2018.

The new plan aims to build missile-intercepting capacity in phases.

Ships capable of shooting down missiles would be deployed in the Mediterranean in 2011 to protect parts of Southern Europe....

In 2015, more advanced missile interceptors with a longer range would be successively added to land and sea launch sites, with protection against short, medium, and intermediate range missiles by 2018.

By 2020, protection against inter-continental ballistic missiles would be added.

The new architecture keeps plans for a radar station in Southeastern Europe, but would also track radar by satellite and ships. Land-based missiles would be deployed at two sites, one in northern Europe and another in southern Europe. Placing one of these sites in Poland remains an option, Flournoy said.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Connecticut, supported what he called the old “shoot, look, shoot” system, where U.S.-bound missiles could be shot down from Europe, and if necessary, shot again by American-based interceptors. He said the old plan was capable of shooting down missiles headed for the United States by about 2017, three years earlier than the new plan.

The panelists provided several advantages of the new system. It would begin protecting European allies in 2011, roughly six years sooner than the old system, and its missiles, costing \$10 million each, are much cheaper than those planned for the old system, which cost about \$70 million.

They also said the diversity in radar and missile sites would make the system less susceptible to attack, in contrast to a single large missile field with two large radar fields.

O'Reilly said the old system would only have the capacity to shoot down five missiles, estimating two interceptors would be fired at each missile threat. He said the newer system would have much more capacity. The missile interceptor ships alone are capable of shooting down about 100 missiles.

“The firepower of this system is significantly higher,” O'Reilly said. “The previously proposed architecture is insufficient to counter large raid sizes.”

Republican Ranking Member Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, appeared worried that the international community perceived the change as a concession to Russia at the cost of U.S. allies, saying that this shows the United States is not prepared to stand beside its friends.

“There is very little doubt that in most of the world, this is viewed as an attempt to gain Russian concessions,” he said, adding that Russia “has veto power” on American missile defense plans.

Others expressed frustration that the United States did not use the opportunity to gain concessions from Russia. “This clearly pleases Russia,” McCaskill said, adding, “We get no substantive offers from Russia.”

“This is not about Russia. It’s never been about Russia,” Flournoy replied, adding that more allies will be protected under the new shield and that the Czech and Polish leaders embraced the plan. She also said the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was “very supportive”.

“I am disappointed by the administration’s decision to scrap the Polish/Czech ground-based defense,” Lieberman said, his brow knotted. He characterized the new plan as a tradeoff between “somewhat greater protection” for Europe, and “less protection to the continental United States.”

Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James Cartwright dismissed this concern, saying the previous plan for a missile shield in Europe would have only raised the probability

of shooting down a U.S.-bound missile from 92 percent to at most 96 percent.

The United States already has missile interceptors in California and Alaska which are widely thought to shield the entire continental United States. A map circulated by Republicans Thursday showed part of Maine wasn't protected, raising concerns that the nation would remain vulnerable if European ground interceptors are not deployed soon.

"We currently have the ability to defend the United States, including the East Coast," Flournoy said.

Sen. James Inhofe, R-Oklahoma, said that whatever the debate, there is no changing the plan. "This thing's done anyway."

The military is scheduled to launch test satellites Friday that detect and track ballistic missiles over their entire flight.

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