



Tests of U.S. Anti-Missile Interceptors Uncovered Flaws and Failures

During a series of tests of the new ballistic missile defense interceptor conducted by the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency from 2010-2016, the interceptors missed their targets several times. During a test of a supposedly "improved" interceptor conducted on January 28, the missile launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California was supposed to make a close fly-by of a mock warhead. However, after one of the interceptor's rocket thrusters malfunctioned, it flew far off-course and missed its target, according to Defense Department scientists.



Following that test, the Defense Department's Missile Defense Agency issued a news release reporting a "successful flight test." Aerojet Rocketdyne, Inc., the maker of the thrusters, issued its own statement claiming that the new model "successfully performed its mission-critical role."

The *Los Angeles Times* revealed details of several of the failed tests of the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system in a July 6 article. In all of these instances, the cause of the interceptors missing their targets was due to malfunction of the thrusters — small rocket motors that steer the interceptor to its target.

The *Times* compiled this record of failures in tests of the GMD system:

- January 2010: An interceptor failed to hit a mock warhead after one of the interceptor's thrusters stopped working during the test. Officials blamed a missing fastener in the thruster assembly.
- December 2010: In another flight test, an interceptor again missed its target. The failure was attributed to severe vibrations caused by the thrusters' "rough combustion" of fuel. The vibrations are believed to have disrupted the interceptor's guidance system.

(In 2011, the U.S. Missile Defense Agency began a redesign of the thrusters to smooth the rough combustion.)

- Late 2013: The redesigned thruster failed a ground test. Following this failed test, missile agency officials, decided not to retrofit existing interceptors with the new thruster. However, they still planned to put the redesigned version in the first four of 14 planned new interceptors.
- March 2014: A panel of outside experts appointed by the missile agency recommended that the redesigned thrusters be put through rigorous ground trials, called "hot fire" testing, before being installed in any interceptors. However, agency officials rejected the recommendation. The Government Accountability Office later criticized the decision, saying that eliminating the testing "increases the risk for reliability issues going undetected."
- May 2015: The GAO faults missile agency officials for "omitting steps" in the redesign of the thrusters



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in their rush to expand the missile defense system.

- Jan. 19, 2016: U.S. Missile Defense Agency director, Vice Adm. James D. Syring, said that an upcoming flight test would “fully flush out and fully test” the new thruster.

Nine days later, on January 28, the test was a failure, as noted above.

There were other reports of test failures of the GMD system in recent years. As one example, an article in *Aviation Week* for July 8, 2013 noted that during a test three days earlier, a ground-based interceptor was launched from Vandenberg AFB, California, against a target launched from the Kwajalein Atoll in the Pacific.

The report said that the U.S. Missile Defense Agency was silent about what happened during the test other than a brief acknowledgment that no interception took place.

The *New York Times* on July 5, 2013 quoted a brief Defense Department statement that acknowledge the failure of the test. “An intercept was not achieved,” the statement said. “Program officials will conduct an extensive review to determine the cause or causes of any anomalies which may have prevented a successful intercept.”

The article also noted that in March of 2013, following tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the Obama administration announced that it would increase ground-based interceptors in California and Alaska from 30 to 44 by 2017.

All 14 of the new interceptors will be placed in silos at Fort Greely, Alaska, where there are already 26 interceptors. The build up at the Alaska facility is an indication that the major threat is regarded as coming from North Korea.

An [article in *The New American* last year](#) reported that NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) was moving back into its previous Cheyenne Mountain underground bunker in Colorado Springs, mainly because of real threats by enemies of the United States who now possess the capabilities to launch a nuclear weapon from the south where NORAD is blind. The principle enemy named by NORAD Commander Admiral William E. Gortney was North Korea.

Gortney explained that North Korea now has operational the KN-08, a nuclear-weapon-armed missile that can be launched undetected and set off a nuclear explosion sufficient to shut down the entire North American electric grid.

Ever since the Cold War, when the biggest threat of a nuclear missile was seen as coming from the old Soviet Union, it was anticipated that the trajectory of missiles would take them over the North Pole. NORAD’s defenses were designed to protect our nation from attacks coming from the north. However, this left us vulnerable to attacks from the south.

The New American noted that this vulnerability is of great concern to Peter Vincent Pry, executive director of the EMP Task Force, who has written frequently in attempts to warn citizens of the danger. Last August, Pry joined with James Woolsey, former CIA director, warning in a *Wall Street Journal* article that “rogue nations such as North Korea (and possibly Iran) will soon match Russia and China and have the primary ingredients for an EMP attack: simple ballistic missiles such as Scuds that could be launched from a freighter near our shores [or] space-launched vehicles able to loft low-earth-orbit satellites [or] simple low-yield nuclear weapons that can generate gamma rays and fireballs.”

The article quoted Pry’s warning about what an attack might do to NORAD’s electronic grid:



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An EMP strike, most likely from the detonation of a nuclear weapon in space, would destroy unprotected military and civilian electronics worldwide, blacking out the electric grid and other critical infrastructure for months or years.

The report noted that because of this potential threat, Gortney has granted approval to begin the move NORAD operations from Peterson Air Force Base to Cheyenne Mountain, along with granting a \$700-million contract to Raytheon to upgrade NORAD's electronics.

This seems like a wise move, but it would be even more reassuring if our defense experts could get the bugs out of our of the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) and put hardware in place to protect the U.S. electric grid.

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