MISSILE DEFENSE

Assessment of Testing Approach Needed as Delays and Changes Persist

Why GAO Did This Study

For over half a century, the Department of Defense (DOD) has funded efforts to defend the United States from ballistic missile attacks. From 2002 through 2018, MDA has received about $152 billion to develop the BMDS and requested about $47 billion from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023. The BMDS consists of diverse and highly complex land-, sea-, and space-based systems and assets located across the globe.

Congress included a provision in statute that GAO annually assess and report on MDA's progress. This, our 17th annual review, addresses (1) the progress MDA made in achieving delivery and testing goals; (2) the extent to which MDA's annual test plan is executable; and (3) broad challenges that could impact MDA's portfolio.

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2019, the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) delivered many of the Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMDS) assets it planned and conducted key flight tests, but did not meet all of its goals for the year. For example, MDA successfully delivered interceptors for use by warfighters and conducted a salvo test (which involves launching two interceptors at an incoming target) for the Ground-based Midcourse Defense program. However, MDA did not meet all of its goals for delivering assets or testing. For example, MDA completed only two of seven planned flight tests, plus eight additional flight tests that were later added for fiscal year 2019.

MDA did not fully execute its fiscal year 2019 flight testing, continuing a decade-long trend in which MDA has been unable to achieve its fiscal year flight testing as scheduled. Although MDA revised its approach to developing its annual test plan in 2009 to ensure the test plan was executable, over the past decade MDA has only been able to conduct 37 percent of its baseline fiscal year testing as originally planned due to various reasons including developmental delays, range and target availability, or changing test objectives. In addition, MDA has not conducted an assessment to determine whether its current process for developing and executing its annual test plan could be improved to help ensure its executability.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that MDA ensure an independent assessment is conducted of its process for developing and executing its annual BMDS flight test plan. DOD concurred with the recommendation.

View GAO-20-432. For more information, contact William Russell at (202) 512-4841 or Russellw@gao.gov