Actions Needed to Improve Operational Planning and Visibility of Costs for Ballistic Missile Defense

Why GAO Did This Study
The Department of Defense (DOD) has spent about $91 billion since the mid-1980s to develop a capability to destroy incoming ballistic missiles. In 2002, recognizing the new security environment after the September 11 attacks, President Bush directed that an initial set of defensive ballistic missile capabilities be put in place in 2004. Although DOD is developing the Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMDS) to meet an urgent need, preparing to operate and support a system under continuous development poses significant challenges. GAO was asked to assess the extent to which (1) DOD has made progress in planning to operate the BMDS, and (2) the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) provides complete and transparent data on BMDS operational costs.

What GAO Found
DOD has made progress in planning to operate BMDS; however, it has not established criteria that would have to be met before declaring BMDS operational, nor has DOD resolved security issues or completed training and personnel plans. DOD officials agree that operational criteria are typically established and met prior to declaring a system operational, and that planning for new systems includes identifying personnel requirements, developing training programs, and identifying logistics and maintenance requirements. DOD has developed BMDS procedures and guidance, created an organization to integrate planning and operational support, and conducted some training and exercises. However, DOD has not established formal criteria for declaring that limited defensive operations or subsequent blocks of capability are operational or completed planning for security, training, and personnel. DOD has not done this because it is developing BMDS in a unique way and BMDS is exempted from traditional requirements guidance. Without specific operational criteria, the Secretary of Defense will not be in a sound position to objectively assess combatant commands’ and services’ preparations to conduct BMDS operations nor have a transparent basis for declaring BMDS operational, which will become more important as capabilities are added in subsequent blocks and Congress considers requests to fund operations. Without adequate planning, clear criteria, and identification of responsibility for ensuring necessary actions have been completed, it may be difficult for DOD to identify and prioritize actions, assure itself or Congress that the necessary pieces are in place before declaring the system operational, and determine whether the return on its significant development investment in BMDS can be realized.

What GAO Recommends
GAO is recommending that DOD develop operational criteria that must be met and a comprehensive plan specifying actions that must be taken before declaring BMDS operational, and provide Congress and DOD complete data on BMDS operational costs. Although DOD concurred or partially concurred with our recommendations, DOD did not state that they planned to take corrective actions. Therefore, GAO added a Matter for Congressional Consideration because GAO continues to believe its recommended actions are needed to prepare for BMDS operations and assist oversight.


May 2006

United States Government Accountability Office