



Highlights of [GAO-09-856](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2002, the Department of Defense (DOD) began developing and rapidly fielding a global Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMDS) composed of elements that include radars, interceptors, and command and control systems. These elements are envisioned to be linked together to defend against a broad range of ballistic missile threats. In 2009, DOD began a broadly scoped review of missile defense policy and strategy intended to reassess the BMDS and set direction for the future. In response to congressional interest in missile defense requirements and operations, GAO reviewed the extent to which DOD has (1) identified the types and quantities of elements and interceptors it needs and (2) established the units to operate elements that have been put into use. GAO reviewed key analyses, studies, plans, and other documents from the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), the services, combatant commands, and Joint Staff; and interviewed officials from across DOD.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOD perform a comprehensive analysis identifying its requirements for BMDS elements and interceptors and require, in the absence of an immediate threat, the establishment of operational units before making elements available for use. In comments on a draft of this report, DOD generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-09-856](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov.

MISSILE DEFENSE

DOD Needs to More Fully Assess Requirements and Establish Operational Units before Fielding New Capabilities

What GAO Found

DOD lacks the comprehensive analytic basis needed to make fully informed decisions about the types and quantities of elements and interceptors it needs. Such an analytic basis would include a comprehensive examination of the optimal mix of elements and interceptors needed to meet all of DOD's ballistic missile defense requirements. DOD studies prepared to date were completed for specific purposes, such as addressing regional threats. However, none of the studies have taken a comprehensive approach that addressed the full range of requirements. The Joint Staff conducted studies, for example, to identify the minimum interceptor quantities needed for certain ballistic missile defense elements designed to defend against short-to-intermediate-range threats. Additionally, the combatant commands have analyzed their ballistic missile defense requirements for their specific regions, and the services have studied requirements for specific elements. Without a full assessment of its overall requirements, DOD lacks the information it needs to make the best possible policy, strategy, and budgetary decisions for ballistic missile defense.

DOD has faced challenges in fully establishing units to operate five of eight ballistic missile defense elements that have been put into operational use. DOD typically requires that major weapon systems be fielded with a full complement of organized and trained personnel. To rapidly field missile defenses, however, DOD has in some cases put ballistic missile defense elements into operational use before first ensuring that the military services had created units and trained servicemembers to operate them. Three of the eight elements were modifications to existing systems, like the Navy's Aegis ships, so units already existed to operate these modified elements. The five remaining elements—the midcourse defense system designed to defend the United States from long-range threats; the high-altitude, theater missile defense system; a powerful radar placed on a sea-based, movable platform; ground-based radars currently fielded in Japan and Israel; and the command and control system designed to link the BMDS together—were put into use before operational units were fully established. As a result, DOD has faced a number of challenges. For example, the Army faced personnel shortfalls to operate the midcourse defense system. These shortages affected the Army units' ability to support ongoing research and development activities and ultimately resulted in operational readiness concerns. MDA and the military services are taking steps to establish the needed forces, but this may take years for some elements. DOD recognizes the challenges created by putting elements into early use, but has not set criteria requiring that operational units be in place before new elements are made available for use. Looking ahead, several new elements are in development, like the radars and interceptors currently being considered for deployment in Europe, and emerging threats could again cause DOD to press those capabilities into use. Unless fully trained units are in place to support missile defense elements when they are made operational, DOD will continue to face uncertainties and operational risks associated with the elements.