



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE, RESPONSE TO "MISSILE DEFENSE MALFUNCTION": Setting the Record Straight

Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering III

May 30, 2008



[Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering III](#)

In the Spring 2008 *Ethics & International Affairs* article, "[Missile Defense Malfunction](#)," [Philip Coyle](#) and [Victoria Samson](#) systematically misrepresent or ignore key facts to bolster their arguments against deploying defenses in Europe to protect our allies and forces in that region against an emerging intermediate and long-range Iranian ballistic missile threat. I want to set the record straight.

Coyle and Samson mock the Administration's claim that ballistic missiles and technologies have spread since 1972 to more than 20 states by asserting most of these countries do not pose a threat. They miss the point. According to U.S. intelligence, access to missile technologies and systems by states openly hostile to the United States has grown. The web of missile technology suppliers has expanded and contributes to the spread of longer-range missiles. And as we have seen in the rocket attacks against Israel, our adversaries willingly pass stand-off strike weapons to non-state actors, including terrorists, whose leaders do not appear to be deterrable.

Coyle and Samson fail to answer why Iran is making significant investments in a program to develop medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles that do not fit its regional defense requirements to engage Israel or U.S. bases. These missiles will put all of Europe at risk. In addition, Iran's space launch development program will allow it an umbrella to develop technologies for long-range missiles, to include multi-staging and advanced guidance.

Coyle and Samson cavalierly claim Iran would never launch a missile against us or our allies, given the resulting retaliation. Massive retaliation worked in the Cold War, but can they guarantee our security when ballistic missiles carrying unknown payloads are in the hands of Iranian leadership? In addition, ballistic missiles give a country a capability to coerce or intimidate even without launching them. This ability to heighten danger and uncertainty would restrict our diplomacy and freedom of action. Moreover, we cannot be certain command and control over missile systems will remain in rational hands...radical factions may not care about retaliation.

Coyle and Samson have it both ways when they claim the operational performance of Ground-Based Midcourse Defense has not been demonstrated against real-world threats. Yet they give full credence to a concern that a system in Europe would be capable of intercepting Russian ICBMs. They also accept too readily Russian "fears" that defensive interceptors could be converted to offensive missiles. Besides the fact that our future activities with the European sites will be transparent to the Russians and the host nations, this concern does not make military sense. We already have mature mobile offensive forces on sea-based and airborne platforms.

Mr. Coyle (out of government since January 2001) and Ms. Samson do not have the security clearances or access to technical information that would allow them to truly understand missile defense system performance. We have demonstrated the effectiveness of our integrated missile defense system in our tests with 34 of 42 successful intercepts since 2001. These include six of nine successes against long

range targets, with four using warhead decoys or countermeasures. While we expect countermeasures could be used by our adversaries, we also believe significant numbers of missiles are deployed today without them.

With respect to countermeasures, Coyle and Samson look only at the performance of the kill vehicle sensor. In fact, our capability against countermeasures is significantly greater when you consider we are employing layered defenses, a redundant network of land-based and sea-based sensors, and advanced algorithms. Our ability to defeat countermeasures will be greatly improved in the future as we introduce a capability to destroy many objects with a single interceptor.

Our test record gave our leadership confidence in July 2006, when the North Koreans launched several missiles, including a long-range Taepo Dong II. The Defense Department and the Missile Defense Agency were inundated with press phone calls asking what we could do to defend the United States. The good news was that we were able to give the President the option of activating a limited defensive system capable of engaging a long-range ballistic missile.

Coyle and Samson cite favorably the diplomacy of former Defense Secretary William Perry, after which the North Koreans halted ballistic missile testing (the end of this moratorium shows how short-lived arms control agreements can be). Ironically, they refer to Dr. Perry's negotiations as "the most cost-effective missile defense system." That was hardly the case. North Korea never did halt its missile development program. What Coyle and Samson fail to mention is that, during the July 2006 crisis, Dr. Perry advocated the preemptive destruction of the North Korean Taepo Dong launch site, certainly a more provocative, destabilizing act. With a limited missile defense capability at the ready, President Bush did not have to follow his advice. Missile defense is a stabilizing factor in the world.

Finally, I want to address the canard that our European allies are not on board with the plan to place long-range defenses in Europe. We have concluded negotiations with the Czech Republic and are in discussions with the Polish government. All 26 NATO nations have formally endorsed the plan. These nations not only agreed with the United States that "ballistic missile proliferation poses an increasing threat," they also recognized "the substantial contribution to the protection of Allies from long-range missile threats to be provided by planned deployment of European based United States missile defense assets." NATO's leaders also tasked the alliance to come up with options to integrate NATO defenses with the U.S. system.

Year after year, test after test, we are taking the technical challenges we face in missile defense off the table and therefore undermining long held positions of our critics. Not only will the missile defense system work, but it can bring stability that would not have been possible otherwise. But if diplomacy, arms control and deterrence fail, missile defense is the option left to protect our nation, allies and forces.

Copyright © 2010 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs