

Global Hypersonic Missile Warfare

Boeing Proposes Missile With Global Reach

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For nearly a decade, the Pentagon has grappled with finding a way to field a weapon with the speed and range of an intercontinental ballistic missile, but without the political ramifications of launching a nuke. Now Boeing says it has the answer: a revived 1980s-era hypersonic missile that could strike anywhere in the world in less than an hour.

The company says it has a missile concept ready, and that if it gets the go-ahead and funding from the Pentagon, the weapon could be ready for fielding within 30 months. The missile, which was developed in the 1980s, is already “flight proven,” Margaret Morse, Boeing’s director for strategic missile systems, told reporters today at a press briefing on the company’s missile defense work.

The company describes the hypersonic strike vehicle as a quick turnaround “gap filler” that could fit the Pentagon’s desire for what officials call “prompt global strike,” that is, the ability to strike anywhere in the world within one hour using a conventional weapon. Such a capability has been proposed as a way to strike “fleeting targets,” such as a high-profile terrorist.

Currently, the only way to strike anywhere in the world in an hour or less is using nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles launched from land or submarines. Though the Pentagon has proposed swapping the nuclear warheads with conventional ones, the idea has largely foundered amid concerns that Russia would mistake any long-range ballistic missile launch for a nuclear strike.

Morse says the Boeing missile would have a very different trajectory than an ICBM and could not be mistaken for a nuclear strike. Rather, it would be launched from a solid-rocket booster with a depressed trajectory, and then the unpowered missile would maneuver to its target using only its kinetic energy.

The Boeing concept involves using a hypersonic weapon based on a 1980s-era system that was then called an advanced maneuvering re-entry vehicle.

The hypersonic missile is just one of the ideas that Boeing is pitching to the government in the hopes of making up for the expected hit in its missile defense business. With President Barack Obama’s shift in missile defense strategy from a ground-based interceptor system developed by Boeing to a sea-based system, the company is poised to lose what has been a significant source of revenue.

In refocusing missile defense and canceling plans to expand the ground-based missile

defense system in Europe, the administration cited the lack of an immediate long-range missile threat from countries such as Iran and North Korea.

But Boeing is also proposing a mobile two-stage ground-based missile interceptor that could be used against long-range missile threats in the event those forecasts are wrong. "It's looked at now as a hedge against the Iranian threat progressing quicker than expected," Norm Tew, the vice president for Boeing's Ground-based Midcourse Defense, said at the briefing for Boeing's mobile missile launcher idea.

The government, however, is not paying for Boeing to work on the mobile-launcher idea; the company is using its own funds. Tew said Boeing plans to test the two-stage booster this summer and then conduct an intercept test at a later date.

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