

The New Importance of Air Defense

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Brief Analysis

While the Defense Department's Fiscal Year 1992 budget was largely drawn up prior to the Gulf crisis, in at least one area DoD has tried to learn an early lesson from the war. The United States in the future will have to devote increasing attention to the air defense mission if it hopes to be able to successfully deploy forces almost anywhere in the world.

In his State of the Union address January 29, President Bush directed that the Strategic Defense Initiative Program "be refocused on providing protection from limited ballistic missile strikes -- whatever their source." On February 4, Secretary Cheney told a press conference that, "I can't think of a better argument for the need to address the question of dealing with the ballistic missile threat than watching the nightly Scud attacks against Tel Aviv and Riyadh. The fact of the matter is, future secretaries of defense are going to have to be able to deploy defenses against ballistic missiles."

This development in American thinking is not only important within the context of SDI, but as a general evolution in the perceived importance of air defense.

Classically, defense planners considered "a nickel's worth of offense" to be equal to a "dollar's worth of defense". When the United States sized and structured its forces against the Soviet Union, it was clear that the Soviets could overcome any air defense by relatively easy and cost-effective countermeasures.

In the nature of things, systems for air defense tend to cost more than the offensive capability they are designed to counter. It is much cheaper to develop an offensive system -- be it a missile or an aircraft -- which can deliver munitions against a target than it is to develop a defensive system which must first acquire the opponent's system, track it, and then hit it precisely. This advantage is reinforced in the event that the offensive system contains unconventional munitions which may not need to hit a target precisely. Even if air defenses were effective, it would be relatively easy for a country like the Soviet Union to swarm those defenses with comparatively cheap offensive systems.

For this reason, the United States invested less on air defense than other mission areas. And where it did invest in air defense -- such as the Patriot system -- this was focused on point defense of high value assets.

An additional consideration also drove the Defense Department toward multi-purpose systems, rather than those devoted strictly to defense. Multi-purpose systems can be employed on the opponent's territory against a variety of targets. Many multi-purpose systems can be used again and again for a variety of missions. Multi-purpose systems allow the United States to take the initiative and take the fight to the opponent. By contrast, defensive systems are valuable for one purpose only -- to defend against an enemy's attack.

But the end of the Cold War and the war in the Gulf have apparently changed the DoD calculus to some degree. In the future as at present, the United States may be facing combat against lesser powers like Iraq. Despite the higher unit cost of defensive systems, great military powers like the United States may find that they can buy enough defensive systems to achieve their objectives against an opponent which cannot devote as many resources to military

purposes.

In addition, with the use of Scud-based missiles and the prospect of far more accurate and deadly threats, it has become apparent that the United States must be able to provide credible air defense if it hopes to be able to insert forces into region's like the Middle East during periods of tension. During Operation Desert Shield, the United States had five months to move forces to the region without any Iraqi opposition. The Defense Department cannot plan on such a luxury in the future. Moreover, it must expect that countries like Iraq will have systems as deadly as the Tomahawk missile within the next decade. Had such systems -- particularly with chemical weapons -- been used against America's deploying forces, the United States might never have been able to mount Operation Desert Storm.

Israel's Response

This evolution in American thinking has also been mirrored in Israel. Thinking in Israel had already begun to change in the last few years with the development of the unconventional threat in Arab arsenals, particularly that of Iraq. Although Israel had twice been hit by Arab missiles in prior wars, the development of an unconventional threat meant that weapons of terror could be used against civilians to undermine the will of the Israeli people.

Israel began to stress protection against this threat by a number of means. It adopted the most comprehensive civil defense measures of any country. It proclaimed a doctrine of retaliation, designed to deter any aggressor. It focused on strike systems which could destroy the missile threat on the ground. And in the late 1980s, it embarked with the United States on a major Anti Tactical Ballistic Missile effort, the Arrow program.

But Israel was still not ready when it faced the test of Iraqi Al-Husayn missiles. While they were working on the long-term threat, at the outset of the current war Israeli leaders correctly assessed the relative military insignificance of the missile threat. Though Israel had begun work on the Arrow program, it had eschewed the purchase of Patriots in keeping with a long-standing Israeli tradition to de-emphasize air defense. What Israeli planners did not fully foresee was that -- even with conventionally-armed, inaccurate Scuds -- Iraq could hold an entire nation prisoner in its own homes.

Without a significant effort to combat this growing threat, Israelis face the prospect of far worse suffering in future conflict. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that both Israel and the United States will redouble their efforts to develop and eventually deploy systems like the Arrow. Such systems will, in Secretary Cheney's words, address either "the kind of theater threat that we face today... or far more sophisticated threats that we anticipate in the future.

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