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Kadish: Stick With the ABL

The Airborne Laser is over budget and behind schedule, but Congress and the Pentagon should stick with the program and give it time to work, according to USAF Lt. Gen. Ronald T. Kadish, former director of the Missile Defense Agency, which oversees the ABL program.

Kadish, in several press interviews in July given before he retired, acknowledged that the ABL is having problems, but he insisted the problems are the result of trying to invent wholly new technology on a strict schedule. The focus of the program has always been on performance, he said, with cost and schedule as secondary considerations.

Emphasizing that the program is making slow but consistent progress, Kadish said that, if it succeeds, the ABL will provide a powerful and unprecedented capability.

He said MDA did not plan to have the ABL included in the Administration's 2004 menu of missile defense capabilities slated for the fall. However, he did not rule out some sensor role for the ABL in the Block 2004 suite.

Kadish said that MDA prefers to focus on two intermediate goals. One is to successfully integrate and demonstrate the laser's optics, achieving so-called "first light" with the laser later this year. The other is integrating the laser on the 747 aircraft that will carry it.

Kadish told the House Armed Services Committee's Strategic Forces Subcommittee in March that he planned to focus the program on the two smaller goals and defer, if necessary, the first test against an actual tactical ballistic missile that had been planned for next year. That shot is now expected to slip into 2006 or later.

The MDA also has postponed indefinitely the acquisition of a second ABL airframe, citing program delays that make the second aircraft premature until technology issues are resolved.

The Government Accountability Office, in a report released in May, said ABL program cost has doubled from initial estimates, now reaching \$2 billion. However, the GAO praised the MDA for its decision to switch to "a sound and ... more cost-effective development strategy." The GAO said the new strategy follows "a knowledge-based rather than a schedule-driven approach" to development of the ABL. The program will advance by achievements—and not by the calendar.

GAO attributed the cost growth primarily to planning that did not "fully anticipate the complexities in developing the system." Further problems stemmed from trying to meet schedule, skipping the process of fully testing subcomponents, and using rapidly prototyped parts. MDA itself has complained that some parts suffered from poor workmanship, setting the program back several months and delaying testing.

Kadish told Defense News that MDA was "not in any way, shape, or form ready to give up on the ABL" and that "it will have a tremendous multiplying effect, if it works."