



Trump's heralded missile plan has a long way to go before it takes off

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As photo-ops go, President Donald Trump's big missile announcement last week landed like a bit of a dud, perhaps due to circumstance.

Trump presented the long-delayed Missile Defense Review as the road to shielding the United States from all enemy missiles.

"Our goal is simple: to ensure that we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States — anywhere, any time, any place," Trump said.

It is a laudable goal in theory that any president might endorse. But the technology and money aren't there yet.

"My general take on this is that it's very much a continuation and consistent with the Obama administration's approach," engineer John Plumb, the former principal director for nuclear and missile defense policy at the Pentagon, told Wired magazine. "It's a cost-unconstrained review, a no-stone-unturned approach. Fully funded, this would be a tremendous amount of money. But it will not be fully funded."

The announcement's timing was another problem easily identified.

For one thing, Washington is in the throes of a record hyperpartisan government shutdown. Investing confidence in the operational skill required for a perfect missile shield dependent on sophisticated sensors seems like a reach at a moment when basic office functions are closed for business.

Since James Mattis quit, an acting defense secretary is in place, which might mean short-term delays or changes in any military project.

At this point, even the Trump administration's ability to complete a cheaper low-tech project known as his southern border wall remains in doubt.

There's also the cost: \$10.3 billion was already allocated for 2019, but projected federal deficits are mounting to record levels.

And the effectiveness of the whole plan draws fire as always from both the political left and right.

“The Missile Defense Review is a wholesale expansion of U.S. missile defense capabilities that will do more to upset nuclear stability than make Americans safer,” writes Eric Gomez, a policy analyst at the conservative Cato Institute, quoted Friday in the Washington Times.

“The review’s call for space-based missile defense sensors" and other improvements "represent a significant increase to the current missile defense architecture.”

Whatever the merits, expect big changes on the drawing board before the plan that Popular Mechanics calls "Star Wars Lite" looks anything akin to real.