

U.S. Commanders Pledge to Work With Japan on Alternative After Halt of Missile Project



An SM-3 Block IIA is launched from the Aegis Ashore Missile Defense Test Complex at the Pacific Missile Range Facility at Kauai, Hawaii, in December 2018. U.S. Army

ARLINGTON, Va. – Top U.S. missile defense officials say they are not overly concerned about Japan's decision to suspend the planned deployment of two Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense systems aimed at countering North Korean missiles.

Japan's defense minister, Taro Kono, announced June 15 that he was halting the installations at Akita Prefecture in the north and Yamaguchi Prefecture in the south of Japan's main island of Honshu, citing cost and technical issues.

Those issues included concerns that the interceptors' rocket boosters might endanger civilian lives and infrastructure if they did not fall in designated safe areas after separating from the SM-3 Block IIA missile. Communities near both sites opposed the installations, concerned about radiation from the system's Lockheed Martin Long Range Discrimination Radar.

"I'm not necessarily shocked" by the decision to suspend work in Japan, the U.S. Missile Defense Agency's commander, Vice Adm. Jon Hill, said on June 23. "There are options out there, and we'll work them," he told a livestreamed roundtable on Global Missile Defense Responsibilities presented by the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance.

Hill noted the longstanding U.S.-Japanese partnership in the Pacific region, including cooperative technology development,

like the SM-3 Block IIA interceptor, co-developed by Raytheon Missile Systems and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

“Fundamentally, the issue is the siting,” Hill said. “We spent a lot of time going through the impacts of the sensing capability [and] what it means to have interceptors near a community area.”

Hill said he wanted to give the Japanese government time to work the issues out, pledging to Tokyo “we are going to lean in and give you whatever support and help you need to make the decision.”

Rear Adm. Stephen Koehler, director of operations for U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, emphasized the strength of the U.S.-Japanese partnership on ballistic missile defense and pledged to work for “the best solution in the theater for them, for us, and for the overarching threat that we face together.”