Pentagon Missile Defense Chief Cites Threats From Maneuverable Missiles, Hypersonic Weapons

ARLINGTON, Va. — With the emergence of peer military competitors, the missile threat is evolving toward the use of maneuverable ballistic and cruise missiles and hypersonic weapons — all of which "drives you into the world of high speed," Vice Adm. Jon A. Hill, director of the Defense Department's Missile Defense Agency (MDA), told a gathering of naval engineers on Nov. 20.

"Speed is a big deal. We are driven by the threat, and it is amazing what we're up against. … It is stunning. What also is stunning is how the threat is changing," Hill added during the American Society of Naval Engineers symposium here in Arlington.

Hill noted that, when he took over MDA, the agency was focused on ballistic missiles. But new threats are emerging from air-launched ballistic and cruise missiles that can maneuver in different phases of their flight and "are capable of higher and higher speeds," he said. "It's a different world, and the agency will have to adjust."

And regarding another emerging threat from hypersonic weapons, he added: "We're working very diligently to understand everything" needed to counter these weapons.

Although MDA is responsible for defending the nation from missile threats, Hill emphasized that "everything we're doing

for the fleet
today is incredibly important. … Our mission is providing a defensive
capability, taking care of our forward deployed forces, our friends and
allies.”

And, he added, “defense itself is deterrence … as a
cost-imposing measure on the adversary.” He said adversaries are spending so
much on developing cruise missiles “because we have incredible capability”
against ballistic missiles. Hill emphasized that missile defense is a joint
effort across multiple U.S. military branches, citing the extensive work to
integrate U.S. Air Force land and space sensors and the Army’s THAAD and
Patriot missile defense programs with the Navy’s Aegis-based defenses.

Hill said his top priority is “sustainment, taking care of what we have now,” and maintaining readiness, which consumes 60% of MDA’s budget. The second priority is building missile defense capacity, citing the expansion of the ground-based interceptors in California and Alaska, new space-based and land-based sensors, including those in Japan and Korea, and future Flight III Arleigh Burke-class destroyers.

With the new missile threats, including hypersonics, Hill emphasized the need for designing and engineering space capabilities for missile defense. “There are things you can only see from space.”