

Top Navy Admiral Warns High-End Missile Use Is Unsustainable in Prolonged Conflicts

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U.S. Navy acting Chief of Naval Operations Admiral James Kilby cautions that the service's reliance on expensive interceptors like the Standard Missile—3 (SM—3) and Standard Missile—6 (SM—6) during high-tempo operations has become unsustainable. These missiles, each costing between \$4 million and \$30 million, have been heavily used in ongoing deployments in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Eastern Mediterranean,

primarily to defend against missile and drone threats from Iran-backed actors.

Kilby emphasized that while the Navy remains capable of responding to immediate threats, the rapid depletion of advanced interceptors risks leaving critical munitions reserves dangerously low. He underscored the need to transition to cheaper alternatives, such as \$25,000 AGR–20 laser-guided rockets, for countering low-cost threats like unmanned aerial systems, thereby preserving premium interceptors for strategic challenges posed by peer adversaries like China.

To address the issue, the Navy is working with the Missile Defense Agency, the Maritime Industrial Base Program Office, and industry partners to ramp up production capacity, replenish interceptor inventories, and improve logistical supply chains.

In parallel, Kilby pointed out improvements in operational readiness: the Aegis Weapons System, which previously took weeks to assess after engagements, now processes data within 24 hours. This rapid feedback loop enhances tactical performance and helps crews optimize missile use in future encounters.

The Navy's overuse of interceptors in recent operations demonstrates a clear need for mixed-tiered defense layers. While SM–3 and SM–6 remain essential for ballistic missile threats, cost-effective options are needed to preserve them for when adversaries deploy long-range, high-end threats, especially if a conflict breaks out in the Pacific.

Kilby concluded that preserving advanced missile inventories while increasing production and accelerating deployment of affordable

countermeasures represents a strategic balancing act. His approach underscores a fiscally responsible defense posture, maintaining readiness against both immediate threats and potential future peer adversaries without depleting critical resources.