



## INFORMATION SERIES

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### **Why Does America Need Golden Dome?**

#### **Dr. Keith B. Payne**

*Dr. Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, Professor Emeritus at the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies, Missouri State University, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, and former Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense.*

#### **Introduction**

President Trump's January 27, 2025 Executive Order, *The Iron Dome for America*, calls for a versatile U.S. missile defense system to protect America's citizens, territory, infrastructure, and military forces against all opponents' "ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles, and other advanced aerial attacks."<sup>1</sup> It also calls for the examination of cooperation with allies to protect their territories, populations and military forces. This is a sweeping directive for the defense of the United States the likes of which have not been seen since Ronald Reagan's 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative. That research and development program ultimately led to the rudimentary U.S. homeland defense system now deployed to protect against North Korea's long-range ballistic missiles, but not against Russian or Chinese missiles.

The goal of defending American citizens, infrastructure and nuclear forces may seem self-evidently sensible. That, however, is a naïve view given long-standing U.S. missile defense policy. Since 1976, no Republican or Democratic administration has deployed missile defenses to ease or even challenge the condition of homeland vulnerability to Russian or Chinese strategic missiles. Americans typically react to this harsh reality with shocked disbelief;<sup>2</sup> why else should U.S. taxpayers spend hundreds of billions of dollars on defense every year if not – at a minimum – to protect the country from attack?



Washington's archaic policy *against* deploying anything beyond a minimalist homeland defense against North Korean missiles is dangerous given the looming nuclear threats of a Russian, Chinese, and North Korean "axis of upheaval" that has the clear goal of overthrowing the liberal world order, by force if necessary. Russia has explicitly lowered its threshold for using nuclear weapons and frequently issues coercive nuclear threats; China's leadership has identified 2027 as a possible timeline for taking Taiwan,<sup>3</sup> and has not ruled out the use of nuclear weapons to do so, if necessary. Both have been engaged in an extensive expansion of their nuclear forces for well over a decade.

Republican and Democratic administrations foolishly expected the post-Cold War international system to be a cooperative "new world order,"<sup>4</sup> governed by a near-universal liberal enlightenment. To the dismay of Western capitals, Russia, China, and North Korea (and Iran) instead see themselves at war with the United States because it is the impediment to their common goal. Washington and the West are only now awakening to the harsh reality of this war.

An American homeland defense against all opponents' missiles, now labeled "Golden Dome" by the Trump Administration,<sup>5</sup> is an urgent step Washington must take to strengthen deterrence and, concurrently, to prepare for the possibility that deterrence will fail, i.e., both to prevent war and prepare for the possibility of war.

### **Golden Dome and the Deterrence of War**

As described by the Executive Order and Pentagon, Golden Dome will "progressively" protect U.S. citizens, critical infrastructure and nuclear capabilities.<sup>6</sup> No one should expect Golden Dome to emerge fully mature to defend against all opponents' missiles. But moving progressively to protect citizens, infrastructure and nuclear forces will help preserve the credibility of U.S. deterrence strategies that must serve to keep the peace. The more effectively the United States provides this protection, the more able it will be to deter war. How so?

First, a basic necessity for deterrence is that U.S. nuclear forces and infrastructure are able to survive any nuclear first strike intended to destroy them; they must be able to pose an enduring threat of retaliation. Golden Dome's protection of U.S. nuclear forces and infrastructure may become increasingly key for the fundamental requirement that U.S. forces be survivable. As Russian and Chinese long-range nuclear missile capabilities continue to expand, and Moscow and Beijing increasingly coordinate and cooperate, the potential nuclear strike threat to eliminate U.S. retaliatory deterrence capabilities will become severe, and the active defense of those U.S. capabilities may be essential for their survival and capacity to pose a retaliatory threat.

More specifically, also necessary for deterrence is the U.S. capability to "tailor" deterrence by holding at risk those particular assets that opponents value most.<sup>7</sup> Golden Dome's potential protection of U.S. ICBMs and nuclear infrastructure will help preserve the U.S. capability to threaten the many hardened and underground military and political sites that likely constitute the highest values of Russia's, China's and North Korea's autocratic rulers—their "tools of



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power and control.”<sup>8</sup> The need for such a deterrent capability against Moscow was recognized as far back as 1983 by the bipartisan President’s Commission on Strategic Forces. Its report concluded that, for deterrence, the United States “...must be able to put at risk those types of Soviet targets—including hardened ones such as military command bunkers and facilities, missile silos, nuclear weapons and other storage, and the rest—which the Soviet leaders have given every indication by their actions they value most and which constitute their tools of power and control.”<sup>9</sup> This basic deterrence principle almost certainly applies to today’s autocratic rulers. Golden Dome’s unique protection of the specific U.S. capabilities needed to pose such a deterrent threat, and thereby tailor deterrence to contemporary autocratic foes, is likely to become key to preventing great power war.

Second, Russian and Chinese regional “theories of victory” over U.S. allies and partners include coercive nuclear threats to America intended to destroy the U.S. will to act in defense of allies, and thus the credibility of U.S. deterrence commitments.<sup>10</sup> The priority goal is to paralyze U.S. leaders with fear of Russian and/or Chinese nuclear escalation or, if necessary, to destroy the U.S. military infrastructure needed for U.S. power projection abroad—either way leaving U.S. allies without American support and highly vulnerable to defeat. The 1962 Cuban Missile crisis and the contemporary war in Ukraine both demonstrate U.S. leaders’ understandable fear of nuclear escalation against U.S. territory,<sup>11</sup> and the potential effectiveness of opponents’ coercive nuclear threat strategies. U.S. leaders, Republican and Democrat, have repeatedly expressed the fear of escalation as their reason for great caution with regard to support for Ukraine. As Russia and China expand their cooperation “without limits,” protecting U.S. citizens and military infrastructure against Russian and Chinese coercive nuclear threats intended to destroy U.S. will and power projection capabilities will become increasingly critical for the credibility of America’s extended deterrence “umbrella” for allies.

Russian and Chinese commentators have charged that America’s Golden Dome will upset deterrence “stability” and must be rejected. However, the fact that both Moscow and Beijing have long pursued their own missile defense shields and, in fact, that Russia has a long-standing *nuclear-armed* national missile defense system, shows their criticism of Golden Dome to be agitprop intended to stop an American defensive program that threatens to strengthen U.S. deterrence capabilities against their respective theories of victory.

### **Golden Dome and Preparation for Conflict**

Deterrence has long been the primary goal of U.S. nuclear policy and strategic forces. However, the increasing potential for deterrence failure or irrelevance is likely given multiple, dedicated opponents who are willing to risk military conflict, emphasize the role of nuclear weapons, and have the common goal of overturning the existing global order. Nuclear escalation in a regional conflict is perhaps most likely. This is an unprecedented threat context in which the United States must prioritize both deterrence and the preparation for deterrence failure. In the event of war, Golden Dome’s defense of citizens, infrastructure and nuclear forces could uniquely save lives, reduce damage and contribute to the resiliency of U.S. military forces and



operations. Deterrence must, of course, remain a priority goal; but the preparation to defend in the event of war also must be a priority. Fortunately, the more capable U.S. defenses are in the event of war, the more likely Washington will be able to deter war. There are no trade-offs in this regard.

### The Arguments Against Golden Dome

Critics of Golden Dome now repeat tired arguments against homeland missile defense that date to the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> These arguments are that: 1) mutual vulnerability to nuclear destruction is necessary for “stable” deterrence, and thus Golden Dome’s protection must be rejected as “destabilizing”; 2) missile defenses will not protect perfectly, and short of near perfection, they are not worth the cost; and, 3) the deployment of Golden Dome will start an “action-reaction” arms race, while rejecting homeland missile defense enables nuclear arms control.<sup>13</sup> In short, critics argue that Golden Dome would be imperfect, “destabilize” deterrence, and cause an arms race, while the continuing absence of serious homeland defense is the basis for arms control. These are the standard arguments rolled out once again to reach the desired conclusion that continued vulnerability to Russian and Chinese nuclear missiles is preferable to missile defenses.

These arguments have driven U.S. missile defense policy for decades. But for all their repetition and policy influence, they were suspect during the Cold War and are demonstrably bogus in the contemporary threat context. Each can be addressed in order.

First, as should be most obvious, American homeland vulnerability is not necessary for deterrence. In fact, homeland vulnerability is detrimental to U.S. deterrence strategies. It is the *vulnerability of opponents* to U.S. deterrence threats that enables U.S. deterrence strategies to be effective, not U.S. vulnerability to opponents’ threats. Defending U.S. civilians, infrastructure and nuclear forces will strengthen the credibility of those deterrence threats for the reasons discussed above. The well-worn critique that U.S. homeland missile defense is somehow detrimental to U.S. deterrence goals is logically incoherent, but that does not seem to discourage critics from advancing it.

Second, Golden Dome need not protect perfectly to be of great value—perfection rarely exists and is a contrived standard by which to criticize U.S. missile defense. Golden Dome’s “progressive” protection of U.S. citizens, critical infrastructure and nuclear capabilities, even though imperfect, will contribute to the credibility and capability of U.S. deterrence strategies. And, in the event of war, less than perfect defenses could help limit damage to U.S. society, particularly in the event of limited coercive nuclear attacks, and strengthen the resiliency of U.S. nuclear and non-nuclear power-projection forces—thereby contributing to the forward defense of allies and defeat of opponents.

Third, history demonstrates conclusively that the U.S. deployment of homeland missile defenses does *not* preclude arms control, nor does the absence of U.S. missile defense somehow reliably *enable* effective arms control. The 2002 Moscow Treaty with Russia imposed deep nuclear reductions and was negotiated and implemented *concurrently* with the U.S. decisions



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to deploy homeland defenses for the first time in decades. And, the 1972 ABM Treaty, which effectively precluded homeland missile defense and was rationalized as the basis for ending further Soviet nuclear expansion, was immediately followed by an enormous increase in Soviet nuclear forces—despite continuing U.S. arms control efforts. In fact, Soviet officials said that the ABM Treaty was welcomed in Moscow because reduced spending on missile defense enabled them to *expand* Soviet nuclear forces.<sup>14</sup> Confident predictions to the contrary, the absence of U.S. missile defense actually *promoted an increase* in Soviet offensive nuclear forces, not arms control.

In short, it is clear from empirical evidence that U.S. homeland missile defense did *not* preclude nuclear arms control in 2002, nor did its absence with the ABM Treaty *enable* effective arms control. The aged arms control criticisms of missile defense, that Golden Dome will preclude arms control, while its absence would reliably enable arms control, are fully inconsistent with historical realities. Again, that historical fact does not discourage continued claims that arms control and homeland missile defense are mutually exclusive.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, every past or prospective deployment of strategic forces has pro and con arguments. That is the nature of the subject. That said, in the looming, unprecedentedly dangerous threat context, the need for Golden Dome's homeland missile defense to strengthen deterrence and prepare for possible conflict is overwhelming. In contrast, the aged arguments against homeland missile defense, now replayed yet again against Golden Dome, are demonstrably bogus or logically incoherent. Those arguments do not reflect thoughtful analyses, but a long-standing political agenda opposed to U.S. missile defense. If, as seems likely, U.S. technological innovation, in cooperation with allies, can make Golden Dome for the American homeland and allied lands practicable, there should be no going back.

<sup>1</sup> The White House, Presidential Actions, *The Iron Dome for America*, January 27, 2025, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/>.

<sup>2</sup> See polling data on public views of missile defense during the Cold War in, Keith B. Payne, *Strategic Defense: "Star Wars" in Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 1986), pp. 233-247.

<sup>3</sup> See Olivia Victoria Gazis, "CIA Director William Burns: 'I wouldn't underestimate' Xi's ambitions for Taiwan," *CBS News*, February 23, 2023, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-director-william-burns-i-wouldnt-underestimate-xis-ambitions-for-taiwan/>.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, President George H. W. Bush, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit*, September 11, 1990, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, available at <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2217>.

<sup>5</sup> *Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Statement on Golden Dome for America*, May 20, 2025, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4193417/secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-statement-on-golden-dome-for-america/>.



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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The 2024 Biden Administration's nuclear employment guidance said, "The Guidance continues to emphasize the need to, first and foremost, hold at risk what adversaries value most. It also reiterates the need to maintain counterforce capabilities to reduce potential adversaries' ability to employ nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies and partners...." U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States*, November 2024, p. 3, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/15/2003584623/-1/-1/1/REPORT-ON-THE-NUCLEAR-EMPLOYMENT-STRATEGY-OF-THE-UNITED-STATES.PDF>.

<sup>8</sup> *Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces* (April 1983), p. 6, available at <http://web.mit.edu/chemistry/deutch/policy/1983-ReportPresCommStrategic.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> For an early discussion of contemporary "Red" "theories of victory," see, Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 35, 99, 103-104, 192-194, 260-262, 268-271.

<sup>11</sup> For a useful discussion of the Cuban Missile Crisis see, Matthew R. Costlow, "Deterring Opportunistic Aggression During the Cuban Missile Crisis: Necessary Reminders and Applications for Today," National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, No. 624, May 6, 2025, available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/matthew-r-costlow-deterrence-is-integrated-in-theory-but-not-in-practice-the-problem-and-partial-solution-no-614-february-3-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/matthew-r-costlow-deterrence-is-integrated-in-theory-but-not-in-practice-the-problem-and-partial-solution-no-614-february-3-2025/). For a discussion of Russian nuclear threats in the Ukraine War, see Michaela Dodge, *What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arm Control Prospects? Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/what-do-russias-nuclear-threats-tell-us-about-arms-control-prospects/>.

<sup>12</sup> These critical arguments from the Cold War are reviewed in, Payne, *Strategic Defense: "Star Wars" in Perspective*, op. cit., pp. 29-178; more recently see, David J. Trachtenberg, *Next Steps in Homeland Missile Defense, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2025), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/next-steps-in-homeland-missile-defense/>.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, Celia McDowall and Ankit Panda, "Trump wants denuclearization and a 'Golden Dome.' He can't have both," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 29, 2025, available at [https://thebulletin.org/2025/04/trump-wants-denuclearization-and-a-golden-dome-he-cant-have-both/?utm\\_source=SocialShare&utm\\_medium=CopyLink&utm\\_campaign=CopyLink&utm\\_term](https://thebulletin.org/2025/04/trump-wants-denuclearization-and-a-golden-dome-he-cant-have-both/?utm_source=SocialShare&utm_medium=CopyLink&utm_campaign=CopyLink&utm_term).

<sup>14</sup> As discussed in William E. Odom's classic text on the Soviet military, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 71, 85-86.

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