



ANALYSIS

WHY DOES AMERICA NEED GOLDEN DOME?

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Executive Summary

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. The Trump Administration has given the label “Golden Dome” to a homeland defense against all opponents’ missiles.

This guidance departs from past policy and practice: since 1976, no Republican or Democratic administration has deployed missile defenses to reduce the condition of homeland vulnerability to Russian or Chinese strategic missiles. The existing rudimentary homeland missile defense system is intended and largely designed to protect against the missile threats from North Korea.

However, Washington’s practice of not deploying more than 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. Moving progressively now to protect citizens, infrastructure and nuclear forces will help preserve the credibility and capability of U.S. deterrence strategies that must serve to keep the peace. The protection of U.S. nuclear retaliatory capabilities, including nuclear command, control, and communications, is an urgent priority in this regard. The more effectively the United States provides this protection, the more able it will be to deter war—there are no trade-offs in this regard.

The 2025 Iran-Israel Twelve-Day War included a dramatic duel between Iran’s offensive missiles and the defensive interceptors protecting Israel. The outcome of the Twelve-Day War would have been horrific for Israel in the absence of Israel’s missile defense capabilities—particularly because Iran targeted civilian centers for destruction. It provides lessons regarding the prospective value of Golden Dome’s missile defenses for allies and the U.S. homeland. The approximately 90 percent success rate of layered missile defenses illustrates their potential effectiveness for denying the coercive effects of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean offensive missile threats, i.e., deterring their coercion, and helping to undercut the potential military effects of even large-scale nuclear attacks—thereby helping to deter such strategies. The Twelve-Day War also demonstrated that missile defenses can contribute critically to saving lives and limiting escalation. It also demonstrated: 1) the great value of missile defense as an essential complement to offensive air operations intended to destroy enemy missile capabilities; 2) that “cost-effective at the margin” must not be a decisive criterion for fielding missile defense; and finally, 3) that the United States and allies must move urgently to produce, stockpile, and field layered missile defense capabilities in a



timely way and in quantities potentially sufficient for multiple, and possibly simultaneous, great power missile threats and attacks.

Critics of Golden Dome now repeat tired arguments against homeland missile defense that date to the 1960s. 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 or logically incoherent in the contemporary threat context. 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.

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."¹ 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 reduce the condition of homeland vulnerability to Russian or Chinese strategic missiles. Americans typically react to this harsh reality with shocked disbelief;² 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,³ 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.

¹ 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/>.

² 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.

³ 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/>.

Republican and Democratic administrations foolishly expected the post-Cold War international system to be a cooperative “new world order,”⁴ 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,⁵ 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.⁶ 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 protection of U.S. nuclear retaliatory capabilities, including nuclear command, control, and communications, is the urgent priority in this regard. 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.⁷ Golden

⁴ 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>.

⁵ *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/>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ 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,

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 power and control.”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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,¹¹ 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.

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>.

⁸ *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>

⁹ *Ibid.*

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

¹¹ 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,” *Information Series*, No. 624 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 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/. 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/>.

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.

Lessons from the Twelve-Day War

There are several basic lessons from the 2025 Israel-Iran Twelve-Day War regarding the likely value of missile defenses, particularly for, but not limited to, missile threats to U.S. allies. During the war, Israel's layered missile defenses reportedly intercepted some 90 percent of the 500-550 missiles Iran launched at Israel.¹² Apparently 36 of the Iranian missiles that penetrated Israeli defenses detonated in population centers, killing 28 persons, inflicting thousands of injuries, and displacing over 13,000 Israelis.¹³

While Iran pursued diverse offensive missile systems for decades, Israel focused on fielding multiple layers of missile defenses, including different defensive systems optimized to intercept incoming missiles at different altitudes, thereby increasing the odds of

¹² Sebastien Roblin, "How Did Israel's Air Defense Fare Against Iran's Ballistic Missiles?" *Forbes*, July 2, 2025, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2025/06/30/how-did-israels-air-defenses-fare-against-irans-ballistic-missiles/>.

¹³ Amy Spiro, "These are the 28 victims killed in Iranian missile attacks during the 12-day conflict," *Times of Israel*, June 29, 2025, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/these-are-the-28-victims-killed-in-iranian-missile-attacks-during-the-12-day-conflict/#:~:text=Twenty%2Deight%20people%20were%20killed,at%20home%20with%20his%20family.> See also, Emanuel Fabian, "The Israel-Iran war by the numbers after 12 days of fighting," *Times of Israel*, June 24, 2025, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-israel-iran-war-by-the-numbers-after-12-days-of-fighting/#:~:text=Iran's%20remaining%20capabilities,launchers%2C%20according%20to%20IDF%20estimates.&text=In%20terms%20of%20Iran's%20defenses,IAF%20fighter%20jets%20and%20drones.>

successful intercepts. In particular, a multi-layered defensive system can enable “shoot-look-shoot,” in which an initial defensive intercept, if unsuccessful, is followed by a second intercept shot that is aided by improved information regarding the location and likely destination of the attacking missile. Israel’s considerable defensive success during the Twelve-Day War may have benefited from Israel’s multiple layers of missile defenses and corresponding “shoot-look-shoot” opportunities.¹⁴

The effectiveness of Israel’s layered defenses demonstrates their potential value for the deterrence of aggression by decisively denying aggressors the expectation that their missiles will be of reliable military or coercive use. This value of layered defenses is applicable to regional missile threats to allies and to intercontinental nuclear missile threats to the U.S. homeland. Russia, China and North Korea appear to anticipate that limited missile threats to the United States will enable them to coerce Washington away from coming to the aid of U.S. allies—thereby enabling their expansionist plans against U.S. allies.¹⁵ Layered U.S. missile defenses provided by Golden Dome could usefully deny opponents’ confidence in such coercive threats to the United States and restore the effectiveness of U.S. extended deterrence for allies; layered defenses could also undercut their confidence in the potential military effects of even large-scale nuclear attacks—thereby helping to deter such attacks.

The war also demonstrated the unparalleled value of defenses in the event deterrence fails. The outcome of the Twelve-Day War would have been far more destructive of lives, property and infrastructure in the absence of Israel’s layered missile defense capabilities—particularly because Iran targeted civilian centers for destruction. The up to 470 Iranian missiles that were intercepted over Israel almost certainly would have inflicted thousands of additional casualties and billions of dollars in additional civilian and military destruction.¹⁶

This point again applies to regional missile threats to allies and to intercontinental nuclear missile threats to the U.S. homeland. There are, of course, considerable differences in protecting against Iran’s hundreds of conventionally armed missiles and defending against thousands of nuclear warheads on intercontinental missiles. Even Israel’s remarkably successful 90 percent defensive success rate against hundreds of Iran’s conventionally armed missiles could lead to intolerable destruction if an attack against the United States involved thousands of Russian and Chinese nuclear missile warheads. Critics of Golden Dome seem to emphasize this type of scenario in their effort to cast doubt on the potential value of missile defense.¹⁷ However, that scenario is only one of many possible nuclear attack scenarios confronting Washington, and perhaps the most likely to be deterred by the U.S. potential to defeat adversaries’ offensive military goals with the help of missile

¹⁴ Roblin, “How Did Israel’s Air Defense Fare Against Iran’s Ballistic Missiles?,” op. cit.

¹⁵ See Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in The 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 35, 99, 103-104, 192-194, 260-262, 268-271.

¹⁶ Roblin, “How Did Israel’s Air Defense Fare Against Iran’s Ballistic Missiles?,” op. cit.

¹⁷ See for example, “Trump ‘Golden Dome’ plan tricky and expensive: experts,” *Le Bourget* (France), June 20, 2025, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250619-trump-golden-dome-plan-tricky-and-expensive-experts>.

defenses and the corresponding threat of a massive U.S. nuclear reply. In other very plausible conflict scenarios, missile defense protection of society and infrastructure could prove extremely valuable in limiting damage. For example, as noted above, even imperfect defenses could help not only to deter Russian, Chinese, or North Korean coercive nuclear threats but, if deterrence failed to prevent Putin's coercive threats of nuclear attack, layered defenses could greatly reduce the consequent U.S. civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure and society.

“Cost Effective at the Margin”

The war also readily demonstrated that the past U.S. self-imposed requirement, that missile defenses be “cost effective at the margin,”¹⁸ is an absurd standard—worthy of peacetime accounting, not wartime realities. That accounting standard mandates that defensive interceptors must not cost more to produce and deploy than do the offensive missiles to be intercepted. However, the likelihood that Iranian missiles cost considerably less to produce and deploy than the Israeli interceptors that defended against them was hardly the priority concern for Israel as its missile defenses prevented the destruction of hundreds of civilian and military infrastructure targets. A more useful comparison is of the alternative approaches to defeating offensive missiles in varying contexts. A more useful comparison is of the effectiveness of alternative approaches to defeating offensive missiles in varying contexts, e.g., offensive strikes against opponents' missile systems prior to their launch, and ground-based, sea-based, and space-based missile defenses.

Limiting Escalation

In addition, in the absence of Israel's layered defenses, the repeated barrages of attacking Iranian missiles would certainly have led to a much greater escalation of the war. In that case, Israel would have been compelled to engage in much more extensive offensive operations against Iran to destroy Iranian missiles, launchers, and storage sites on the ground prior to their launch. During the war, even with near-absolute air superiority over Iran, discriminate Israeli air strikes apparently destroyed approximately 50 percent of Iran's launchers, and Iranian missile launches continued until the very end of the fighting.¹⁹ In effect, while Israeli air attacks against Iranian missile capabilities on the ground were of great importance, these so-called “left-of-launch” operations to destroy Iranian missile capabilities on the ground were inadequate. The effectiveness of Israeli missile defenses was a necessary complement to and enabled a critical limit on Israel's escalation of the war. This

¹⁸ See the discussion in Matthew R. Costlow, “A Curious Criterion: Cost Effectiveness at the Margin for Missile Defense,” *Information Series*, No. 537 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 21, 2022), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/matthew-r-costlow-a-curious-criterion-cost-effective-at-the-margin-for-missile-defense-no-537-october-21-2022/.

¹⁹ Roblin, “How Did Israel's Air Defense Fare Against Iran's Ballistic Missiles?”, op. cit.

potential value of missile defenses as a means of limiting war escalation again applies to regional conflicts and threats to allies and to intercontinental nuclear missile threats to the U.S. homeland.

Defense Production and Inventories

Finally, the Twelve-Day War demonstrated conclusively the importance of readily available interceptor quantities. The multiple waves of Iranian missile attacks apparently stressed the available inventory of U.S. interceptors, particularly had they been needed elsewhere simultaneously.²⁰ For example, given the rate of use in the Middle East, the U.S. Patriot missile defense system reportedly was reduced to only 25 percent of the number of interceptors needed to support broader Pentagon plans.²¹ Prior to the war, Iran reportedly possessed approximately 2,500 ballistic missiles and was producing 50 additional missiles per month.²² Had the war occurred months or years later, it could have been a contest between the greater number of Iranian offensive missiles and readily available defensive interceptors. Given the Iranian rate of missile production, this competition may have been disastrous for Israel given the limited production rate of interceptor missiles in Israel and the United States. The question of Iran's nuclear potential, of course, likely was critical with regard to the timing of Israel's attack. However, this question of competing inventories of Iranian missiles vs. available interceptors must also have driven Israeli considerations. This is an important lesson from the Twelve-Day War to be learned for the defense of the United States. The total number of deployed U.S. interceptor launchers for homeland defense now stands at 44—an absurdly low inventory given the much greater missile threats now facing the United States.

In short, the sufficient production and fielding of missile defense capabilities must be shaped by the number and character of the missile threats to be deterred and defeated. The United States and allies now confront the large and growing missile arsenals of Russia, China and North Korea. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte recently emphasized the chilling potential of Russia and China launching a simultaneous attack against the West, initiating World War III.²³ Unfortunately, this reality underscores the urgency of the bipartisan Commission on the National Defense Strategy conclusion in its 2024 report: "The commission found that U.S. industrial production is grossly inadequate to provide the

²⁰ See Amira El-Fekki, "US Missile Defenses Heavily Depleted in Shielding Israel: report," *Newsweek*, June 27, 2025, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/us-missile-defenses-heavily-depleted-shielding-israel-report-2091465>.

²¹ Hugo Lowell, "US has 25% of all Patriot missile interceptors needed for Pentagon's military plans," *The Guardian*, July 8, 2025, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jul/08/us-pentagon-military-plans-patriot-missile-interceptor>.

²² Fabian Hinz, "Israel's attack and the limits of Iran's missile strategy," *Online Analysis*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 18, 2025, available at <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/06/israels-attack-and-the-limits-of-irans-missile-strategy/>.

²³ See Taryn Pedler and Will Stewart, "World War III will start with simultaneous Xi and Putin invasions," *Daily Mail.com*, July 6, 2025, available at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14879371/World-War-III-start-simultaneous-Xi-Putin-invasions-taking-globe-brink-Armageddon-warns-NATO-chief-Mark-Rutte.html>.

equipment, technology and munitions needed today, let alone given the demands of great power conflict. A protracted conflict, especially in multiple theaters, would require much greater capacity to produce, maintain and replenish weapons and munitions.”²⁴

In summary, the Twelve-Day War’s dramatic duel between Iran’s offensive missiles and the defensive interceptors protecting Israel provides lessons regarding the prospective value of Golden Dome’s missile defenses for allies and the U.S. homeland. In the absence of Israel’s layered missile defenses, Iran’s missile attacks would have inflicted much greater devastation. The success of layered missile defenses illustrates their potential effectiveness for denying the coercive effects of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean limited offensive missile threats, i.e., deterring their coercion, and helping to undercut the potential military effects of even large-scale nuclear attacks—thereby helping to deter such strategies. The Twelve-Day War also demonstrated that missile defenses can contribute critically to saving lives and limiting escalation. It also demonstrated: 1) the great value of missile defense as an essential complement to offensive air operations intended to destroy enemy missile capabilities; 2) that “cost-effective at the margin” must not be a decisive criterion for fielding missile defense; and finally, 3) that the United States and allies must move urgently to produce, stockpile, and field layered missile defense capabilities in a timely way, and in quantities potentially sufficient for multiple, and possibly simultaneous, great power missile threats and attacks.

The Arguments Against Golden Dome

Critics of Golden Dome now repeat tired arguments against homeland missile defense that date to the 1960s.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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

²⁴ As reported in, Tom Jurkowsky, “National Defense Strategy Commission: We Are Not Prepared,” *RealClearDefense*, October 21, 2024, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2024/10/21/national_defense_strategy_commission_we_are_not_prepared_1066457.html?utm_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru.

²⁵ 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/>.

²⁶ 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.

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 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.²⁷ 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.

²⁷ 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.

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. The 2025 Twelve Day War, featuring Iran's missile attacks and Israel's missile defenses, provides ample illustrations of the great value of layered missile defenses, for both allies and the U.S. homeland. 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.

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