



INTERVIEWS

This section of the *Journal* features an interview with Ambassador Henry Cooper, former Director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization. The subject of the interview, conducted by Michaela Dodge, is missile defense and the prospects and necessity of the Trump Administration's Golden Dome program.

An Interview with Ambassador Henry Cooper, former Director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO) on Missile Defense Trends

Q. What are some consistent obstacles you see in implementation of a comprehensive missile defense system?

A. Politics that led to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in the President Richard Nixon-Secretary of State/National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger era biased Research & Development against developing all but fixed ground-based defenses against Intercontinental-Range Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs). This bias still exists.

And also, such politics ruled out mobile or deceptively based ground-based defenses to protect the Minuteman III system even though it was the least expensive modernization option in the late 1970s. That led to a much more expensive Minuteman III Upgrade and ultimately a silo-stuffed MX Peacekeeper ICBM (rendering it vulnerable to attack by accurate Soviet ICBMs) that we traded away in arms control while retaining the vulnerable Minuteman III ICBMs to this day.

Especially enduring is a major arms control bias against space-based defenses, the least expensive, most effective basing mode. A related obstacle are exaggerated cost estimates associated with the continuing biases against space.

Q. In your experience, what are most successful ways to counter these obstacles?

A. An effective way to counter these obstacles would be to have first, an advocate willing to put his reputation on the line and a technically competent supporting team. Second, one would need a receptive President and Secretary of Defense like Ronald Reagan and Caspar Wienberger, and a willing Secretary of State like George Shultz. Third, a few, but effective, members of Congress willing to explicitly support building truly effective defenses rather than just supporting political constituent objectives.

Q. The administration is arguing that a comprehensive layered missile defense system will be implemented by 2028. Under what conditions is this timeframe achievable and how likely is it that these conditions will be present?



A. The only way to meet this timeline is with a limited deployment of a modern Brilliant Pebbles space-based interceptor system coupled with expanded sea- and ground-based kinetic kill interceptors...e.g. land- and sea-based Aegis ballistic missile defense (BMD) and Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems.

I believe this can be accomplished within the Trump Presidency for less than half of the reportedly planned funding for this period. The rest of the funding should be dedicated to developing a Space-Based Laser system, which I do not believe can be done within the Trump Presidency, but is the best long-term possibility.

Q. Which of the technological developments regarding missile defense has surprised you most since you left as the head of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization?

A. I have not been “surprised.” In my view, these developments should have been expected because of perseverance of strong congressional biases that led President Clinton’s Secretary of Defense Les Aspin to “Take the stars out of Star Wars,” and biased everything toward investing in the most expensive, least effective BMD systems: land-based homeland defenses.

Thanks to Representative Jack Kemp and The Heritage Foundation, a number of informed technologists and political supporters advocated for the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes concept I had originated in the 1990s. At least the Aegis systems proceeded as a global theater missile defense system with inherent long-range BMD potential, which was fully demonstrated during the George W. Bush Administration when Aegis shot down a dying satellite during the “Operation Burnt Frost” in 2008.

But even though President G. W. Bush withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, his administration did nothing to exploit fully that inherent capability. Thankfully, today Aegis Ashore sites are protecting Hawaii, some islands in the Pacific, and European allies (there is a site in Poland and Romania each), and of course wherever Aegis cruisers and destroyers are located. I will never understand why Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld did not fully exploit what we knew how to do...I met with him at Heritage and had a positive conversation at least for keeping Aegis BMD going ... and I think Keith Payne, then Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy, played an important role in keeping Aegis going, but the combined efforts of a number of friends were unsuccessful in then making Aegis all it could be, let alone reviving the Brilliant Pebbles concept. Politics beyond my understanding.

Q. What fundamentals remained the same?

A. Little has changed regarding opposition to space-based interceptors, especially associated with exaggerated cost estimates and the usual opposition from the Union of Concerned Scientists, still intertwined with space arms control issues.

If we could get Elon Musk engaged, he could make it all happen out of his hip pocket. He has already demonstrated most of the needed technology in becoming the world’s richest man. We have the technology and expertise...if we only could get the right leadership.

And we already have Aegis BMD at sea and on land ... we just have to exploit that capability. Frankly, the main problem will continue to be politics.

Q. In your opinion, how will evolve the role of missile defense given Russia's aggression and China's rapid nuclear modernization?

A. I cannot say...it is all political and depends on U.S. political leadership. If President Trump really wants it, a lot can be accomplished on his watch that can ultimately lead to results on his watch and sound plans and programs for the future. I wish he would put Elon Musk in charge of making it happen.

Q. How do unmanned systems fit in the missile defense puzzle?

A. That is a bit beyond my expertise, but if I were a young man, I would be trying to wrap my brain around the Artificial Intelligence world. I would love to rub the noses of missile defense opposition in a Star Wars world.
