



PROCEEDINGS

NEXT STEPS IN HOMELAND MISSILE DEFENSE

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Next Steps in Homeland Missile Defense” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on March 25, 2025. The subject of this webinar is discussed in a recent National Institute Occasional Paper and subsequent Information Series by David Trachtenberg. These publications recommend actions both the Trump Administration and the Congress should take to improve U.S. homeland missile defenses. They also considered implications for NATO, the impact of improvements to U.S. missile defenses on the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence guarantees to allies, and lessons that can be learned from Israel’s experience with its own “Iron Dome” program.

David J. Trachtenberg

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As I noted in my email invitation, March 23 marked the 42nd anniversary of President Ronald Reagan’s speech to the nation announcing the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). The goal of SDI was to protect the nation from Soviet nuclear missile attack by harnessing defensive technology, including space-based elements, that would help make nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete.”

Although the main goals of SDI were never realized, technology has significantly advanced over the past four decades, making a more robust homeland missile defense posture more practical and cost-effective. Accordingly, as one of his first actions, President Trump issued an Executive Order on “The Iron Dome for America” (now called “Golden Dome”), directing substantial improvements to defend the United States against missile attacks of any type, in any phase of flight, and from any location.¹

Missile threats to the homeland have grown and continue to grow in numbers, types, and sophistication. Consequently, it is no longer reasonable—if it ever was—to argue that allowing the U.S. homeland to remain vulnerable to peer or near-peer missile threats from adversaries is a good thing.

The notion that national vulnerability equates to international stability is a legacy of Cold War thinking that I argue should be relegated to the proverbial dust bin of history. Missile defenses enhance deterrence by complicating the attack plans of a potential aggressor and can limit damage in the event deterrence fails despite our best efforts and for whatever reason.

Now, some may see a more robust homeland defense posture as a move toward a “Fortress America” and the abandonment of U.S. security guarantees to long-standing allies. I would argue, however, that the more effective we are at defending our homeland, the more credible our security guarantees to others are likely to be. Therefore, U.S. allies should be

¹ The White House, Executive Order, “The Iron Dome for America,” January 27, 2025, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/>.



supportive of the Golden Dome concept, as the continued vulnerability of the U.S. homeland, in my view, is more likely than not to result in a folding of the American nuclear umbrella—to the detriment of allied security. How our European allies see this is something I hope we will consider today.

Moreover, in a world where both Moscow and Beijing—working independently or in concert—are threatening the United States and the West and brandishing nuclear threats, it is an urgent imperative to ensure that our citizens are defended not only against the prospect of direct attack, however improbable it may seem, but against coercive threats intended to prevent the United States from taking actions in its own security interest for fear of the potential consequences to our homeland.

In my National Institute *Occasional Paper*² and recent *Information Series*,³ links to which were provided in the email invitation to this event, I argue for building on President Trump's Executive Order by including adequate funding for homeland missile defenses in the president's budget submission to Congress. I also call on Congress to amend U.S. missile defense policy in the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act by avoiding any language in law that explicitly or implicitly endorses exclusive reliance on strategic deterrence to defend the nation against strategic missile threats from nuclear peer adversaries.

Deterrence will always be part of U.S. strategy and should be, but foregoing active defense of the homeland against significant missile threats of all types from major adversaries is shortsighted and leaves the American people hostage to the presumed rationality of an opponent.

Perhaps most importantly, it is critical to acknowledge the importance of a space-based missile defense layer including both sensors and shooters that can counter offensive missiles in their early stages of flight, well before they approach U.S. territory, and to submit a budget request that appropriately funds development of kinetic and non-kinetic space-based defensive programs.

Although the United States has refrained from deploying a comprehensive space-based missile defense layer to protect the nation, the groundwork must be laid now to allow progress on kinetic and non-kinetic defensive means to move forward expeditiously. This includes space-based interceptors as well as directed energy systems that have utility against multiple types of offensive missiles.

Perhaps there are lessons that can be learned from Israel's Iron Beam experience, which, it has been argued, dramatically changes the cost effectiveness ratio in favor of the defense. More broadly, given the level of U.S.-Israeli cooperation in the area of missile defense, it has

² 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/>.

³ David J. Trachtenberg, *Defending America: The Next Steps in Homeland Missile Defense, Information Series No. 620* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 17, 2025), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-defending-america-the-next-steps-in-homeland-missile-defense-no-620-march-17-2025/.

even been suggested that perhaps the United States should deploy some Arrow interceptors as part of a layered U.S. missile defense system.⁴

In addition, I think it is imperative to overcome the bureaucratic and organizational impediments to progress on homeland missile defense. There are multiple entities with responsibility for missile defenses—from their development to fielding to operation.

The Missile Defense Agency, USNORTHCOM, USSTRATCOM, and the Services all play a role. But given the importance of space, I advocate for a greater role for the U.S. Space Force in homeland missile defense activities. This would be consistent with language in this year's NDAA calling for a single point of contact for designing and developing an integrated air and missile defense system for the United States.

Recently, several Space Force officials have highlighted the importance of the Space Force's missile defense mission, noting improvements in the Space Force's ability to track and target threats in space.

In this regard, I was disappointed to read last week that in the interest of government efficiency, the Space Force may be stripped of its missile defense component entirely—the argument being that there are already a multitude of entities involved in the missile defense mission.⁵ I think such a decision would be counterproductive and detrimental to implementing the president's Executive Order.

The president's Executive Order also directed the Secretary of Defense to report on an implementation plan within 60 days. That timeline expires in two days, and it remains to be seen how DoD will propose to implement a Golden Dome architecture that includes all of the elements identified in the president's directive.

There are a number of other recommendations in the report, but I won't take the time to highlight them here. Suffice it to say they include upgrading and modernizing terrestrial-based interceptor systems, deploying a third interceptor site in the United States, protecting critical infrastructures as part of a defensive "underlayer," and developing directed energy capabilities for missile defense. What we should seek to avoid is a disproportionate focus on the least effective options to the detriment of the most effective ones.

These recommendations, and others—such as considering deploying Aegis Ashore, for example—will no doubt be opposed by those who typically see any enhancements to homeland missile defense capabilities as unnecessary, destabilizing, impractical, unrealistic, and prohibitively costly—all Cold War arguments that no longer seem relevant or applicable in today's more threatening environment—if they ever were.

Finally, I would note that multiple administrations and multiple Secretaries of Defense have said that defense of the homeland is the nation's "top priority." Yet, the budget for

⁴ Fred Fleitz, "How President Trump Can Deploy a Missile Defense Shield to Defend America in Only Three Years," *American Greatness*, March 21, 2025, available at <https://amgreatness.com/2025/03/21/how-president-trump-can-deploy-a-missile-defense-shield-to-defend-america-in-only-three-years/>.

⁵ Courtney Kube and Gordon Lubold, "Trump admin considers giving up NATO command that has been exclusively American since Eisenhower," *NBC News*, March 18, 2025, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-admin-considers-giving-nato-command-exclusively-american-eisenho-rcna196503>.

homeland missile defense is only a fraction of a fraction of what we spend on defense. This, I would argue, is unacceptable.

Michael Rühle

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President Trump's decision to build a homeland missile defense has not yet received much attention in Europe. Unlike Ronald Reagan's famous television address of March 1983, President Trump's Executive Order from January 2025 was barely noticed.

This was because his Directive was only one in a barrage of similar Executive Orders that emanated from the White House. Another reason was that the war in Ukraine captured most of Europe's attention. So, rather than combing through Presidential Executive Orders, Europeans were busy discussing how President Trump's goal of brokering a peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia could actually be achieved.

It is therefore fair to expect that once Washington gets serious in implementing an *Iron* (or *Golden*) *Dome*, Europeans will be baffled, and will have few charitable things to say about this endeavor. This has little to do with strategic rationales, technologies or budgets, but all the more with the current political climate, which makes homeland defense appear like yet another strange idea by a strange U.S. administration.

Of course, the United States does not need Allied approval of its missile defense plans. After all, the U.S. did not get out of the ABM Treaty only to be told by its own Allies that large-scale missile defense for one's own homeland is something one should not even try.

However, assuming that the U.S. administration is still interested in maintaining a solid defense relationship with its European Allies, it should be in the United States' interest to understand European attitudes towards U.S. homeland defense, so as not to have this project become yet another irritant in an already strained relationship.

Three issues need our particular attention.

The first is the general European attitude vis-à-vis Theater Missile Defense. This attitude has changed for the better. The war in Ukraine, as well as the missile attacks against Israel by Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, have demonstrated the tremendous importance of air- and missile defense in modern conflict. This positive experience has made Theater Missile Defense a legitimate part of many nations' military toolkit.

However, this analytic "rehabilitation" of missile defense in Europe is closely tied to the European theater. This suggests that a U.S. homeland defense will not be seen in Europe merely as an evolutionary extension of current trends in Theater Missile Defense, but as something radically different. In other words, the positive connotation of Theater Missile Defense in Europe will not necessarily translate into a blanket endorsement of U.S. homeland defense plans.

The second factor that will influence European reactions is the U.S. rationale for homeland defense. David's paper explains why the United States did not undertake a major effort at a nationwide missile defense, but it also explains why the rise of revisionist powers, and the advent of new technologies, has sparked a renewed attempt to move missile defense to center stage.

Europeans will hardly argue with the United States' threat perception *per se*. Russia is currently waging a war in Europe, and China's nuclear buildup has not gone unnoticed, either.

However, if the past is any guide, many Europeans will doubt whether a comprehensive missile defense is the answer to the problem—even more so as it is not yet clear how comprehensive the *Golden Dome* is ultimately going to be.

Many will argue that nuclear deterrence between the major powers still works, and that the scenarios underlying the quest for homeland defense, such as "coercive strikes," remain far-fetched. Regarding technology, critics will argue that previous claims by BMD advocates about the feasibility and effectiveness of missile defense were vastly exaggerated, and that a homeland defense against nuclear missiles was still out of reach.

How much traction these arguments ultimately will have is impossible to say. After all, Europe has not discussed strategic missile defense in earnest since the 1980s. Hence, should a new debate occur, many participants will seek to employ the 1980s arguments they still may be familiar with.

SDI does indeed offer some interesting parallels with today's debate. One of the factors that haunted SDI from its very beginning was its unclear rationale with respect to nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence. President Reagan sold it as an initiative to overcome a nuclear deterrence system that he considered immoral. This happened right at the time when Europeans were deploying nuclear Pershings and cruise missiles in Europe.

By contrast, many of Reagan's aides knew full well that the United States would have to continue to bank on nuclear deterrence for a long time to come. Hence, they emphasized the role of missile defense as a mere augmentation of deterrence. They specifically addressed European worries regarding missile defense and extended deterrence. A better protected United States, so the argument went, would make extended deterrence more credible. This helped dispel European fears that the United States would become isolationist and retreat from its international commitments under its "astrodome" shield. Equally importantly, SDI's character as a research program allowed Washington to conclude technical cooperation agreements with several allies, thereby lending additional legitimacy to it—whereas the *Golden Dome*, according to President Trump, "will be made all in the USA."⁶

Would the United States be able to address such European worries as effectively today as it did in the 1980s? Would it even want to? Answering this question brings us to the third and final factor that needs to be considered: the broader political context of U.S. BMD.

⁶ Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Directs the Building of the Iron Dome Missile Defense Shield for America, The White House, January 27, 2025, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-directs-the-building-of-the-iron-dome-missile-defense-shield-for-america/>.

The first Trump Administration had used threats and warnings about a U.S. withdrawal from Europe to push the Allies to increase their defense budgets. This approach worked, because the Europeans understood that U.S. qualms about unfair burden-sharing were legitimate.

By contrast, the second Trump Administration has chosen a much more confrontational path. It no longer seems satisfied with re-balancing the transatlantic security relationship, but questions its very utility. This dismissive attitude vis-à-vis Europe, which has also become visible in the Administration's dealings with Ukraine, has now led to a widespread counter-reaction, including an attempt to "de-risk" from the United States, for example by the European Union taking on a much stronger role in defense procurement, or by an increasingly alarmist discussion of the risks involved in buying U.S. "black box" systems like the F-35.

This is historically unprecedented. And yet, it is the backdrop against which Europeans will have to grapple with a U.S. missile defense project that is likened to the "Manhattan Project," and whose name alone invokes associations with President Trump's golden sneakers franchise.

The BMD narrative will thus be absolutely crucial. The *Iron Dome* Executive Order contains a detailed paragraph about cooperating with Allies on Theater Missile Defense.⁷ This suggests continuity. What is completely missing, however, is a conceptual link to extended deterrence. Indeed, the term "deterrence" is not even mentioned in the Executive Order. This could easily be fixed by administration officials making public statements to this effect. But whether the president would want them to do so is an open question. A recent ad by Lockheed-Martin describes *Golden Dome* as "an impenetrable shield," revealing a degree of hyperbole that goes way beyond what such a system can achieve. However, it appears perfectly tuned to the President's personal style.

So, my conclusion is clear: If U.S. missile defense is not to become yet another irritant in an already strained transatlantic relationship, the U.S. BMD narrative needs to be carefully calibrated. You may also say that it needs to be "de-Trumped." This is not just to calm down nervous Europeans. It should also be in the United States' own interest, if homeland missile defense is to be mainstreamed into its force posture for good. If *Golden Dome* is too closely associated with a specific president, it will suffer the same fate as SDI: It will lose momentum once that president leaves the White House.

⁷ "... The United States continues to cooperate on missile defense with its allies and partners to aid in the defense of ally populations and troops and of forward-deployed United States troops. Following the submission to the President of the next-generation missile defense reference architecture under section 3(a) of this order, the Secretary of Defense shall direct a review of theater missile defense posture and initiatives to identify ways in which the United States and its allies and partners can:

(a) Increase bilateral and multilateral cooperation on missile defense technology development, capabilities, and operations;

(b) Improve theater missile defenses of forward-deployed United States troops and allied territories, troops, and populations; and

(c) Increase and accelerate the provision of United States missile defense capabilities to allies and partners." The Iron Dome for America, The White House, January 27, 2025, Section 5, available <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/>.

Robert G. Joseph

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Thank you, David. My compliments to you, Michael and Uzi for your thoughtful and insightful presentations. I'm sure like everyone listening this afternoon—learned a great deal from your comments.

I would like to make three points to broaden the context for our discussion.

First, like others who have long advocated for an effective missile defense of the American homeland, I was very encouraged by President Trump's Executive Order on "The Iron Dome for America."

The author or authors of the Order were clearly knowledgeable about the threats we face, about the state of technology to develop and deploy an effective defense against all types of missiles from all potential attackers, and about the more than 40-year history of, I would say, mostly failed efforts to achieve Ronald Reagan's original goal.

Perhaps most encouraging, the Order envisions the acceleration of space-based sensors and—I would say even more important—the development and the deployment of space-based interceptors capable of boost-phase intercept.

We may see in the next few days if the Secretary of Defense plan called for in the Order responds meaningfully to that part of the tasking or if, once again, the antibodies in the Pentagon prevail as they have most often done.

My direct experience was in the Bush-41 and Bush-43 Administrations. In both cases, homeland missile defense was a priority. In 41, this included Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS)—the program of record—to provide for what the Order now calls for. In 43, after exiting the ABM Treaty, we began the deployment of the Ground-based Missile Defense (GMD) system and put in place a set of advanced programs to keep pace with the rogue threats but that could possibly have been expanded to the near-peer threat from China. Unfortunately, with both 41 and 43, the follow-on administrations killed the programs.

The first Trump Administration also saw the president call for an effective space-based missile defense. Again, unfortunately, the concept was relegated to a study by his own Pentagon. We will see if it is different this time.

Second, I believe the study will say very positive things about the potential of space in general perhaps because the authors know that is what the president wants to hear. It is also likely that space sensors will be pursued aggressively. But, as for space-based interceptors—the essential key to success—I am not overly or even cautiously optimistic that the plan will call for near term deployment. I hope I am wrong, but my guess is that the plan will lay out

in strong terms a vision of space-based interceptors for the indefinite future—but not for now. As we all know, strong words and more studies do not translate into capabilities—as we have seen multiple times.

To be clear, unless the plan calls for moving forward now with the actual development and deployment of space-based interceptors—interceptors that are essential for defending against—and therefore deterring not full-scale strikes but rather Russian and Chinese coercive threats—the plan will fail, and the president’s goal will not be achieved.

My third and final point is that the problem—the fundamental flaw in the approach being taken—is that the Pentagon is being tasked to produce the plan without the direct involvement and oversight of the White House—as was the case in the first Trump Administration.

As far as I know, there is no one in the White House who is responsible for ensuring that the Pentagon comes up with the right answer. And most often, left to its own devices, DoD will do what DoD has done in the past—citing technology and funding concerns even when they no longer apply. Here, I hope that institutional fidelity to the land-based next generation interceptor is not allowed to derail the president’s call for an effective space-based defense.

The key to success in ending the ABM Treaty and deploying the first strategic missile defense system was direct and constant White House oversight. That same involvement is needed today to succeed.