

Would Golden Dome Make America Safer?

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In February 2022, days after Russian forces crossed into Ukraine, Putin placed his nuclear arsenal [on high alert](#) and warned that any nation interfering would face consequences unlike any in its history. The warning to those who might intervene - specifically NATO. Four years on, NATO has [provided extensive military and economic support](#) to Ukraine without paying the price Putin had threatened. However, the threat still begs a question the U.S. has never answered. How would Washington protect the homeland, rather than merely avenge a nuclear strike? President Biden [warned Moscow](#) of severe consequences for any nuclear use in Ukraine but kept the American response ambiguous. The U.S. may or may not use nuclear weapons against Russia in defense of Ukraine, but a different reaction may occur if the target were a NATO country.

Because of the distance between the two countries, a Russian strike on the U.S. would likely [require long-range ballistic missiles](#) launched from land or submarine. Even though eighty years of deterrence have kept that prospect remote, a single failure such as a misinterpretation or escalatory mobilization of forces could lead to a catastrophic reaction. The U.S. fields [layered interceptors](#), yet the possibility of wide devastation remains. In January 2025, President Trump issued [Executive Order 14186](#) which launched the “Golden Dome” initiative. The order, titled “The Iron Dome for America,” [directed the Pentagon](#) to develop a more sophisticated, layered shield against ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles. The concept is analogous in purpose to Israel’s “Iron Dome,” but the planned U.S. architecture is far broader. It calls for [space-based sensors, interceptors, and non-kinetic capabilities](#). Potential systems could even include [directed-energy weapons such as lasers](#).

Antimissile defense is not new. In the 1980s, President Reagan initiated the [Strategic Defense Initiative](#), more widely known as *Star Wars*. The program envisioned, among others, a [space-based antimissile system](#) that could provide a comprehensive defense against enemy missiles. That vision never came to fruition. However, technology has evolved, and the U.S. now operates [Ground-Based Midcourse Defense, Aegis, THAAD](#) and [Patriot](#) which are foundations for Golden Dome. These could build on and be consolidated to add new space-based antimissile capabilities. However, there are problems with this approach. The [Government Accounting Office has documented challenges](#) in transitioning DOD directed-energy prototypes, including high-energy lasers, into operational use and the [Congressional Budget Office \(CBO\)](#) assesses that directed-energy weapons, such as lasers, are unlikely to be fielded soon. Another problem is that the Golden Dome’s cost is still unknown. The CBO’s estimate is that a national missile defense architecture broadly consistent with the executive order could cost upwards of [\\$1.2 trillion](#) to develop, deploy, and operate over two decades. Every dollar carries an opportunity cost, reducing the: money that could be used to modernize other systems or reduce the [national debt](#).

Further, determining the Golden Dome’s effectiveness is problematic due to the difficulty of intercepting ballistic missiles, and the need is to stop multiple missiles or further influence an

adversary's actions. [The CBO found](#) that a national missile defense architecture of this type could fully engage a regional-adversary attack or a small-scale attack by a peer adversary, but it could be overwhelmed by a full-scale attack from Russia or China.

[The CBO also warned](#) that deployment could prompt adversaries to increase missile inventories, expand long-range arsenals, or pursue more effective countermeasures, including nuclear weapons. While the intention of the dome would be to make America safer, it could do the opposite. A commonly cited anecdote, known as the [cobra effect](#), offers a warning about best-laid plans. This anecdote purports that British officials in colonial India offered a bounty for dead cobras; residents allegedly began breeding them for the reward, and when the bounty ended, the snakes were released which made the metropolitan areas in India more unsafe. A policy intended to reduce the cobra population produced the opposite result. The same could be true of the Golden Dome and must be considered in the calculus for its implementation.

Concerns for Golden Dome go beyond the dome antimissile defense. A shield intended to reduce American vulnerability could make an adversary feel more exposed, encouraging it to build or diversify forces in other areas. [Russia condemned Golden Dome](#) arguing weapons in space are a provocation and they militarize space. The Soviets had a [similar reaction to the Star Wars](#) program. Russia may simply build more missiles and decoys to ensure enough survive. Russia is positioned to do so with impunity given that [New START expired](#) in February 2026. For the first time in decades the largest arsenals on earth are no longer bound by a bilateral cap.

Whoever follows Putin may well prove worse. Even though the forgoing text focusses on Russia, other adversaries are not far behind. [North Korea](#) continues to expand and diversify its nuclear and ballistic-missile capabilities. [China](#) continues a major expansion of its nuclear and missile forces. An even with the [assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei](#), the Iranian regime continues to show an unwillingness to curb their pursuit of missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

Will Russia's current nuclear weapons levels increase like the cobras in India? It is unknown, but regardless, the argument for the dome is strong. An imperfect defense would still complicate Russia's planning and could improve protection against [limited or accidental launches](#). Golden Dome could make America safer, however there is risk that it may do the opposite; no one can yet say. However, uncertainty is not a reason to abandon the concept, but a reason to keep exploring and to field it once it is ready. The dangers are not diminishing, and the world is growing less predictable. A nation must mitigate the dangers that exist and find a way not to release the bounty on the cobras.

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