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Defense Primer: The Golden Dome for America

The Golden Dome for America (initially known as the Iron Dome for America) is an initiative of the second Trump Administration to develop an integrated air and missile defense system. President Donald J. Trump introduced the initiative in Executive Order (E.O.) 14186, dated January 27, 2025. Golden Dome is to combine a range of capabilities to create a "system of systems" to protect the United States from "aerial attacks from any foe," according to a May 2025 press release from the Department of Defense (DOD), which is now "using a secondary Department of War designation" under E.O. 14347, dated September 5, 2025. Congress provided $24.4 billion toward related efforts through the FY2025 reconciliation law (P.L. 119-21, commonly referred to as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act). President Trump has referred to this sum as an initial down payment or deposit toward the system, saying it "should be fully operational before the end of my term."

Congress has deliberated the rationale for and implementation of Golden Dome. In hearings, interviews with the press, and communication with DOD, some Members have argued for and against the initiative, highlighted concerns, raised questions, and requested additional information. Members formed Senate and House Golden Dome caucuses. In July 2025, the Senate confirmed U.S. Space Force General Michael A. Guetlein for appointment to general while assigned to the position of direct reporting program manager for DOD's new Office of Golden Dome for America. Members have introduced Golden Dome-related legislation, such as the IRONDOME Act of 2025 (S. 435) and GOLDEN DOME Act of 2025 (H.R. 4107, S. 2142), and have included Golden Dome-related provisions in proposals for FY2026 defense authorization legislation (H.R. 3838, S. 2296) and appropriations legislation (H.R. 4016, S. 2572).

The Trump Administration's Threat Assessment and Strategy

E.O. 14186 states, "The threat of attack by ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles, and other advanced aerial attacks, remains the most catastrophic threat facing the United States." The E.O. further states that "the threat from next-generation strategic weapons has become more intense and complex with the development by peer and near-peer adversaries of next-generation delivery systems and their own homeland integrated air and missile defense capabilities." The order does not name any foreign nations. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), U.S. Air Force General Gregory M. Guillot, commander of U.S. Northern Command, discussed missile threats posed by China, Russia, and North Korea, as well as the potential for Iran to develop "a North America-threatening" intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

In articulating a strategy to combat such threats, E.O. 14186 states, "The United States will deter—and defend its citizens and critical infrastructure against—any foreign aerial attack on the Homeland." This strategy differs from the strategy articulated in DOD's 2019 and 2022 Missile Defense Reviews (MDRs). Under this previous strategy, the United States sought to defend against rogue states, as well as accidental and unauthorized launches, while relying on nuclear weapons to deter China and Russia from striking U.S. territory.

Current Capabilities

Golden Dome may incorporate some or all current U.S. missile defense systems, which include sensing, intercept, and command and control capabilities. It may update these systems or augment them with new capabilities, or both.

The United States currently has several space-, air-, ground- and sea-based capabilities dedicated to sensing. Collectively, they detect, track, discriminate between, and provide target-quality data on potential aerial threats. These capabilities include the Long-Range Discrimination Radar (LRDR), Upgraded Early Warning Radars (UEWR), the Army Navy/Transportable Radar (AN/TPY-2), Sea-Based X-Band Radar (SBX-1), and the Space-Based Infrared System (SBIRS). Some of these are legacy systems that have been updated to track multiple types of threats simultaneously and to reduce personnel requirements. Some are slated to be replaced by systems in development. Several also have space domain awareness applications.

The United States has a range of kinetic (or hit-to-kill) ballistic missile defense capabilities, which have some capability to intercept some non-ballistic threats, such as cruise missiles, hypersonic weapons, and large drones. These include the Ground-based Midcourse Defense System (GMD), with interceptor sites at Alaska and California; ship- and ground-based Aegis systems; and ground-based Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) systems and Patriot missile defense systems.

The United States also has capabilities for *point defense*—to defend a specific location or asset—against cruise missiles and other low-flying threats. Specifically, the National Capital Region, which includes Washington, DC, is defended by medium- and short-range air defenses, alongside manned aircraft.

U.S. nonkinetic capabilities, such as electronic warfare and cyber capabilities, are also incorporated into the current missile defense architecture.

Issues for Congress

Congress may consider whether or not to provide additional funding for Golden Dome, and may consider how to exercise oversight of Golden Dome implementation.

Statutory national missile defense policy. Congress may consider whether or not to revise the "national missile defense policy" (10 U.S.C. §5501). The current policy mirrors the previous homeland missile defense strategy as articulated in the 2019 and 2022 MDRs. It states,

> It is the policy of the United States-
>
> (1) to research, develop, test, procure, deploy, and sustain, with funding subject to the annual authorization of appropriations for National Missile Defense, systems that provide effective, layered missile defense capabilities to defeat increasingly complex missile threats in all phases of flight; and
>
> (2) to rely on nuclear deterrence to address more sophisticated and larger quantity near-peer intercontinental missile threats to the homeland of the United States.

Congress has revised the national missile defense policy previously. In 2019, Congress added language on the U.S. nuclear deterrent and expanded "complex ballistic missile threat" to "complex missile threat" (P.L. 116-92). In 2023, Congress removed references to "rogue states" and defense of "allies, partners, and deployed forces" (P.L. 118-31).

The SASC-reported National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 (NDAA; S. 2296) would further revise the policy by removing paragraphs (1) and (2) and adding language on defending U.S. citizens and critical infrastructure from "foreign attack by increasingly complex ballistic, hypersonic glide, and cruise missiles, and other advanced aerial threats." It would also add provisions about guaranteeing U.S. second-strike capability and cooperating with allies and partners "to aid in the defense of allied and partner populations" and U.S. forces abroad. The House-passed FY2026 NDAA (H.R. 3838) would also revise the policy. It would replace paragraphs (1) and (2) with language about deterring and defending against "any foreign aerial attack on the homeland."

Adequacy of information available to Congress. Congress may consider whether it has sufficient information to assess Golden Dome. While President Trump has announced some details—such as the inclusion of space-based interceptors—the Administration has not publicly provided a comprehensive picture of the systems, procurement plans, timelines, and operational concepts involved. It has postponed an "industry summit" and reportedly directed defense officials not to speak about Golden Dome in certain public contexts. Committee reports (H.Rept. 119-162, S.Rept. 119-52) highlighted a need for more information.

DOD stated that "the Government plans to socialize" the Golden Dome architecture in September, though it is unclear whether this plan will be made public and, if so, to what extent. This architecture may describe the capabilities included; how these capabilities align with varied threats; and where, in what quantities, and along what timeline they may be fielded. The reference architecture, requirements, and implementation plan that the January 2025 executive order directed the Secretary to submit to the President by March 2025 were not made public. Congress may consider whether or not to require DOD to report certain details, and whether or not to direct DOD to make all or some of those details unclassified and publicly available.

Cost and feasibility. Another issue for Congress concerns the debate around the cost and feasibility of Golden Dome. Countering peer and near-peer capabilities could require an increase in both U.S. missile defense sophistication and capacity (i.e., quantity of interceptors and launchers, and associated personnel and industrial base capacity). In May 2025, President Trump stated that Golden Dome would cost $175 billion. Some observers have cited higher estimates, including some in the trillions of dollars, driven in part by the inclusion of space-based interceptors. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated the cost of a limited space-based interceptor system—sized only to counter rogue threats—at more than $500 billion. Historically, missile defense systems have exceeded initial budget estimates and schedules.

While technological challenges have hampered past missile defense efforts, General Guetlein has stated that all the technology needed to realize Golden Dome exists today. Kinetic space-based intercept has been a focus of feasibility debates, but missile defense faces other technical challenges including the degree to which systems can differentiate between missiles, debris, and decoys; provide sufficient warning to intercept low-flying threats like cruise missiles and UAS; and contend with simultaneous diverse threats.

Strategic implications. Some members have stated that some of these systems could adversely affect U.S. security by destabilizing nuclear deterrence relationships with U.S. strategic competitors and/or by contributing to a competition in nuclear-armed missiles. Congress may consider how China and Russia have responded to Golden Dome and may respond to future missile defense efforts. For more, see CRS Insight IN12568, *Golden Dome: Potential Strategic Stability Considerations for Congress*.

Acquisition and the defense industrial base (DIB). Congress may consider possible tradeoffs associated with various acquisition strategies that DOD could use for different Golden Dome subsystems. These may include tradeoffs in cost, schedule, and acquisition risk. Congress may also consider the adequacy of the U.S. DIB to build Golden Dome on the President's three-year timeline and where DOD might invest in increasing capacity. To field new technologies and pursue this timeline, DOD may consider nontraditional acquisition options. Congress may assess existing acquisition oversight tools and mechanisms.

For more about Golden Dome for America and U.S. air and missile defense, see CRS Report R48584, *Golden Dome: Related CRS Products*.

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