Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

INSIGHT

Golden Dome: Potential Strategic Stability Considerations for Congress

Updated November 4, 2026

The second Trump Administration has proposed to develop a "next-generation missile defense shield" against nuclear and conventional attacks that it has called a "Golden Dome for America." Since the 1950s, Members of Congress have periodically debated the costs, feasibility, scope, and sufficiency of strategic defense systems that could limit damage to the U.S. homeland from a nuclear attack. In these debates, some Members have stated that some of these systems could adversely affect U.S. security by destabilizing nuclear deterrence relationships with adversaries and/or by contributing to a competition in nuclear-armed missiles. This Insight focuses on certain strategic stability issues that Congress may consider when providing oversight of or funding for Golden Dome. See the **text box** for a definition of *strategic stability*.

Background

Strategic Stability

A state of relations between adversarial nuclear-armed states where neither side has an incentive to (1) employ nuclear weapons first (known as *crisis stability* or *first strike stability*) or (2) build up nuclear weapons (known as *arms race stability*).

One of the major roles of U.S. strategic nuclear forces has been and remains the deterrence of a nuclear attack on the U.S. homeland through a threat of nuclear retaliation (a second strike). After the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union gradually sought to improve strategic stability in their mutual deterrence relationship. The Johnson and Nixon Administrations concluded that deploying missile defenses (anti-ballistic missile, or ABM, systems) against a large-scale Soviet nuclear attack was infeasible and that U.S. interests would be better served by negotiating with the Soviet Union to reduce Soviet incentives for a nuclear first strike or an offensive nuclear missile buildup to overcome U.S. ABM systems. In 1972, after hearings, the Senate voted 88-2 to provide advice and consent to ratification of the ABM Treaty that restricted the development and deployment of ABM systems and approved an Interim Agreement that imposed numerical limits on strategic nuclear ballistic missiles.

As part of his 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative, President Ronald Reagan articulated a shift in U.S. strategy from threatening nuclear retaliation toward a defensive approach reliant on intercepting Soviet strategic ballistic missiles with space-based ABM systems. In negotiations that eventually led to the 1991

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
IN12568

Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), Soviet leaders sought to keep the United States in the ABM Treaty and limit U.S. space-based ABM systems.

Ballistic Missile Defenses in U.S.-Russian Relations

After the end of the Cold War, Congress passed several Missile Defense Acts setting policy and providing funding for missile defenses to protect the U.S. homeland from threats posed by the regional proliferation of missile technologies. Russian concerns about these efforts complicated bilateral nuclear arms control during the 1990s. However, the United States and Russia concluded the 2002 Moscow Treaty that further reduced strategic nuclear forces despite the concomitant U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. During the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama Administrations, the two countries also attempted to cooperate bilaterally and within the NATO-Russia framework on elements of a collaborative missile defense system.

Russian officials express concern that U.S. missile defenses are not limited programs aimed at countering regional threats like North Korea or Iran but are instead an open-ended effort aimed at undermining Russia's ability to engage in nuclear retaliation. Russian negotiators unsuccessfully sought "legally binding guarantees" that U.S. missile defenses would not be aimed against Russian strategic nuclear forces. The 2010 New START Treaty's preamble included language, secured by Russian negotiators, regarding an "interrelationship" between strategic offenses and defenses. The Senate's resolution of advice and consent to New START ratification stated that the treaty did not restrict U.S. missile defenses.

The Russian military has some missile defense systems and capabilities to protect its nuclear deterrent, as well as to counter U.S. missile defenses beyond traditional countermeasures. In 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia had novel nuclear weapons to counter U.S. missile defenses. During the Biden Administration, Russian officials focused on missile defense as one of the factors, in addition to nuclear weapons and conventional precision strike, affecting strategic stability.

U.S. missile defense policy has become an area of coordination for Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC), whose growing nuclear arsenal now poses "a direct threat to the [U.S.] Homeland," according to U.S. intelligence estimates. In a May 2025 statement, Russia and the PRC stated that, through Golden Dome, the United States sought to undermine their ability to engage in nuclear retaliation.

Potential Strategic Stability Considerations

As Congress assesses the Trump Administration's homeland missile defense plans and their strategic stability implications, it may consider the following issues:

- **What are the implications of Golden Dome for U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy, particularly in an emerging environment of two nuclear peers?** Through executive branch briefings, hearings, and other oversight activities, Congress may question Administration approaches to this issue in the context of Administration reviews of nuclear and missile defense policies and postures. In defense authorization and appropriation legislation, Congress may provide policy direction and funding for limited or expansive approaches to Golden Dome—decisions that may involve making budgetary tradeoffs among defense programs.
- **How might Russia and the PRC respond to Golden Dome and on what timeline?** Through intelligence community briefings, Congress may track Russian and PRC changes to their nuclear forces, their development of countermeasures, and the evolution of their doctrines and operational concepts in response to Golden Dome. Congress may also evaluate existing reporting requirements on nuclear cooperation between Russia and

the PRC (e.g., P.L. 118-31, §1649) and determine whether the requirements should be amended to include cooperation or coordination between Russia and the PRC on missile defenses and counterspace issues.

- **What is the relationship between Golden Dome and U.S. arms control with Russia and the PRC?** President Donald Trump has expressed interest in engaging with Russia and the PRC on nuclear arms control issues. Through executive branch briefings, hearings, and other oversight activities, Congress may seek to understand Administration views on this issue, as well as assess the implications of arms control for U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy and nuclear and missile defense policies, programs, and postures.

Author Information

Anya L. Fink
Analyst in U.S. Defense Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.