

Keeping tabs On Big Brother: UK debates on US plans for ballistic missile defenses

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US plans for the deployment of a National Missile Defence (NMD) system have been a serious cause for concern for Prime Minister Tony Blair's government, and have laid down a challenge to the United Kingdom's apparent intention both to maintain strong links with the United States and to preserve its obligations to multilateral security arrangements. NMD throws into question US commitments to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, and risks undermining the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and US-Russian arms control agreements. The United Kingdom has been placed in the iniquitous position of seeing its closest ally embark on a project which runs counter to its own interests.

The problem has stemmed from the fact that two sites on UK territory, the US bases at Fylingdales and Menwith Hill, would be required for NMD (as currently proposed) to work. Of the NATO allies, only Denmark is also in this position. Other EU states are vigorously opposed to the US scheme and have lined up in an unusual, ad hoc alliance with Russia and China to provide the backbone of international opposition. However, many British politicians maintain that there still exists a 'special relationship' between the United Kingdom and the United States, and that high levels of cooperation in the diplomatic, defence and intelligence fields are the fruitful results of this relationship. It would be difficult, therefore, for a British government to deny the United States integration of the two existing sites into any future NMD system, if they were asked to do so, as it might jeopardise cooperation in these other fields. However, the United Kingdom consistently has placed multilateral arms control as a key tenet of its foreign policy, and it is just such agreements which NMD threatens to undo.

What, therefore, has been the UK government's strategy so far? Resisting calls from many quarters to criticise NMD in public and deny the United States use of UK facilities, the government has chosen to conduct a private campaign of tactful diplomacy. NMD is not considered sufficiently important to jeopardise the entire US-UK relationship, and a strategy was chosen by which opposition to NMD would be conducted through diplomatic and prime ministerial channels. No public or parliamentary positions were taken on the basis that: firstly, the scheme did not yet exist and the government did not have to have an opinion on it; and secondly, the US government had not made a formal request regarding the two relevant sites and therefore no answer was necessary. London's stance also has been premised upon the belief that deployment of some kind of system would be likely in the medium term, whatever the strength of international opposition. Wanting to avoid an embarrassing U-turn within the next 6 or 12 months, the British government has preferred public silence.

Since President Bill Clinton's 1 September decision not to issue the preliminary contracts necessary to deploy NMD by 2005 as previously foreseen, the UK government feels that its policy has been vindicated. The United States has been dissuaded from going ahead and the UK-US relationship has not been seriously damaged. To support this, a 5 September article in the Washington Post claimed: "The early misgivings of British Prime Minister Tony Blair also were important in Clinton's decision."^[1] At a recent hearing of the US House Government Reform Committee's national security, veterans affairs and international relations subcommittee, a State Department official said: "We cannot fail to take the views and security requirements of our friends and allies into account as we move forward on this program. [...] We have an obligation to do what is necessary to achieve consensus within the NATO and Pacific alliances which are essential to our own security, and to reassure others of the steadfast commitment of the United States to preserving the international arms control regimes that they have come to rely on for our their own security."^[2] However, the debate on missile defences continues, and it remains the case that uncertainty over the readiness of the technology probably played more of a role in the president's decision than allies' opinions. So UK relief will only be temporary, and crucial elections in both the United States and the United Kingdom in the next 12 months will provide the background for an urgently required long-term UK strategy.

How the UK fits into the NMD System

Elements of three of the principal components of the proposed NMD system are based in the United Kingdom. This puts the country right at the heart of the proposed NMD system to a degree unequalled by South Korea and Denmark, whose territories are also earmarked for the deployment of NMD components.

A 1997 press release from RAF Menwith Hill stated: "(Her Majesty's Government) and the United States Government are pleased to announce the European Relay Ground Station (RGS-E) for the new Space Based Infra-Red System (SBIRS) will be established at RAF Menwith Hill." [3] Permission for deployment was granted by the UK government on 20 March 1997, and parts of the system are due to come on line soon. The Space-Based Infrared System, or SBIRS-High, will pick up the fact that a booster has been launched and provide some initial trajectory information. [4]

The 1997 announcement did not gain much attention until late 1999, when the role of SBIRS-High in NMD became apparent. The UK government responded to criticism of the deployment's implications for the ABM treaty by arguing that the detection of ballistic missile launches was a long standing strategic necessity, and that the work at Menwith Hill would have been undertaken even in the absence of a proposed NMD. Whilst this may be true, the UK government has acknowledged that: "(SBIRS-High) would be capable of providing early warning of ballistic missile launches to a national missile defence system should the US decide to deploy such a system." [5]

RAF Fylingdales is one of the bases for the Ballistic Missile Early Warning Radar System (BMEWS), part of the United States' global network of early warning radars, designed to track incoming missiles early in flight. This network is due to be upgraded to give it the heightened tracking ability required by the proposed NMD system. [6] Along with Thule in Greenland, RAF Fylingdales is also named in Pentagon Ballistic Missile Defense Organization planning documents as one of the sites for the network of X-band radars. The X-band radars will have a better tracking capability than the early warning radars, and are also designed to help distinguish the warheads from debris and false targets. [7]

The UK government admits to the role that RAF Fylingdales is slated to play in NMD. A joint Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence memorandum confirmed that "present US plans for the first phase of a National Missile Defence system envisage the use of Fylingdales and four other existing ballistic missile early warning radars (three of them in the United States, the fourth at Thule in Greenland) for tracking hostile ballistic missiles in mid-flight." [8] However, on the question of what its decision would be should a request for changes be made, the UK government consistently has argued that, not having been asked, it does not have a position. As Foreign Secretary Robin Cook has said: "Until we know both the nature of the question and also the circumstances in which we are being asked that question, it would be premature for us to debate what might be, particularly since there is no commitment by the United States to ask the question." [9] However, officials in Washington seem confident that requests for the use of Fylingdales will not be turned down. Questioned on the subject, Kenneth Bacon, Pentagon spokesman, said: "We have been working closely with our allies, particularly the [United Kingdom], on this, and will continue to work closely with them. I think it's too early to predict a problem there. I wouldn't anticipate there would be a problem, actually." [10]

Some of the technology currently being deployed at Menwith Hill, and due to be installed at Fylingdales, could easily be used in a much more ambitious NMD system, such as the all-encompassing, three-tiered ballistic missile defence network proposed by many US Republicans. Although a long way off, and heavily dependent on the outcome of the US presidential election, the possibility is none the less real. The UK government's present

position is based on the assumption that the systems currently being considered will be used in a 'limited' NMD system. The question is how the UK government will react, and indeed how it will be able to react, should the same technology one day become part of a far more extensive NMD network – with potentially greater implications for international stability than that being presently contemplated.

Debate Within the Labour Government

Cook is perhaps not as complacent about the ABM treaty as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office-Ministry of Defence memorandum suggests. In response to questions on the "Fylingdales scenarios" from Ted Rowlands MP, Cook commented: "Scenario (b) outlines the situation in which the ABM treaty no longer exists because it has been renounced. There are many people in Britain or Europe, who would regard that as heavy price to pay."^[11] The Foreign Affairs Committee spoke of the "apparently contradictory views emanating from the [Foreign and Defence] ministries."^[12] These differences were highlighted in March 2000 when Peter Hain, Foreign and Commonwealth Office minister, told the BBC's Newsnight programme that he did "not like the idea of a Star Wars programme, limited or unlimited." On the same evening, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon had revealed to Channel 4 News that if the United States were to ask Britain to use Fylingdales, "the history of our close friendship with the [United States] is that we are sympathetic to such requests."^[13]

The Ministry of Defence is keen to keep its options open in the area of ballistic missile defence.^[14] According to Hoon, the United Kingdom "consult(s) closely with the [United States] and take(s) account of the work they are doing, to help us take an informed decision on whether to acquire a capability ourselves in the future."^[15] A 1985 Memorandum of Understanding on the NMD's predecessor, the Strategic Defence Initiative launched by former US President Ronald Reagan, continues to allow US-UK information exchange on ballistic missile defence.^[16] Although Cook is unwilling to completely rule out the option of a future British ballistic missile defence system, he has played it down, telling the Foreign Affairs Committee that there was "no active commitment to it". According to Cook, the technology "at the present time is not available to us" and the cost "would be quite substantial."^[17]

The Ministry of Defence is currently sponsoring a three-year Technology Readiness and Risk Assessment Programme (Trrap) by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency [DERA] and four British defence contractors, due to be completed next summer. The programme aims to monitor "developments in the risk posed by ballistic missiles and in the technology to counter them."^[18] In answer to a July 1999 parliamentary question, then-Defence Secretary George Robertson said: "Trrap is a three-year programme which was initiated following the Strategic Defence Review. It forms part of the Corporate Research Programme. Its purposes are (i) to monitor developments in the potential threat and the technologies available to counter it and (ii) to establish a position from which a national requirement for fielding an active ballistic missile defence system could be developed, should one become necessary. The programme focuses on the characteristics of ballistic missiles, the performance of radar and other sensors, the guidance of interceptors, and their potential to defeat ballistic missile warheads including those containing biological or chemical agents."^[19]

In June 2000, Hoon confirmed the existence of the three-year programme, and announced that the Ministry of Defence also was contributing to NATO preparations for studies into the feasibility of an allied theatre ballistic missile defence development, expected to start in 2001. In April 2000, an article in the Sunday Times quoted Wing Commander Phil Angus, former commanding officer of RAF Fylingdales, as saying that Trrap was aimed at giving "a definition and framework to UK ballistic missile defence.

It looks at the threat and the technology options required to counter it.” Angus went on to say that 300 people were working full-time on the programme, and up to half a dozen computer-simulated “war games” have been held as part of it. The study, he said, is expected to be reported at the end of the year.[20] The Ministry of Defence is thus following a European trend in exploring the broad principle of missile defence, especially Theatre Missile Defence (TMD), without making any political commitments to deploy.

Threat Assessments

One serious division of views between the United Kingdom and the United States relates to the nature of the threat posed by various ‘states of concern.’ The United States regards this split as one of the principal barriers to a European acceptance of the NMD system. Britain generally refuses to comment on US threat assessments, saying only that “the judgement on the national security of the United States is one which the United States has to make itself.”[21] Whitehall sources also have indicated that classified threat assessments reveal serious concerns about the strategic procurement ambitions of several ‘states of concern.’ In public, however, Britain does seem to have a different approach to some of these states, giving more emphasis to the diplomatic track, an approach which is shared by Canada and most EU states. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has used the upgrading of UK-Iranian and EU-Iranian diplomatic and commercial links to show that it regards ongoing political reform and rapprochement with the West, as well as the Middle East peace process, as the best ways to engage Iran and thus ensure that it abides by its non-proliferation commitments. It also strongly supports the current dialogue between North and South Korea, and generally shrinks from using the ‘rogue’ label. [22]

The Political Debate Within the United Kingdom

The nature of the debate within the governing Labour Party can be seen in the differences of opinion between various ministries highlighted above. It remains the case that Labour is torn, as the party in power, between the pragmatic need to maintain good relations with the United States and its long-held affiliation with the broad principles of arms control and disarmament. Currently available party policy documents do not discuss NMD in detail, but sections of the parliamentary party and the trade union movement have made it clear that they regard NMD as a highly dangerous project which runs contrary to traditional Labour party policy. Further evidence of unease at US intentions may be found in the UK government’s annual report 1999/2000, which states: “No nation can isolate itself from the rest of the world. Every country’s security, its prosperity, even its climate can be affected profoundly by what happens beyond its borders.”[23]

In a pre-manifesto document, “Believing in Britain,” the Conservative Party said that, if elected in 2001, it would “take a lead in building support in Europe for co-operating with the [United States] on the development of ballistic missile defences, to counter the new threat from rogue states and terrorists equipped with weapons of mass destruction.”[24] The Conservative defence spokesman, Iain Duncan Smith, consistently has expressed support for NMD, both in Parliament and in the media. In a 2 August 2000 press release, he said: “In the face of what is now a growing threat from unstable nations rapidly arming themselves with biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, European nations need to co-operate with the [United States] in finding a range of responses. It is critical for the NATO Alliance that Britain takes the lead in uniting with the Americans on ballistic missile defence.”[25]

By contrast, on 7 July 2000, the Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesman, Menzies Campbell MP, said: “The American proposal for the National Missile Defence is

profoundly destabilising. A breach of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty will put back recent welcome developments in multilateral nuclear disarmament and could easily provoke a new nuclear arms race. [...] The so-called 'threat' which NMD is design to deal with is grossly overstated. Presidential election year is not the best atmosphere in which to take decisions of such significance and potential damage.”[26] At their September 2000 party conference, the Liberal Democrats approved a motion urging the United States to abandon NMD and calling for the UK government to refuse permission for the use of UK sites in NMD.

Conclusion

Clinton's 1 September 2000 decision to defer a decision on deployment merely has provided a temporary breathing space for the UK government. The Ballistic Missile Defence Organisation already has proposed another test for January 2001, and debates continue to rage within the United States over threats and technologies. The identity of the incoming president will remain unknown until November, and the scope of his proposals for missile defences may vary hugely. Still, the issue of NMD or its successor will continue to pose tricky diplomatic dilemmas for Her Majesty's Government. Despite the differences between the political parties spelled out above, it is likely that the outcome of the next election in Britain will not affect the problem for the United Kingdom. Instead, it will be the outcome of the November US presidential elections which may force the United Kingdom to choose between a high-risk foreign policy move and the wrath of its senior partner.

Endnotes

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