

Official UK Government position on Missile Defence

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Towards the end of 2002, the UK Government made significant statements which indicated a growing willingness to support the concept, if not the detail, of missile defence systems.

On 12 October, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon told the House of Commons that US officials had visited London, other European capitals and NATO HQ during the summer “to set out possible approaches to missile defence and to repeat US willingness to offer protection to friends and allies”. More specifically, he pointed out that:

It is right that we recognise the potential contribution of missile defence to a comprehensive strategy to deal with the threat from ballistic missiles – a strategy that also includes non-proliferation and counter-proliferation measures, diplomacy and deterrence.

He also went on to state that the US Administration had not made a decision about the “precise future architecture” of a missile defence system, nor had there been a formal request for the use of RAF Fylingdales. Such a request would be seriously considered but only if “we were satisfied that the overall security of the UK and the alliance would be enhanced”.

Most importantly, after months of prevarication in response to calls to widen the debate, Mr Hoon said:

I have asked for some detailed analytical work to be completed on the implications of missile defence and its relationship with other elements of a comprehensive strategy against the ballistic missile threat. We welcome parliamentary and public discussion of the issues involved. I therefore intend to make available in the coming months further analytical and discussion material as our work progresses, and we will be ready to discuss these issues in the House at the appropriate time.

On 4 November, questions about which European partners support missile defence, if British taxpayers’ money has been committed to missile defence and if parliamentarians would be permitted to vote on the issue were put to the Defence Secretary. He said that the questions were premature and he was only prepared to restate that material was being prepared for a debate by the Ministry of Defence.

In a wide ranging speech at the Foreign Policy Centre on 13 November, Geoff Hoon reminded his audience that NATO was already examining the “threat to deployed forces from ballistic missiles” and that “it also needs to look carefully at the emerging threat from ballistic missiles to the territory and population centres of NATO nations”. “The US programme on missile defence is gathering momentum in a vast enterprise involving cutting edge technologies which will require a massive effort over the coming years”, he said.

On 26 November, the Secretary of State for Defence was asked whether a formal mechanism would be made available for the public to register their views on missile defence with his Department. Mr. Hoon replied that “Members of the public are welcome to write to the Ministry of Defence with their views on missile defence. I intend to publish shortly some discussion material as an aid to public debate”.

On 9 December, the Secretary of State told members of parliament that he had placed “further analytical and discussion material in the Library of the House” and that “the paper will also be distributed widely and will be available on the Ministry of Defence website”. In response to a question from Paul Keetch MP: “What Memoranda of Understanding have been signed in relation to the use by the USA of British facilities for missile defence activities”, Mr. Hoon replied: “None”. In response to a question from Patrick Mercer MP: “To ask when he expects preparations to begin for British involvement in the US-led missile defence system”, Mr. Hoon replied:

The United Kingdom already has close access to US research and development work on missile defence, taking part in collaborative research and information exchange on ballistic missile defence technologies. UK industry is also playing an active role. UK expertise in such areas will enable us to consider and make informed assessments about

technical advances in missile defence.

On Tuesday 17 December, the Government announced that it is considering a request from the US to upgrade the Early Warning Radar system at RAF Fylingdales and that views from the public will be sought before a decision is made. The US request had arrived in a letter from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Mr Hoon's statement can be viewed on the 10 Downing Street Newsroom Web site.

In his response letter, Geoff Hoon said: "The decision on Fylingdales upgrade is an important one, and the Government is keen for it to be informed by public and Parliamentary discussion. We shall ensure that this House has appropriate opportunities to debate the issue in the New Year."

The Defence Secretary told MPs on Wednesday 15th January that the Government's preliminary conclusion was that it was in the UK's interests to agree to the US request for the upgrade at Fylingdales. Mr Hoon's full parliamentary statement can be downloaded at: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page7000.asp>

Later that day, he gave oral evidence before the House of Commons Select Committee on Defence, as part of their inquiry into missile defence. The chairman, Bruce George MP, closely questioned him about his earlier parliamentary statement which seemed to have foreclosed on the public debate he himself had initiated and before the Committee had published their report. Mr Hoon declined to give a timetable for a formal decision but indicated he would take the Chairman's comments into consideration and that there would be a full parliamentary debate before that decision was taken. Other members of the Committee then put their questions to Mr Hoon on a range of related issues which he answered more fully than he had been prepared to in the past. Mr George indicated that the Defence Committee's report should be published within about a month.

Perhaps mindful of suggestions that the Government might make a formal response to the U.S. Administration before the end of the month, the Defence Committee Report on Missile Defence was published on 29 January. The report concluded that "the UK should agree to the upgrade of a U.S. early warning radar on British soil for use in the U.S. missile defence system".

The Committee also largely agreed with the UK Ministry of Defence's assessment of the growing threat from ballistic missile proliferation. The report acknowledges that an upgrade to Fylingdales may draw Britain into active participation in deployed missile defence systems and hoped for UK industrial participation and benefit. However, the report also questioned whether the overall missile defence system would work.

The report was also extremely critical of the Government's consultation process, stating: "The Committee strongly regrets the way in which the issue has been handled by the Government." The Committee also noted that the Ministry of Defence "has shown no respect for either the views of those affected locally by the decision or for the arguments of those opposed to the upgrade in principle." The Committee noted that it "will also wish to follow up those matters relating to the upgrade of RAF Fylingdales which could not be addressed fully in this report."

In a Parliamentary statement on 5 February, Defence Secretary Hoon said: "I am therefore replying today to the United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, conveying the Government's agreement to the US request." A MoD Press Officer explained to BASIC that the decision to upgrade Fylingdales does not bring their consultation to a close as this is but a small part of the wider debate on missile defence which will go on for years.

The Government's response to the Defence Committee Report was received on 5 February and has been published as an Appendix to their Special Report (<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmdfence/411/41104.htm>).

BASIC has been informed by the Ministry of Defence that written submissions to the

public debate should be forwarded by February 2003.

They can be sent electronically to:

Missile-Defence@mod.gsi.gov.uk

or by post to:

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