

The missile defence debate gap in Britain: As wide as ever in 2004

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BASIC Notes: Occasional papers on international security policy,
24 February 2005



British American Security
Information Council

Key Points

- A review of Hansard in 2004 reveals the paucity of the Missile Defence debate in Parliament.
- Only limited information on this issue has been placed in the public domain, albeit grudgingly. This includes Annexes to a US-UK MoU on missile defence cooperation, covering arrangements for the upgrade work at Fylingdales (Annex A), and the behind-the-scenes arrangements for closer collaboration (Annex B).
- Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, has responded to parliamentary questions with curt, evasive and dismissive replies.
- Annex A appears to be consistent with the stated position of the UK government.
- Annex B indicates that the UK government may have gone further down the road of integration with US plans for missile defence than publicly admitted.
- The head of the US Missile Defense Agency has said that he wants to base at least ten interceptor missiles in Europe within the next five years, and has confirmed that the UK is in the running to host the interceptors.
- UK and NATO ballistic missile threat assessments should be declassified and placed in the public domain.
- It is appropriate to have a full parliamentary and public debate about the advisability of deploying missile defence systems in the UK before the decision is taken.
- The Defence Secretary must be held to his word that “any decision on the siting of interceptor missiles in the United Kingdom would be open to scrutiny and debate in the normal way”.

Introduction

A review of Hansard in 2004 reveals that the Missile Defence debate in the UK Parliament has yet to be started in earnest. MPs have on numerous occasions questioned the government in general, and the Defence Secretary in particular, over alleged plans to involve the UK more closely in the US missile defence programme. Their questions, however, have been met with short replies and the repeated assertion that no decisions have been taken relating to the basing of US interceptor missiles in the UK.

The June 2003 US-UK Framework Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Ballistic Missile Defence was finally placed in the Library of the House, after initial refusal to accede to MP requests to do so, and after BASIC had acquired a copy and posted it on our website. The MOU outlined the developing military and industrial relationship between the UK and US on missile defence. Its availability encouraged MPs to further question the Defence Secretary over UK involvement in the US missile defence programme. Annex A, on the arrangements for the upgrade work at Fylingdales, and Annex B, which gave further insight into the behind-the-scenes arrangements for closer collaboration, were then made available in December 2003 and October 2004 respectively.

With limited information being placed in the public domain and a serial lack of candour on the part of the UK government, it was hardly surprising that the print media became interested in any speculative assessment that came their way. The blame for whatever inaccuracies arose from this situation can be squarely laid at the doors of Whitehall.

The non-debate in Parliament

It is interesting to examine the parliamentary answers given by the Defence Secretary in response to questions about basing US missile interceptors in the UK. Over the course of 2004, Geoff Hoon generally responded to questions with curt, evasive and dismissive replies.

For example, a question by Alan Simpson MP on the 25 May which asked the Minister

if he had had any discussions with the US authorities about basing missile defence interceptor sites in the UK was met with the following reply:

The Government have not yet decided whether the United Kingdom requires its own missile defence, and these discussions do not therefore involve specific architectures or basing assumptions.

The day after Parliament reconvened following the recess on 11 October, the Secretary of State for Defence gave a written answer announcing that he had signed an agreement "setting out mechanisms for co-operation with the US in research, development, test and evaluation activities related to missile defence". His statement did not refer to this agreement as 'Annex B' to the 12 June 2003 MOU which led to some confusion about what he was actually referring to. Moreover, he said he was placing it in the Library of the House of Commons but it did not become available until a week later.

This confusion was reflected in the tone of a parliamentary question by Nicholas Soames MP on 21 October in which he said:

It is perhaps a complete coincidence that on Tuesday this week the Secretary of State placed in the Library of the House an annex on research, development, test and evaluation of ballistic missile defence capabilities and systems to a US-UK memorandum of understanding dated 12 June 2003 regarding ballistic missile defence.

On the 28 October, the Minister of Defence, in response to a question by Menzies Campbell MP, once again insisted that:

There have been no discussions between Ministers or officials of either government about the stationing of interceptor missiles in the UK. The Government have not yet decided whether the UK requires its own missile defence, and our discussions with the US on missile defence matters do therefore not involve specific architectures or basing assumptions.

On the same day Mr Hoon responded to a question by Alan Simpson MP, who asked whether parliamentary approval is required before a proposal for the siting of US interceptor missiles in the UK can be authorised, by saying that:

Any decision on the siting of interceptor missiles in the United Kingdom would be open to scrutiny and debate in the normal way. Specific parliamentary approval would not be required.

Similar comments were made by the Defence Procurement Minister Lord Bach on the 3 November in the House of Lords. In response to a question by Baroness Miller about government discussions with the US administration regarding the siting of a US controlled missile defence system in the UK, Lord Bach's response was that:

The government have not yet decided whether we need our own missile defence... That is a decision for the future when the US system has further evolved and we have better information on potential costs and architecture.

And on 6 December, Geoff Hoon responded to a question by Norman Baker MP, thus:

The government have not yet decided whether the United Kingdom requires its own missile defence...It would therefore be premature to consider specific military sites for basing interceptors, or any other part of a missile defence system for the UK.

From these answers it can be determined that the official stance by the government on the involvement of the UK in BMD and the placing of missile defence interceptors on British soil has three clear elements:

1. Discussions with the US on missile defence cover a wide range of issues, but talks have not included the possibility of extending BMD to the United Kingdom.
2. No request has yet been made by the US, and no decision has been made by the UK to allow for an extension of missile defence to cover the UK.
3. Because no decision has been made, there is no need to discuss specifics, such as where the interceptors might be placed and how much this would cost.

MPs have shown signs of weariness with the lack of candour demonstrated by the

Defence Secretary. In a Commons debate on the 21 October, Nicholas Soames MP asked outright:

Are they [the government] in favour of interceptors being stationed on UK soil or not? If not, why not? If so, what is the state of the negotiations?

Mr Soames also made the astute observation that the government had been similarly unforthcoming about details of earlier discussions prior to the decision to upgrade the tracking station at RAF Fylingdales.

In a Westminster Hall debate on UK-US relations on the 3 November, it was the Liberal Democrat MP, Norman Baker, who expressed concern with the government “smuggling through the possible deployment of missiles, whether at Menwith Hill, Fylingdales or anywhere else in the United Kingdom”. Mr Baker also stated his concern that the lack of debate and information was an indication of the government having something to hide.

Also on the 3 November, Lord Bach included a comment about the US administration having offered to extend BMD to the UK. Indeed, this is the basis of the MOUs - to open up opportunities for the UK to buy into US technology and be permitted to field US systems.

What insights do Annex A and Annex B offer?

Annex A - ‘The Upgrade of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning Station, Royal Air Force Fylingdales, Yorkshire, United Kingdom’, was placed in the Library of the House of Commons in December 2003. However, it is not clear who signed it or when it was signed as that page had been removed beforehand. Some of the key extracts from the Annex are as follows:

- “... establishes a program to upgrade the capabilities of the Early Warning Radar (EWR) located at RAF Fylingdales for missile defense purposes;
- “... a key contribution to the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense System (BDMS);
- “... modification of the existing EWR by the installation of new hardware and software to convert the facility to a UEWR”;
- [The UK Participant will] “assist the U.S. Participant in meeting its deadline for completion the upgrade of the RAF Fylingdales radar system by September 2005”; and
- “The UK Participant will retain its responsibilities for the cost of operations and maintenance for the ITW/AA mission”...and...the costs associated with operations and maintenance of the UEWR”.

This document appears to be consistent with the above stated position of the UK government. However, it will be important to follow developments at Fylingdales throughout 2005, particularly to seek information from the government about allocated costs to the MoD, and thus the UK taxpayer.

Annex B - ‘Research, Development, Test and Evaluation of Ballistic Missile Defense capabilities and Systems’, was signed in London by Professor Roy Anderson, Chief Scientific Adviser for the UK and by Lt Gen Henry Obering USAF, Director Missile Defense Agency for the United States on 12 October 2004. Some of the main clauses are as follows:

- “... options for the defense of the U.K. and the implications for the defense of Europe”;
- “...joint development of defense options”;
- “Analyses related to architecture studies of options for the defense of the U.K.”;
- “the extension of the U.S. system to make missile defense capabilities available for the U.K.”;
- “... for the purpose of harmonizing the Participants’ ballistic missile defense requirements”; and
- “The MDA and the U.K. Missile Defence Centre (MDC) will manage all missile defense efforts.....”.

This document indicates that the UK government may have gone further down the road of integration with US plans for missile defence than publicly admitted. It clearly suggests that there will be missile "defence" for the UK and Europe, at some stage. While the activities of the US Missile Defense Agency are relatively well known and openly discussed, the activities of the UK Missile Defence Centre are shrouded in secrecy and its Director, Group Captain Clive Field keeps a very low profile - to say the least.

Print media interest

The UK print media has been very interested in exactly what the MOU and its annexes actually amount to, particularly in light of government secrecy on the issue. Articles and letters in October and November on the discussions about missile defence interceptors on British soil were partly informative and partly speculative - a direct result of the lack of official candour.

In a front-page article in the Independent on Sunday on 17 October 'Star Wars deal places US missiles on UK soil', Severin Carrell and Francis Elliott wrote:

Tony Blair has secretly agreed to allow President Bush to site US missiles on British soil as part of the new US 'son of Star Wars' programme. ...Downing Street has given an agreement in principle to the Pentagon to station interceptor missiles at RAF Fylingdales, North Yorkshire. The confidential deal goes far beyond the official position that Britain is providing enhanced radar provision for the US national missile defence programme.

Sir Menzies Campbell MP, Foreign Affairs Spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, was quoted:

These reports, if true, are a source of grave concern given that a decision appears to have been taken behind closed doors before a full public debate on the costs and strategic implications. ...In view of the potential significance of these events it's extraordinary that MP's don't yet have access to this agreement.

On the same day, Brian Brady wrote in Scotland on Sunday about the missile interceptors being based in Alaska and added:

But the Americans remain keen to extend their shield further afield, preferably in Europe. The UK is their favoured location. ...Ministers expect a similar request for the US to use the 'spy station' at nearby Menwith Hill to support the scheme.

The story was picked up by the BBC, Reuters, the Press Association, the Guardian the Scotsman, and Global Security Newswire in the United States.

One week later on 24 October, the Independent on Sunday ran another story 'Moscow protests at Star Wars plan for UK'. A spokesman for the Russian Ministry, Sergey Lavrov, warned the move would "represent a disturbing new step" in international relations and posed a "possible threat to the security of Russia".

This theme was picked up by Richard Norton-Taylor in The Guardian on the 29 October, 'Britain: the outpost for Son of Star Wars?'. On this occasion the MoD admitted "there may have been discussions" while the Pentagon directed questions to the State Department who, in turn, declined to comment. However, Director of the US Missile Defense Agency Lt Gen Obering said:

I think it's important that we invite our friends, our allies to participate in this with us, and that they can benefit from the coverage the same way we have. We...have plans, and have conducted quite a bit of consultation with our allies, on putting [in] a third interceptor site ... we'll put a site in Europe to expand that coverage to our allies.

On the 7 November, an article by Mark Townsend in The Observer, 'US ready to put weapons in space', discussed the adoption by the US Air Force of a doctrine to establish 'space superiority'.

The new doctrine means that pre-emptive strikes against enemy satellites would become 'crucial steps in any military operation'. ...Internal USAF documents reveal that

seizing control of the 'final frontier' is deemed essential for modern warfare. Counterforce Operations reveals that destroying enemy satellites would improve the chance of victory. ...Space superiority provides the freedom to attack as well as the freedom from attack.

In the article, concern was expressed about Britain's agreement 'in principle' to station US interceptor missiles at Fylingdales as the journalist noted that: "Participation in the missile defence programme means that Britain is already 'locked into' a programme that could ultimately include space warfare".

This article drew harsh criticism from Geoff Hoon in a published letter in The Observer the following week under the heading: 'Missile Mistakes'. The Minister of Defence criticised the article for claiming that any agreements had been made by the government to place interceptors in Britain:

There has been no request from the US to site ground-based interceptors anywhere on UK soil, and therefore no decision, secret or otherwise, has been taken.

Dr Ian Davis, Director of BASIC picked up on this point and in a letter to The Observer on the 21 November, expressed his frustration with Hoon and his blatant refusal to "deny that British officials have had discussions with their US counterparts". Dr Davis then recommended that proposed UK-US missile defence agreements be made available for parliamentary scrutiny, and that the numerous UK and NATO ballistic missile threat assessments be declassified and placed in the public domain.

Meanwhile, the Independent on Sunday published details of an exclusive interview with Lt-Gen Obering that same day. The article confirmed that the US administration wants to base at least ten missiles in Europe for the 'Son of Star Wars' missile defence system within the next five years. Lt-Gen Obering confirmed that the UK was in the running to host the interceptors. He added that the missiles would be purchased in October 2005 and they would choose which European country would host the site soon afterwards.

Once again, BASIC's Director picked up on these comments and Geoff Hoon's earlier unequivocal denial of any talks taking place, in his published letter in the Independent on Sunday on 28 November. He asked:

Perhaps our relationship with the current US administration is so special that its military no longer feels it necessary to inform our Secretary of State for Defence when searching for real estate in Britain? Or perhaps the wool is being pulled over our eyes? Either way I think we should be told.

Conclusion and recommendations

This brief analysis offers an insight into the inner-workings of the MoD on this important issue. Apparently the idea of an 'informed decision' is not something the MoD wish to be party to. Despite government ministers insisting over a period of nine months that the decision to include the UK in US BMD plans must be made before consideration of interceptor sites and other practical matters?if indeed it is to be made at all?the reality has been of continual obfuscation and fence-sitting. Surely, it is appropriate to have the debate about the advisability of deploying missile defence systems - in principle - first?

Of course, the possibility also exists that the government is being more than unwilling to engage in any substantive debate on the issue and is, in fact, not being entirely truthful with either the UK Parliament or the British public.

1. The government should be much more forthcoming about its thinking on missile defence systems and permit some level of parliamentary debate in 2005.
2. Parliamentarians should continue to seek substantive answers from the government on discussions with the US administration and within NATO about developments and projected costs associated with missile defence systems.
3. MoD and NATO Feasibility Studies should be made available for parliamentary scrutiny and comment, and review by independent experts.

4. The activities of the UK Missile Defence Centre should be made more accountable.
5. The Defence Secretary must be held to his word that “any decision on the siting of interceptor missiles in the United Kingdom would be open to scrutiny and debate in the normal way”.