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Mit Unterstützung  
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und Nassau

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## The United Kingdom and the United States' National Missile Defence

### Introduction

Though President Clinton has recently stated his intention not to press on with the deployment of the National Missile Defence system, the presidential candidates Mr. Gore and Mr. Bush, the latter in particular, have expressed intentions to carry on. Early on, the US government has made efforts to win support for NMD among its allies. The support of the NATO partners Britain, Canada and Denmark will be indispensable for the successful deployment of NMD. The key element of America's NMD system in Britain will be the Fylingdales radar station. Though NMD will not depend on this station to detect ballistic missiles approaching from North Korea, without Fylingdales, NMD would be useless against a ballistic missile attack from the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> In order to integrate Fylingdales into NMD, it will need to be upgraded. Furthermore, an additional radar station will have to be built on British territory. Neither of these projects is possible without British consent. The US have not yet formally requested permission to upgrade Fylingdales, but sooner or later the British government will have to make a decision. The United States' dependence on Fylingdales effectively gives Britain a veto power on NMD until the US have found another partner in Europe. How will this power be used? How should it be used?

### Problems

What are the problems related to the decision on the question of Fylingdales?

In the issue of Fylingdales, the British government faces a dilemma. If the UK decides to co-operate with the United States and agrees to the upgrading of Fylingdales radar station, the implications for British security, for international security, and for the cohesion of NATO could be serious.

The implications for British security are twofold. First, British territory would form an important part of NMD without being covered by the system.

<sup>1</sup> On importance of Fylingdales for NMD see Statement of US Secretary of Defence William Cohen, The Guardian, 27 July 2000, "US needs Allies in Defence". House of Commons, Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Annex 54, 24 July 2000, Hansard. House of Commons, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, 28 June 2000, Hansard, Question 195.

The upgrading of Fylingdales would increase the security of the US from ballistic missile attacks, whereas Britain might become a target for missile wielding enemies of the US. This problem could be avoided if Britain became the "junior partner" and received NMD coverage as well. A British NMD, however, would merely replace one problem with a set of other problems: If Britain were the only European NATO-member to be covered by a ballistic missile defence, what would be the implications for Britain's relationship to other European NATO and EU countries? What would be the implications for the Western European Union, for the European Defence and Security Identity, for a Common Foreign and Security Policy? Germany and France have already voiced their opposition against NMD and have encouraged Britain to help form a common European front against NMD.<sup>2</sup> What about the future of Anglo-French and Anglo-German relations if Britain sided with the US rather than her European partners?

The second implication for British security is the uncertain value of Britain's nuclear deterrent. Britain still relies on her nuclear deterrent which has been much reduced recently. If the deployment of an American NMD induced Russia to develop an NMD system of her own, the weak British nuclear deterrent might become useless and British security interests would be damaged accordingly.

There are also implications for international security. A deployment of NMD, in the face of Russian and Chinese opposition, could result in a new arms race if Russia and China increased their nuclear attack capabilities in order to be able to overwhelm NMD. Major progress which has been made by START II, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Non-Proliferation Treaty and related non-proliferation and arms control agreements could be undone by an arms race of this kind.

The implications for NATO of NMD deployment must also be considered. NMD could split the alliance into the US (and Canada), which would be protected from a limited ballistic missile attack, and the other NATO members, which would not enjoy this protection.

If, on the other hand, the United Kingdom chose not to co-operate with the US, not to agree to the upgrading of Fylingdales, the consequences would be unattractive as well. Refusing to support the US in a matter of security could seriously damage the special relationship between Britain and the United States which Britain considers to be very important for her security. Not only would tense British-American relations reduce Britain's attractiveness as a partner in security for the US, they would also make themselves felt in the area of military-industrial co-operation. The British defence industry enjoys a particularly close working relationship with its American counterpart. A British refusal to support NMD could undermine the foundation of confidence on which this industrial partnership is built. This, in turn, could deprive Britain of access to American technology and, consequently, render the prospects for the British defence industry less attractive.

This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma the British government is likely to face soon. What are the positions of the government, the parties and the public in the United Kingdom?

## Positions

### The Government

There seem to be different positions on NMD in the British cabinet. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has repeatedly stressed the importance of arms control and non-proliferation treaties for British security policy. Any move which could undermine these treaties and agreements, and this may include NMD, is viewed as harmful to British security interests. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office places particular importance on the preservation of the ABMT.<sup>3</sup> Robin Cook, though privately reported to be an opponent of NMD, nevertheless, refuses to give a definitive statement as to whether or not the UK will co-operate with the US on NMD. The government, he repeatedly said, would make a decision only when it was formally approached by the US. Circumstances, such as the status of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, would then influence the

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian, 02 August 2000, "Britain's critical Missile Dilemma".

<sup>3</sup> Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 24 July 2000, Hansard. Joint Foreign and Commonwealth Office / Ministry of Defence Memorandum, "US National Missile Defence and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, 18 April 2000, Hansard.

government's decision.<sup>4</sup> It seems that an agreement between the US and Russia on the ABMT would increase chances that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would become more co-operative. Another important consideration in Mr. Cook's view is the special relationship. He stated that there is "a lot of joint collaboration which works to our advantage as much as to that of the United States" and added that the UK would "obviously consider with great care any request from such a close ally".<sup>5</sup> Which consideration, the preservation of the ABMT in its current or amended form, or the special relationship would tilt the balance in favour or against NMD cannot be predicted. Nor can be predicted whether or not Britain will acquire a national missile defence system herself. Though Mr. Cook agreed that a British NMD is not feasible for the moment both for reasons of technology and costs, he did not exclude the possibility that a British NMD might be developed some time in the future.<sup>6</sup> Foreign Affairs Minister Hain, in contrast to his superior Mr. Cook, was quite outspoken in his opposition to NMD.<sup>7</sup> On balance the Foreign and Commonwealth Office relies on integrating "states of concern" such as Iran and North Korea in the international community rather than opting for a military solution.<sup>8</sup>

The Ministry of Defence has been cautious about NMD as well. Though Secretary of State for Defence Mr. Hoon admitted that co-operation on NMD would entail costs in the area of diplomacy and security, he did not rule out co-operation on and possibly involvement in NMD.<sup>9</sup> For the time being, the Ministry of Defence acts in accordance with the Strategic Defence Review, in which the MOD has pledged to monitor the development of the missile threat as well as the technologies countering this threat before coming to a definitive decision. The monitoring programme will end in July 2001.<sup>10</sup> The MOD is fully aware of the importance of the special relationship with the United States for British defence and security. The 1985 Memorandum of Understanding on the Strategic Defence Initiative which envisaged British defence industry a share in contracts for the development of missile defence technology may also induce the MOD to be receptive towards NMD.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the ministry's position on the NMD issue is more co-operative than the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's position.<sup>12</sup> This was confirmed by Secretary of State for Defence Hoon who stated, referring to the upgrading of Fylingdales, that "[T]he history of our close friendship with the US is that we are sympathetic to such requests."<sup>13</sup>

The Prime Minister, like his foreign minister, has been understandably cautious about a definitive statement regarding NMD and Fylingdales. Mr. Blair, like Mr. Cook, repeatedly stated that the UK would continue to solicit the US for finding a solution which would not jeopardise the progress that has been made in non-proliferation and arms control in recent years. Like Mr. Cook, the Prime Minister also showed particular concern regarding the future of the ABM Treaty.<sup>14</sup> Though Mr. Blair's statements have implied unease on the NMD issue, it is hard to say whether he will co-operate with the US.

## Parties

The differences in emphasis between MOD and FCO have prompted the opposition to accuse the government of being split on the NMD issue. The Conservatives have expressed interest in British co-operation on a joint US-NATO ballistic missile defence and criticised the government for remaining cautious on this issue. The Eurosceptic wing of the Conservatives views the NMD issue

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<sup>4</sup> House of Commons, 28 June 2000, Hansard, Questions 166, 201, 203. Joint Foreign and Commonwealth Office / Ministry of Defence Memorandum, "US National Missile Defence and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, 18 April 2000, Hansard.

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, 28 June 2000, Hansard, Question 200.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Question 183.

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian, 22 March 2000, "Ministers split over British Role in US Missile Defence Shield".

<sup>8</sup> Nicola Butler, "Missile Defence Divergence: Britain debates NMD", *Disarmament Diplomacy*, no. 48, page 2.

<sup>9</sup> The Guardian, 02 August 2000, "Britain's critical missile dilemma".

<sup>10</sup> House of Commons, 12 June 2000, Hansard, Column 451 W.

<sup>11</sup> Nicola Butler, "Missile Defence Divergence: Britain debates NMD", *Disarmament Diplomacy*, no. 48, page 3.

<sup>12</sup> International Herald Tribune, 03 August 2000, "U.K. Panel Questions U.S. Missile Shield Plans".

<sup>13</sup> The Guardian, 22 March 2000, "Ministers split over British Role in US Missile Defence Shield".

<sup>14</sup> House of Commons, 24 July 2000, Hansard Column 767.

as a matter of the transatlantic relationship versus the European Defence and Security Identity. Other Conservatives suspect those members of the government opposed to NMD to be anti-American ideologues swimming in the wake of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Regarding the government's efforts to preserve existing arms control and non-proliferation treaties, the Conservatives warn that Russia should not be handed a veto on Britain's defence.<sup>15</sup>

Liberal Democrats and members of the Labour Party, both seconded by a group of British academics, have expressed grave concerns about NMD and expressed unease about the idea that Britain might co-operate with the US in this issue. The main point of criticism was the potentially damaging consequence for arms control and non-proliferation agreements if Russia and China, and possibly also India and Pakistan, would increase their nuclear arsenals in response to NMD deployment. The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty is to be considered of particular importance, since the success of nuclear deterrence has been largely based on this treaty. If Russia would agree to amending the treaty, two problems would emerge: first, China's protests would still not be taken into account. Second, if Russia deployed an NMD of her own, Britain's nuclear deterrent, which has recently been significantly reduced, would lose much of its strategic and diplomatic value. MPs also worry that the US would increase her security at the cost of Britain, since NMD would protect the US only, whereas Britain would contribute to NMD without enjoying its protection. Not only are critics concerned about the strategic consequences of NMD deployment for Britain and the world, they also question the rationale underlying the NMD initiative: One weak spot of the NMD idea is the concept of the "rogue state" or the "states of concern". Critics note that states such as North Korea may have unpleasant regimes as well as a more or less advanced ballistic missile capability, but this would not be an indication of hostile intentions towards either the US or Europe. The interest of Iran and Syria in ballistic missiles, for instance, is more likely to be fuelled by hostility towards Israel than towards European states or the US. Apart from intentions, the ballistic missile capability of states such as North Korea or Iran is regarded as doubtful. Another weak spot of the NMD idea is the degree of protection it may or may not offer against weapons of mass destruction. Even if NMD should be capable of intercepting ballistic missiles, it would be utterly useless against weapons of mass destruction delivered by unconventional means such as suitcases, cargo ship or truck. These unconventional means of delivery, however, are far more likely to be used than ballistic missiles. On the one hand, trucks and cargo ships do not require substantial investments in technology, on the other hand, by using unconventional means of delivery an attack can be carried out without revealing the identity of the attacker, so that the US would not be able to retaliate. There are also suspicions that the American interest in NMD is of a domestic rather than strategic nature. Pork barrel politics and the presidential election campaign are main suspects. The wish to preserve the lead in military technology by considerable investment in NMD-related research and development is also cited as a possible inducement for the US to press for NMD.

Instead of British co-operation on NMD, critics in the Liberal Democratic as well as the Labour Party would rather like to see continued efforts in the field of arms control and non-proliferation agreements.<sup>16</sup>

Criticism of NMD is not limited to Liberal Democrats and Labour. The multi-party Select Committee on Foreign Affairs recently published a report which repeated several of the arguments cited above and concluded with a recommendation to the British government to exert its influence on the US administration to find a more appropriate solution for the problem of proliferation and to state clearly that the US should not expect unconditional British co-operation in case of unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. The Select Committee echoed the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's position that "states of concern" such as North Korea were best dealt with by rapprochement and integration.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> On the Conservatives' position see Nicola Butler, "Missile Defence Divergence: Britain debates NMD", *Disarmament Diplomacy*, no. 48, page 10. BBC World Service, 02 August 2000, "Caution urged on US Defence Plan". *The Times*, 21 June 2000, "Hain cautious over American Missile Shield". House of Commons, 24 July 2000, Hansard, Columns 765-766. House of Commons, 22 February 2000, Hansard, Column 1417.

<sup>16</sup> On the position of Liberal Democrat, Labour and other critics see BBC World Service, 08 July 2000, "UK Protests over US Defence Plan". House of Commons, 03 July 2000, Hansard, Columns 2-3. House of Commons, 07 June 2000, Hansard, Columns 349-350, 377-378. House of Commons, 04 May 2000, Hansard, Column 346. House of Commons, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, 04 April 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, Eighth Report, 02 August 2000.

## The Public

British newspapers have taken a keen interest in the NMD issue as well. The Guardian, representing the centre-left spectrum, is highly critical of NMD. One article speaks of "America's paranoid scheme", the Americans having the same mindset as "the builders of the great wall of China". The Guardian was also apprehensive that NMD "will destabilise the world, and will challenge Nato as an alliance of consenting partners."<sup>18</sup> The Times, representing the conservative part of the spectrum, is far less forthcoming with comments but seems to feel particularly threatened by the prospect that Russia could use the NMD issue to drive a wedge between the US and her European NATO partners.<sup>19</sup>

The British public seems not to be too concerned regarding the NMD issue yet. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Greenpeace, however, have begun to draw attention to the issue.<sup>20</sup>

## Recommendations

Which course of action can be recommended to the UK government in the NMD issue?

Though an uncooperative attitude towards the US in the NMD issue could dent the special relationship, the damage might be smaller than expected. National Missile Defence is an election issue in the US. A pledge to develop and deploy NMD is expected to win votes, particularly by Mr. Bush. Once the election will be won by either candidate, however, it is doubtful whether NMD would be close to the heart of the new President. Therefore, a refusal of European governments to provide the desired degree of co-operation might not have very serious consequences for Britain.

If Britain refused to co-operate on NMD, the UK would gain more than it might lose. The diplomatic and strategic weight of Britain's minimum deterrent would be preserved, relations with France, Germany and other European states in matters of European security would receive a boost. Furthermore, progress in arms control and non-proliferation, once no longer impeded by tensions due to NMD, would be beneficial to international security and would permit Britain to continue her policies on arms control.

President Clinton's resolution to defer the decision on NMD to his successor has provided the British and other European governments with a respite. As long as the US administration does not formally request British permission for the upgrading of Fylingdales, the UK government has room for manoeuvre. How should this opportunity be used? The British government should, in conjunction with other European NATO partners, particularly Denmark and Germany, try to convince its American counterpart to forego the NMD project in favour of continued efforts in the area of arms control and non-proliferation. An American initiative for a START III agreement, for instance, might restore Russia's and China's confidence and interest in arms control. In case the new US administration pressed on with NMD, the UK should continue to draw attention to the implications of this course for international security. The British government could also excuse its lack of enthusiasm for NMD with reference to domestic as well as pan-European opposition.

How good are the prospects for the success of British opposition to NMD? Prospects are not too bad since NMD would be at best a half-way house without the integration of Fylingdales. Prospects would be even better if Britain and Denmark followed a common policy in this issue.

To summarise, it appears that British foreign and security interests call, on balance, for non-involvement of Britain in NMD, and this end might be achieved at limited diplomatic costs.

<sup>18</sup> Quotes from The Guardian, 06 July 2000, "We will all be dragged into America's paranoid Scheme".

<sup>19</sup> The Times, 12 June 2000, "Europe urged by Putin to reject US missile plan".

<sup>20</sup> BBC World Service, 08 July 2000, "UK Protests over US Defence Plans". BBC World Service, 07 July 2000, "Britain ambivalent on US Missile Plan".