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The United Kingdom and Ballistic Missile Defence – Developments since September 11

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National Missile Defence (NMD), also called Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD), has been one of the core issues of President Bush's first months in office. In its determination to press ahead, the Bush administration has tried to overcome Russian and Chinese resistance against its plans, as well as to win the approval and support of its European allies. The events of September 11th have confirmed President Bush's decision to build NMD.¹ The United Kingdom is deeply involved in the NMD issue since military facilities in Britain, the radar stations Fylingdales and Menwith Hill, have long been envisaged to form part of the NMD's early warning system against incoming missiles. Denmark, whose Thule radar station is also needed, is in a similar situation. Though the United States have not yet formally requested the British government to upgrade and integrate these radar stations, there is no doubt that the government will have to make up its mind sooner rather than later on whether or not to cooperate in this matter.

Arguments

The longstanding debate on the NMD issue in Britain had intensified before September 11th. Since the events in New York and Washington, the debate has been pushed into the background, from which it is slowly reemerging. The arguments for and against British cooperation on NMD may be summarized as follows:

Critics have pointed out that the upgrading of Fylingdales radar station would have serious implications for British security, for international security, and for the cohesion of NATO.

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

¹ Times, October 12, 2001, "Bush offers Russia hope of missile deal".

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.² The second implication for British security would be the uncertain value of Britain's nuclear deterrent. Britain still relies on her nuclear deterrent which has been much reduced recently. What about the future of Anglo-French and Anglo-German relations if Britain sided with the US rather than her European partners? 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 would also be 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.

Critics also want the implications for NATO of NMD deployment to 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. Critics have also voiced doubts on the technical feasibility of the system as well as its inability to stop low-tech attacks in the guise of "suitcase bombs" and the like.

Supporters of NMD have pointed out that a refusal of the United Kingdom to cooperate with the US on the NMD issue would have unattractive consequences 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 cooperation. 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. Furthermore, if the US felt unprotected by a missile defence system, it might become less willing to intervene in conflicts abroad.

Since September 11th, both sides have felt confirmed. Like President Bush, the supporters have noted that terrorists who fly passenger aircraft into skyscrapers will lack moral inhibitions to fire ballistic missiles with biological, chemical, or nuclear warheads on the cities of the United States and allied nations such as Britain. The critics have countered this argument with the observation that the terror attacks proved that NMD was aimed at the wrong security problem. NMD, they say, could not have prevented the airborne attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Rather than protecting the United States and, under an extended NMD system, the United Kingdom, against ballistic missiles, the far likelier threat in form of "suitcase bombs" and other technologically less challenging terror instruments ought to be addressed.

Positions

The Government

So far, the British government has avoided to commit itself by noting that the US had not yet formally requested British cooperation. The signals from the British cabinet have been mixed.

² Guardian, August 2, 2000, "Britain's critical missile dilemma".

Neither the Foreign and Commonwealth Office nor the Ministry of Defence were enthusiastic about missile defence for fear that existing and future arms control agreements might be at risk.³ Gradually, members of the cabinet have implied growing support for NMD.⁴ The Foreign Secretary Jack Straw issued a memorandum in support of the case for missile defence in August, so far the strongest support for NMD by a member of the cabinet.⁵ The Prime Minister has been less forthcoming but seems to have warmed to the idea of missile defence as well.⁶ The governments increasingly supportive attitude towards NMD has not received backing by Britain's highest ranking officers. The present chief of defence staff, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce is critical of NMD. He pointed out that NMD might not work, that it was too expensive for the UK to participate in, and that Chinese and Russian objections should not be ignored. The former chief of defence staff, Sir Charles Guthrie added that NATO solidarity should not be sapped by a system which protected some but not all member states.⁷

Since September 11th, the government has not made any clear statements on the issue. The foreign secretary echoed President Bush's conviction that terrorists would not hesitate to use WMD but did not mention missile defence in this context.⁸ Likewise, the Prime Minister has noted the growing threat of WMD without calling for missile defence. In spite of these uncommitting utterances, the "Times" still believe Mr. Blair to be tacitly supportive.⁹

Parties

The frontlines in the debate are not exactly running along party lines. In general, Labour and Liberal-Democrat MPs are highly critical of NMD. Opposition to NMD is most pronounced within the Prime Minister's own party. A memorandum against British participation in NMD was signed by 235 MPs, mostly Labour, in Summer 2001. Conservatives, most notably their new leader Iain Duncan Smith, have accused the government of being split in the NMD issue and called for British participation in NMD, a demand which was confirmed after the terrorist attacks in September 11th.¹⁰

Though a discussion of the NMD issue had been struck off the list at the Labour conference in Brighton in the first week of October, the events of September 11th have not entirely stifled debate for long.¹¹ Critics of NMD, mainly members of Labour, have pointed out that NMD, "a

³ Hansard, July 9, 2001, Col. 522-523; Times, May 4, 2001, "Cook gives MPs a third way to view Bush's missile defence".

⁴ Guardian, August 11, 2001, "Straw backs Bush's star wars plan"; Hansard, July 5, 2001, Col. 406; Hansard, July 19, 2001, Col. 434.

⁵ BASIC, "UK Government Brief on Missile Defence", August 1, 2001.

⁶ News.Telegraph.co.uk, February 18, 2001, "Cook at odds with Blair on Star Wars II"; News.Telegraph.co.uk, February 24, 2001, "Blair pledge to aid Bush on 'son of star wars' "; Auszüge aus einem Interview mit dem britischen Premierminister Tony Blair am 13. Juni 2001 in Brüssel, Raketenabwehrforschung International, <http://www.hsfk.de/abm/ausland/britain/130601.html>, Auszüge einer Pressekonferenz mit George W. Bush und dem britischen Premierminister Tony Blair am 19. Juli 2001 in Halton (England), Raketenabwehrforschung International, <http://www.hsfk.de/abm/bushadmi/bush/190701.html>.

⁷ BBC World Service, October 8, 2001; "Profile: Admiral Sir Michael Boyce"; Guardian, February 12, 2001, "Missile shield would cost UK billions"; Guardian, July 28, 2001, "Military chief casts doubts on star wars".

⁸ Hansard, October 14, 2001, Col. 619; Times, September 15, 2001, "We must stop chemical weapons spread, says Straw".

⁹ Times, September 15, 2001, "Emotional wisdom meets the challenge of tragedy".

¹⁰ Guardian, October 10, 2001, "Bunker mentality"; Guardian, October 10, 2001, "Iain Duncan Smith's speech"; Hansard, July 9, 2001, Col. 524-525; Hansard, July 10, 2001, Col. 651.

¹¹ Times, October 1, 2001, "Hostility to US policy will erupt at fringe events".

sort of Maginot line in the sky"¹² was useless against the kind of threat the United States and Britain were really facing. The arguments that NMD was technologically over-ambitious, harmful to British security and arms control agreements has also been reiterated in the House of Commons.¹³ Mr. Malcolm Savidge, Labour MP and vociferous critic of missile defence, summarized the cause against NMD and expressed the hope that the Prime Minister would use Britain's special relationship, recently confirmed by the joint Anglo-American air campaign over Afghanistan, to convince the Bush administration to abandon the ballistic missile shield. Mr. Savidge also put the missile defence question in a wider context by observing that security for the United States, Britain, and their allies was best to be achieved by a multilateral approach including non-proliferation and arms control, rather than unilateral or bilateral technological fixes.¹⁴ Tory supporters of NMD, in contrast, echoed the opinion held by President Bush as well as the Foreign Secretary Mr. Straw that the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon showed that ruthless terrorists and possibly rogue states would not hesitate to use ballistic missiles when and if they were available to them. A ballistic missile shield would therefore be necessary.¹⁵

Public and Press

Before September 11th, The British public had not been convinced of the need for a ballistic missile shield. In a MORI poll conducted in July 2001, 70% voiced fears that "The development of the US missile defence system will encourage other countries to build more advanced nuclear weapons." About 60% believed that NMD will undermine nuclear disarmament efforts, and 72% thought that cooperation in missile defence would make Britain a potential target. Though more than half expected that a refusal of Britain to cooperate would harm the special relationship, more than two thirds believed that the UK should not cooperate.¹⁶ The effect of the attacks of September 11th on public perception of NMD has yet to be evaluated.

Leading newspapers, the centre-left "Guardian" and the conservative "Times" have frequently commented on the issue. The stance of the "Guardian" has not changed after September 11th. Its comments on NMD, based on common arguments against missile defence, are as disparaging as ever.¹⁷ The "Times" which had been ambiguous about NMD seems to have joined the chorus of the critics since the terrorist attacks.¹⁸ Scholars writing in the "Times", such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Anatol Lieven, wrote that the terrorist attacks clearly demonstrated the uselessness of NMD in realistic threat scenarios.¹⁹ In Schlesinger's opinion, the "terrorist with the suitcase" filled with biological, chemical, nuclear, or radiological devices, was the real threat. NGOs have also tried to draw attention to the issue. Before the terrorist attacks, Greenpeace and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) had

¹² Hansard, September 14, 2001, Col. 629.

¹³ Hansard, October 4, 2001, Col. 724, 727, 731, 807; Hansard, October 8, 2001, Col. 874, 878.

¹⁴ Hansard, October 4, 2001, Col. 761-763.

¹⁵ Hansard, September 14, 2001, Col. 663; Hansard, October 8, 2001, Col. 874-875.

¹⁶ BASIC, Press Release, July 18, 2001.

¹⁷ Guardian, September 13, 2001, "This is Britain's moment"; Guardian, September 28, 2001, "Russia wants ban on space weapons"; Guardian, October 3, 2001, "A conference, not a party"; Guardian, October 3, 2001, "Asymmetric Warfare"; Guardian, October 9, 2001, "Terror turns Bush's focus inside out"; Observer, September 16, 2001, "Too close for comfort".

¹⁸ Times, March 7, 2001, "Bush policies threaten to restart Cold War rivalries"; Times, March 24, 2001, "So now we know it - no more Mr. Nice Guy"; Times, 3 May 2001, "Lasers on the lawn"; J Walsh (Harvard), Times, August 7, 2001, "History says hold fire on missile defence".

¹⁹ Anatol Lieven, Times, September 13, 2001, "New enemies demand new strategies as the Cold War ends"; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Times, September 15, 2001, "The fanatic with a suitcase is our enemy now".

launched a campaign against NMD, which included high-profile demonstrations such as the short-lived occupation of Menwith Hill radar station.²⁰ Since September 11th, these organizations have remarked upon the uselessness of NMD against the terrorist threat.²¹

Recommendations

It seems that a threat scenario in which the United States or the United Kingdom are attacked with ballistic missiles is highly unlikely. Why should potential attackers spend time, money, resources, and effort on complicated ballistic missile technology if low-tech alternatives such as crop-dusting aircraft, small unmanned aerial vehicles, trucks, boats, or the proverbial suitcase would do the job? The attackers of September 11th had certainly no technological ambitions. Apart from the cost of ballistic missile development, even a rogue state would hardly launch a ballistic missile against the United States or the United Kingdom or permit a terrorist group doing so since this course of action would provoke retaliation far more violent than the current air campaign against the Taliban. Not only is NMD useless against the most likely threats, it is also harmful since the Russian and Chinese governments will lose their trust in arms control and disarmament agreements as the Russian government has recently confirmed.²² Does President Bush's offer to share missile defence technology with Russia change the situation? Is it a realistic expectation that the United States will simply give away state-of-the-art technology that will have cost American taxpayers billions of dollars to develop and which has given the United States a lead in this area? Is it likely that the US will practice such a degree of openness after it has opposed the Biological Weapons Convention on account of the threat of industrial espionage? Does Russia have the resources to spare necessary to participate in the system?

The British Prime Minister will soon have to decide whether or not to participate in America's missile defence scheme. Now is the best time for Mr. Blair to come out strongly against NMD. In the days and weeks following the events of September 11th, Britain has demonstrated that she is the United States' most stalwart ally in Europe. With these credentials as a dependable friend, Britain may be in a position to deny cooperation on NMD without putting the special relationship at risk. Since the United States needs the support of both Britain and Denmark in order to complete its radar chain, it would be helpful if the British and Danish governments agreed on a common position in this issue. If British defence industry will be harmed because it will not participate in American missile defence technology, if the special relationship will be dented by Britain's refusal, so be it. That is the price Britain must pay for true security, which is based on multilateral consensus rather than bilateral action.

²⁰ Guardian, July 4, 2001, "Dogged defence is no match for walking missiles".

²¹ CND Press Release, September 15, 2001, "Terrorist attacks on the United States"; Guardian, October 10, 2001, "America's tragedy makes protest taboo".

²² BASIC, Global Quotations, September 24, 2001; BBC World Service, September 17, 2001, "US says Russia rules nothing out"; BBC World Service, September 25, 2001, "President Putin's promises to Washington"; Jonathan Eyal (RUSI), Guardian, September 26, 2001, "Pitfalls for Moscow in new pact".