

The UK's role in NMD: Star Wars on the Yorkshire Moors

During the lifetime of this Parliament, Tony Blair will have to decide whether to let the United States use two bases in Yorkshire as part of President Bush's controversial plan for a National Missile Defence systemⁱ (NMD) or Star Wars, as it has become known.

The development of Star Wars is likely to make the world a more dangerous place. Any attempt by the US to build a missile shield is expected to spur countries such as China into an arms race to try to overcome the shield, and to jeopardise nuclear arms control agreements with Russia.

In the UK, Fylingdales and Menwith Hill air bases are part of current US plans. If they become part of the Star Wars system, they could also become targets in any conflict involving the US.

Menwith Hill

Menwith Hill, the US spy base near Harrogate, is the site for the European part of a new US network of satellites intended to detect and provide early warning information on ballistic missile launches.ⁱⁱ

The US argues that, due to its location, Menwith would play an important role detecting launches from Iraq or Iran, or "accidental" launches from Russia, so that they could be shot down by US missiles. It would relay data from satellites in high orbit over the earth, to the US missile defence battle management centre in Colorado. A similar Ground Relay Station at the Pine Gap US spy base in Australia is intended to detect missiles launched at the US from North Korea or China. Of these countries, only Russia and China currently possess missiles that could reach the US.

In March 1997 the British government gave the go ahead to a US request to upgrade Menwith to incorporate the new network. This involved the construction of two giant golf ball shaped "radomes". The Government says that it gave its consent to the construction of the radomes at Menwith Hill because the new satellite network is *"regarded by the US as necessary regardless of any missile defence proposals and is being pursued as a separate project"*.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the US Air Force, which is responsible for the programme describes it as *"the first step in a credible missile defence"*. According to the US Air Force, the new network *"significantly benefits warfighters"*.^{iv}

Although the radomes have already been built at Menwith Hill, the British Government's consent will be required if the US is to use data relayed by Menwith for national missile defence purposes.^v

Fylingdales

Fylingdales in the North Yorkshire Moors National Park is one of five US ground based early warning radars located around the globe. Also included in this network is Thule, in Greenland.^{vi} The Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) has been based at Fylingdales since 1963 and currently consists of a 40-meter high phased array radar, used for US and NATO early warning purposes.

According to the UK Foreign Office, the contribution of Fylingdales to a missile defence system would be in "*tracking ballistic missiles launched from the Middle East*", although no such missiles currently exist. The Foreign Office says that without the involvement of the upgraded Early Warning Radar at Fylingdales, the effectiveness of the missile defence system in meeting the supposed future missile threat to the United States from the Middle East "*would be likely to be significantly impaired.*"^{vii}.

President Clinton's proposal for a limited National Missile Defence "required" the upgrading of Fylingdales,^{viii} to track hostile ballistic missiles in mid-flight, providing precise data on their trajectory. President Bush is expected to expand the Clinton system to include air, sea and even space-based weapon systems.

Initially Bush's plans would require upgrading the existing early warning radar facilities at Fylingdales by changing the software and information technology hardware used to make the data more precise. In future the US Ballistic Missile Defence Organisation would also like to build an additional, more accurate radar (known as an X-band radar), which would require new buildings at Fylingdales.

Any use of Fylingdales for national missile defence purposes will require the British Government's consent.

Impact of Star Wars on the UK

Undermining Britain's Security

Britain does not share the US's assumption that there is a significant and growing threat from "rogue states". According to Secretary of State for Defence Geoffrey Hoon MP^{ix}, "*The Government have made it clear that, in the light of a series of careful reviews of the United Kingdom's security, we apprehend no immediate threat to the UK from so-called rogue states or the proliferation of nuclear weapons.*" However, President Bush's efforts to develop Star Wars in response to so-called rogue states are undermining strategic stability and Britain's security.

A new arms race?

"If you look at world history, ever since men began waging war, you will see that there's a permanent race between sword and shield. The sword always wins. The more improvements that are made to the shield, the more improvements are made to the sword. We think that with these [anti-missile] systems, we are just going to spur swordmakers to intensify their efforts."

(French President Jaques Chirac, New York Times on December 17 2000)

China and the Far East

In August 2000, a leaked US intelligence report, "Foreign Responses to U.S. National Missile Defence Deployment", warned that deploying a US missile defence system could *"prompt China to expand its nuclear arsenal tenfold and lead Russia to place multiple warheads on ballistic missiles that now carry only one"*. The report said that China would expand its relatively small arsenal of roughly 20 long-range nuclear missiles to a quantity large enough to overwhelm a limited missile defence system. It estimated that **China** could deploy up to 200 warheads by 2015, prompting **India** and **Pakistan** to respond with their own build-ups.^x

North Korea, which the US describes as the country *"most likely to develop ICBMs [intercontinental ballistic missiles] capable of threatening the United States during the next 15 years,"^{xi}* has announced a moratorium on ballistic missile tests until 2003. However, the Bush Administration has suspended discussions with North Korea on issues of ballistic missile testing, development and export policy, and failed to give priority to diplomatic efforts to resolve the historical conflict between North and South Korea. The US approach is far more likely to provoke conflict than to prevent it.

Russia and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty

Russia has reacted strongly against US missile defence plans. President Putin warns: *"Washington cannot realise its plans alone. It needs European help, above all from Britain, Denmark and Norway. These states risk being drawn into a process that will lead to an unpredictable destruction of strategic stability. The price could be very high."^{xii}*

The 1972 US-Russia Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty prohibits missile defence systems that could provide a national territorial defence of the US or Russia. Upgrading the early warning radar or constructing an X-band radar at Fylingdales would violate Articles III, VI and IX of the ABM Treaty. Without the ABM Treaty efforts to move towards nuclear disarmament or remove nuclear weapons from hair-trigger alert are likely to be undermined.

Making Yorkshire a target

According to press reports senior British defence officials have admitted that, *"Britain would become a target of 'rogue' states" if the government allowed the US to use its bases at Fylingdales and Menwith Hill*".^{xiii} Secretary of State for Defence Geoffrey Hoon MP acknowledges that the possibility of Britain becoming a target is *"one of the implications we would have to think through"* before allowing UK bases to be used.^{xiv}

Visiting Professor at the Centre for Defence Studies, Sir Timothy Garden warns: *"The upgraded X-band radar sites would become the forward eyes of an NMD system. They would therefore become the priority targets for any enemy which wished to penetrate a US NMD system. Nor would an attack on them necessarily be carried out by ballistic missile."*^{xv}

UK political reactions

UK politicians on Star Wars

The **Labour** Government has been sitting on the fence in the run-up to the General Election, insisting that it has not decided on whether to allow the use of facilities in Britain because, *"we have not yet received a proposal"*^{xvi} from the US.

Tony Blair has, however, indicated that he agrees with President Bush's position that *"We need to obstruct and deter these new threats [from rogue states] with a strategy that encompasses both offensive and defensive systems."*^{xvii} Secretary of State for Defence Geoff Hoon MP also says that the UK *"would want to be helpful when decisions are taken on how the US intends to move forward."*^{xviii} And the Prime Minister's spokesperson Alistair Campbell has indicated that the UK thinks that Bush's missile defence plans are *"broadly a good idea"*.

Former **Conservative** leader William Hague has spoken out in favour of Bush's plans, saying that Britain should *"contribute its early warning radars as well as much needed political and diplomatic support"*^{xix} for Star Wars.

The **Liberal Democrats** oppose missile defence if it is in breach of the ABM Treaty. According to Defence spokesperson Paul Keetch MP, *"We are deeply concerned that if the USA embarks on that path, Russia will spend billions of dollars that it cannot afford, not to build a similar shield but to increase the number of its multiple warheads to try to overwhelm such a shield. That will lead China, then India, then Pakistan, to upgrade in turn...Britain should use its unique relationship with the United States to warn against such a programme."*^{xx}

There is widespread unease within parliament regarding US plans for Star Wars. Labour MP, Mike Gapes asks, if the US withdraws from the ABM treaty, *"would the Government co-operate with whatever the Americans ask for on radar upgrades and so on? Are we prepared passively to accept*

the new reality because it appears inevitable, even though we may not like it? Do we just sit and watch all the arms control treaties unravel, our own security situation worsen slowly and our relations with Russia deteriorate, damaging European security?"^{xxi}

In 2000, the cross party Foreign Affairs Select Committee recommended that the Government "*impress upon the US Administration that it cannot necessarily assume unqualified UK co-operation with US plans to deploy NMD in the event of unilateral US abrogation of the ABM Treaty.*"

The Committee also concluded: "*We are not convinced that the US plans to deploy NMD represent an appropriate response to the proliferation problems faced by the international community. We recommend that the Government encourage the USA to seek other ways of reducing the threats it perceives.*"^{xxii}

And in May 2001, as the General Election was called 178 Members of Parliament signed an Early Day Motion No. 650, endorsing "*the unanimous conclusion of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, which recommended that the Government voice the grave doubts about NMD in the UK, questioned whether US plans to deploy NMD represent an appropriate response to the proliferation problems faced by the international community, and recommend that the Government encourage the USA to explore all ways of reducing the threat it perceives.*"

Conclusion: Star Wars will Start Wars. The UK Government should have no part in it

The introduction, by the US, of a system intended to shoot down incoming missiles, combined with modernised US nuclear forces, will make conflict more likely and increase the risk that the US may be willing to initiate future wars, including the possible first use of nuclear weapons.

"...missile defence is about preserving America's ability to wield power abroad. It's not about defence. It's about offence. And that's exactly why we need it." (New Republic, Senior Editor Lawrence Kaplan, February 2001)

The inclusion of Menwith Hill and Fylingdales in US missile defence plans is not in Britain's security interest and would put Yorkshire on the front line in future conflicts involving the US. Given the serious implications of President Bush's policies for British and international security, much greater public debate is needed on Star Wars.

President Bush's plans for Star Wars are provoking a new arms race, and are inherently de-stabilising. Star Wars is undermining British security not enhancing it. Tony Blair should be prepared to stand up to Bush and reject the use of bases in Britain for US Star Wars.

ⁱ National Missile Defence (NMD) is now often referred to simply as "missile defence" by the US.

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- ⁱⁱ Defence Minister, John Spellar MP, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 8 Feb 2000, Column: 111W. The network is called the Space Based Infra Red System (SBIRS).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Secretary of State for Defence, Geoffrey Hoon MP, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 Mar 2001, Column: 523W.
- ^{iv} US Air Force, Space and Missile Systems Center, "SBIRS Mission and Systems Overview Brief", 15 March 2001, available from the SBIRS Home page at <http://www.laafb.af.mil/SMC/MT/Sbirs.htm>.
- ^v Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, "US National Missile Defence", 24 July 2000.
- ^{vi} "US National Missile Defence and the Thule Airforce base in Greenland", on www.stopstarwars.org
- ^{vii} Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Foreign Affairs Committee, 2000.
- ^{viii} Leaked ABM Treaty "Talking Points" from the US State Department, January 2000.
- ^{ix} House of Commons, *Official Report*, 15 January 2001, Column 4.
- ^x Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Missile Plan Could Reportedly Provoke China", *New York Times*, 10 August 2000.
- ^{xi} "Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States Through 2015".
- ^{xii} *The Times*, 20 June 2000.
- ^{xiii} Richard Norton-Taylor, "UK at risk of 'rogue' reprisals if it gives space to US missile shield", *The Guardian*, 7 April 2001.
- ^{xiv} Richard Norton-Taylor, "Son of Star Wars", *Guardian*, 19 April 2000.
- ^{xv} Sir Timothy Garden, "Looking at National Missile Defence from Europe", Paper for the Danish Foreign Policy Committee, 25 April 2001.
- ^{xvi} Tony Blair, Prime Minister's Question Time, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 17 Jan 2001: Column 342.
- ^{xvii} 'Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair,' The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Camp David, Maryland, February 23, 2001.
- ^{xviii} Pentagon News Briefing, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld Joint News Conference with Secretary of State for Defence Geoffrey Hoon of the United Kingdom, 21 March 2001.
- ^{xix} William Hague speech to the American Enterprise Institute, January 2001.
- ^{xx} House of Commons, *Official Report*, Defence in the World Debate, 4 May 2000.
- ^{xxi} House of Commons, *Official Report*, National Missile Defence Debate, 17 May 2000: Column 105WH.
- ^{xxii} Foreign Affairs Committee, "Weapons of Mass Destruction", 407 of 1999/2000, 2 August 2000.