

Consistency and Change in British Approaches to Missile Defence

by **Dr Jeremy Stocker**
Director of Studies, **CDISS**

Despite the apparent novelty of the subject, defence against ballistic missiles has been a persistent topic in British defence policy for well over half a century. The UK had to respond to the threat, or potential threat, of ballistic missile attack in three distinct episodes.

The first was the German V-2 rocket campaign in 1944-5, which made Britain the first country ever to be subject to this form of attack. During the Cold War the single greatest security threat to the UK was the large and developing Soviet nuclear-armed missile force, though it was not until the early 1960s that the West had a reasonably accurate picture of Soviet capabilities. Finally, since the closing years of the Cold War onwards, there has been the widespread proliferation of generally smaller, slower and usually conventionally-armed missiles to a large number of Third World countries. Iraq's use of ballistic missiles during both Gulf Wars was just one manifestation of this process.

Britain was also the first country to devise a scheme for active defence against ballistic missiles. In August 1944, even before the first attacks against London, the Army produced a plan using a variety of early-warning radars and existing anti-aircraft (AA) guns. None of the various versions of the plan were tried, however, as by March 1945 the V-2 had been defeated by the advance of Allied ground troops across western Europe. This pattern was to be repeated in Iraq in 2003.

The UK did conduct research into missile-based active defence during the mid- to late-1950s using the nuclear-tipped version of the existing Bloodhound missile, to be followed by a dedicated Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) interceptor. These efforts proceeded in parallel with similar, but larger-scale, American efforts but unlike the US Britain soon came to the conclusion that the formidable technical challenges were beyond the country's scarce financial resources.

Thereafter the UK, earlier and more comprehensively than the US, adopted the view that the only credible response to the Soviet threat was an assured retaliatory capability. For a small, densely-populated island like Britain active defence, however effective, had

little to offer in the face of a nuclear-armed threat numbered initially in the hundreds and latterly in the thousands.

The problem was compounded by the need to deter a much larger and more heavily-armed opponent. This gave several added dimensions to Britain's deterrent posture. One was the importance of the so-called 'Special Relationship' with the United States, the latter being the ultimate guarantor of Britain's security. The Special Relationship has always been at its most special in relation to nuclear and intelligence matters, both of vital relevance to missile defence. British governments have also laid a heavy stress on non-proliferation means, including but not only arms control, as a way of stabilising a deterrent relationship with the Soviet Union whilst preserving the credibility of the country's own 'minimal' nuclear deterrent.

This basic posture has left a large historical legacy for British attitudes towards missile defence after the end of the Cold War, despite the completely altered strategic landscape. The last 15 years have seen the end of bi-polar (nuclear-armed) hostility and the emergence of a safer, but less stable world. The UK has adopted a new expeditionary strategy, while at the same time there has been a renewed American enthusiasm for active missile defence against non-Russian threats.

Britain has retained much of its former scepticism about the technical and financial feasibility of active defence, though its experience with the Chevaline Polaris Improvement Programme gives it a unique insight into the challenges entailed in defence penetration as well. 'Strategic Stability' has been an enduring concern, though with the end of the Cold War no-one seems able to define just what that phrase now means.

A particular concern was the effect of US missile defence efforts on the future of the 1972 ABM Treaty. This was always a pivotal item in the UK's approach to BMD. It underpinned many other arms control agreements from the 1970s and -'80s, and, just as important, by severely limiting missile defence deployments helped to ensure the credibility of the UK's own small nuclear deterrent. Significant and unwanted consequences were foreseen if America's wish to deploy defences forced a withdrawal from the Treaty.

That withdrawal did in fact take place in 2002. However, none of the feared consequences took place. Indeed, US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was accompanied by another agreement between Washington and Moscow further reducing offensive nuclear systems, contrary to received wisdom which had widely predicted

the precise opposite. As British concerns about US missile defence had largely been based on the wish to see the Treaty preserved, when it was abrogated anyway, but without the expected fallout, many UK worries about BMD itself were assuaged.

Prior to US withdrawal the then junior Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain said "I don't like the idea of a Star Wars programme, limited or unlimited." Once the Treaty was no more, the Foreign Secretary himself, Jack Straw admitted that "There is an overwhelming case for missile defence in principle." He later went on to say that "...we in this country have long recognised the case, in appropriate circumstances, for measures of missile defence." A profound, if little noticed, change had occurred in official British thinking on the subject of ballistic missile defence.

The UK is now faced with three distinct, if related BMD issues for the future. One is the 'theatre' (or tactical) defence of deployed forces. This is now quite uncontentious, though with a reduced emphasis on air defence as a whole it is unfunded and competing with more pressing needs for scarce defence resources.

The second issue is the strategic territorial defence of the UK, within a wider NATO-Europe context. Much of Europe will come within range of non-Russian threats before the UK, so an Alliance-wide approach makes sense, though a bilateral arrangement with the US to extend the coverage of the American's own system is a possibility.

Finally, there is British participation in US defences themselves. Approval has already been given for the early warning radar at Fylingdales in North Yorkshire to perform this role, and a similar arrangement for the satellite ground station at Menwith Hill is likely. Should the US request to station interceptors in Britain, this would bring together US and UK defence needs, but the clear American preference is for a site in eastern Europe.

As in the past, the British Government does not see a pressing need to acquire defences for the UK itself, and is content simply to respond to US initiatives. The residual controversies surrounding the subject, however, have lost little of their force and we can expect missile defence, currently overshadowed by events in Iraq, to return to the political agenda.