

US 'missile defence' in Europe: who needs it?

David Webb suggests current US plans for missile defence may cause more problems than they solve.

The controversy surrounding US plans to position components of its missile defence system in Central Europe has attracted a lot of media coverage in recent weeks – but little discussion or debate in the parliaments of Europe, despite concerns about the risks and doubts about the benefits.

New European bases

The Bush administration claims that it needs new bases in states formerly allied to the Soviet Union in order to protect most of Europe and continental US from a potential long range missile attack by Iran.

It plans to install a radar system in a forward position somewhere close to Iran in order to provide early-warning and cueing information for an enormous X-band radar installation, which is currently situated at the Missile Test Range in the Pacific. The X-band radar would be upgraded and moved to a site near Prague in the Czech Republic.

X-band radars operate in the gigahertz frequency range. They are designed to resolve details of targets to within 0.2-0.3m with the aim of differentiating warheads from decoys. Information from these radars would be used to target accurately around ten missile interceptors, to be located at a site in northern Poland. These installations would be in addition to the two bases at Fylingdales and Menwith Hill in North Yorkshire, which the US is already permitted to use for missile defence.

When Defence Minister Des Browne announced in July that permission had been given for the US to use the electronic surveillance base at Menwith Hill for missile defence, it came as no surprise. A relay station was already established there for space-based, infra-red early warning and tracking satellites; most of the required equipment was therefore installed. The willingness of the UK government to fall in line with US plans was also apparent, illustrated by various news reports and statements in the House of Commons. Many of them point to ongoing discussions with the US on how the UK can become more involved – even by offering to host interceptors.

Yet none of these decisions has been based on any discussion or debate in parliament. It is possible that the government considered the two-month

'consultation period' in 2001 sufficient, which followed the US request to upgrade the radar at Fylingdales. If so, it was an understated affair: the deadline for comments was announced at short notice and coincided with the Christmas holiday period. Despite the large number of objections (including one from SGR) that the Blair government nonetheless received, the plan went ahead, suggesting that the decision had already been made. The upgrade at Fylingdales is now complete. As soon as testing is concluded, it will become integrated into US missile defence.

This lack of debate is typical and widespread across Europe. Not only that, countries are making their own decisions without consultation with their European partners, despite the fact that all European countries will be affected by the decision of any individual state to participate in the scheme.

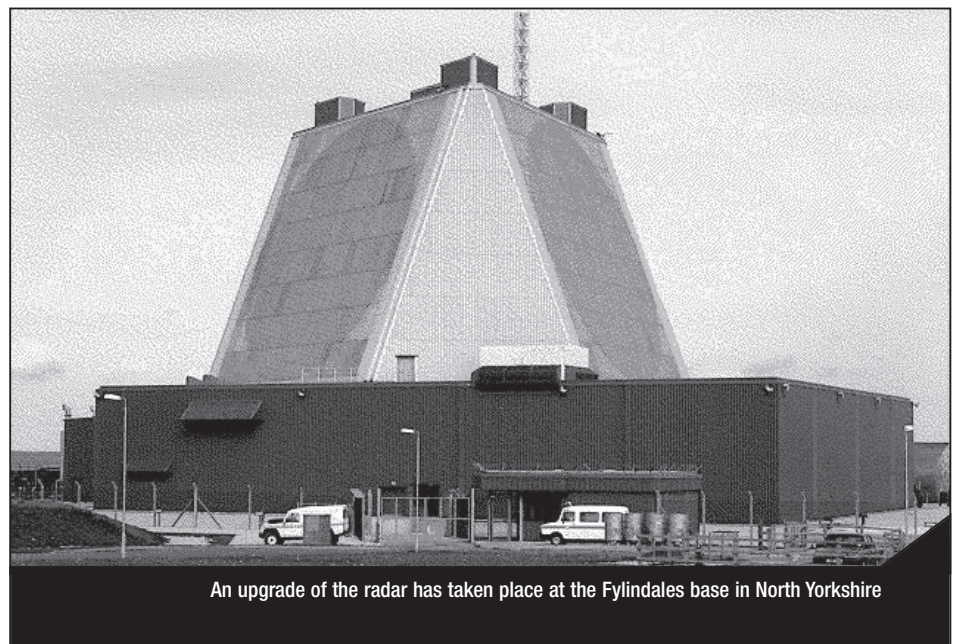
Tension with Russia

These moves are also causing considerable problems with relations between the US and Russia. Although the US insists its proposals are only aimed at Iran, President Putin has expressed strong reservations, indicating that he sees the deployment to be at least partly directed towards Russia. He has suspended Russia's participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty¹. He has also threatened to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty – which eliminated a whole class of nuclear weapons from Europe² – and to aim Russian missiles at European targets once

again. Speaking in Lisbon in October, the Russian president even compared the current situation with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Why are the Russians so concerned? Joseph Gerson has recently described³ how every US president since Truman has threatened to use nuclear weapons in order to get its way on some issue or another. If missile defence is viewed as a system that could allow the US to threaten to use nuclear weapons and reduce the fear of retaliation, then it is not surprising that certain nations, faced with a US pre-emptive policy and doctrine of 'full spectrum dominance', are suspicious of its motives.

In a recent article⁴ US scientists George Lewis and Ted Postol examine how the Russian military might analyse the situation. They suggest that the Russians could readily conclude that, although the system may be deployed against Iranian missiles, it could also be used to counter Russia's nuclear weapons. They point out that current plans for a European missile defence system could not cope with the number of missiles in the Russian arsenal. However, a National Security Presidential Directive signed by President Bush in December 2002 states that current deployment of missile defences is just a starting point for future improved and expanded systems. In addition, Lewis and Postol claim that the two-stage interceptors planned for Poland are derivatives of the Minuteman series of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and, if fitted with a kill vehicle (the component that seeks and intercepts the oncoming



An upgrade of the radar has taken place at the Fylingdales base in North Yorkshire

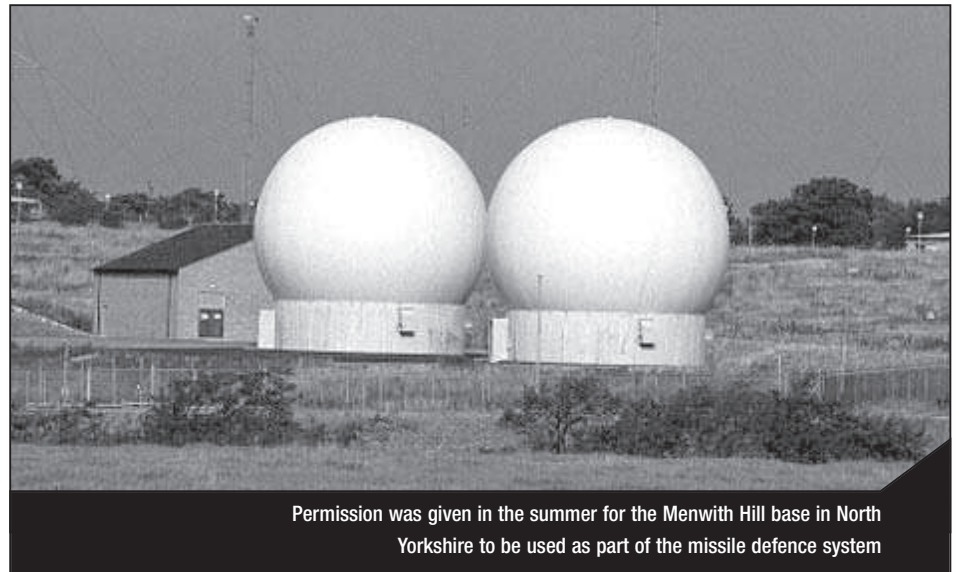
missile), rather than a nuclear payload, could reach speeds 40% greater than a Russian ICBM on its way to the US.

Therefore it is possible that Poland-based interceptors could catch SS-25 ICBMs launched from silos situated west of the Ural mountains. Postol had previously presented this analysis at a seminar in Washington in August⁵ when he pointed out that the US Missile Defence Agency had overstated the speed of Russian ICBMs by 15% and underestimated the speed of proposed US interceptor missiles by 30% to demonstrate that the system posed no threat to Russian missiles.

Whether the US has Russia in its sights or whether Russia is being oversensitive, the basis for tension is plain. In addition, polls and press reports have made it clear that while the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic are fully behind the US proposals, the citizens of those countries are far from happy.

One or other of these factors may have encouraged President Putin to suggest in May that instead of installing a new radar in the Czech Republic, the US could use a Russian early-warning radar in Azerbaijan. In June, he extended this offer to include a second, more modern early-warning radar at Armavir, Russia. He also stated that Russia would not object to US interceptors being stationed in Iraq, Turkey or other southern European locations and suggested that Russia would be willing to run joint early-warning centres in Moscow and Brussels. His proposals focused on the co-operative monitoring and assessment of the Iranian missile threat and eliminated the potential threat to Russian ICBMs from Europe-based interceptors. Radars in Armavir and Azerbaijan are close to Iran and could be enhanced by installing mobile X-band radars. In addition, such a configuration could cover all of Europe whereas current US plans need to be augmented by other, short-range systems to fill in gaps.

The response from the US has been ambivalent. Speaking in Prague in October after meeting the Czech Prime Minister, Defence Secretary Robert Gates said that the US would consider tying together activation of the sites in Poland and the Czech Republic with definitive proof of the threat from Iran. However, President Bush, speaking in Washington, restated US claims that the planned system is necessary to guard against an imminent threat, and overturned the acknowledgement that any Iranian missile threat is unproven.



Permission was given in the summer for the Menwith Hill base in North Yorkshire to be used as part of the missile defence system

Alternatives to missile defence

The US appears to be sticking to an uncompromising line, but other issues may catalyse a revision. As this article went to press, the Pentagon was having difficulty getting funding for the scheme approved through Congress.

If it fails, there are other approaches the US and UK governments could consider. Rather than fuel an arms race by developing missile defence systems that encourage more missiles to be built, we could work collaboratively to eradicate the need for them in the first place.

If we are concerned about nuclear weapons proliferation we can vigorously pursue a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, develop new international monitoring systems, and abide by and strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If we are worried about ballistic missiles we can negotiate a new Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty or a missile test ban, and work for missile-free zones. We could make a real attempt to rid the world once and for all from the threat of nuclear annihilation by seriously pursuing a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

This would seem to be a more sensible and sustainable way of behaving, one that would avoid fuelling the suspicion and distrust caused by the current strategies, and that would have benefits for all.

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References

1. The 1990 CFE treaty signed by members of NATO and the former Warsaw Pact countries established parity in major conventional forces and armaments. For more information, see: <http://www.state.gov/t/ac/rls/fs/11243.htm>
2. The 1987 INF treaty between the USA and the Soviet Union removed all nuclear weapons and their delivery systems with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. Nearly 2,700 missiles were eliminated. For more information, see: <http://www.state.gov/www/global/arms/treaties/inf1.html>
3. Gerson, J (2007). *Empire and the bomb: how the US uses nuclear weapons to dominate the world*. Pluto Press.
4. Lewis, G N and Postol, T A (2007). *European missile defense: the technological basis of Russian concerns*. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2007_10/LewisPostol.asp
5. Somers, B (2007). *Weapons expert says proposed missile defense capable of intercepting Russian ICBM*. AAAS. <http://www.aaas.org/news/releases/2007/0924missile.shtml>
Postol's original presentation is at http://russianforces.org/files/BriefOnEastEuropeMissileDefenseProposal_August24,2007_FinalReduced.pdf

Further reading

Center for Defense Information missile defence web pages: <http://www.cdi.org/program/index.cfm?programid=6>

Union of Concerned Scientists missile defence webpages: http://www.ucsusa.org/global_security/missile_defense/

US Missile Defence Agency website: <http://www.mda.mil/>

Yorkshire CND 'Star Wars' web pages: <http://cndyorks.gn.apc.org/md/news.htm>