

Bush commitment to US National Missile Defense causes international protests

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The inauguration of George W. Bush as US president comes amidst growing international disquiet at the new administration's commitment to the National Missile Defense (NMD) system.

The proposed NMD "shield" is supposed to protect the US from any incoming missiles, fired by so-called "rogue states", by shooting them down before they reach American airspace. It has been dubbed "son of Star Wars," after Ronald Reagan's abortive 1980s programme to place satellites in space that could shoot down incoming missiles. The NMD scheme has been condemned by Russia and China for breaching the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty and threatening a renewed international arms race, while several European powers say in addition that it undermines the integrity of NATO.

On the eve of Bush's inauguration, China "leaked" information that it was involved in talks with Moscow to form a "strategic alliance" over arms and space programmes. No specific details were given on the proposed alliance, which is not expected to be formalised for months, if at all.

Nonetheless, the Sino-Russian discussions indicate the depth of unease aroused by the NMD plan. Russia and China argue that whereas the ABM treaty was aimed at preventing any single country gaining nuclear supremacy, the proposed NMD shield would enable the US to launch a "first strike". Beijing and Moscow fear they could find themselves on a list of US-designated "rogue states" in the future.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that if the US violates the ABM treaty, Moscow will consider all other arms control agreements null and void, whilst a Chinese foreign ministry statement said there would be "broad and deep negative consequences" to world stability if the plan were implemented.

The NMD shield system, which could cost upwards of \$60 billion (more than the entire sum paid out globally in foreign aid in 1997), has also come under attack for its technological problems. Only three tests out of a planned 19 have taken place so far; of these two failed and the other was only a partial success.

Regardless of cost and technical shortcomings, the incoming Republican administration has made plain it intends to proceed with the scheme. Bush's new Defense Secretary Donald

Rumsfeld, a Cold War "hawk", is said to have dismissed the ABM treaty as "ancient history". He argues that NMD should be at the core of a new, overhauled, US defence strategy. Colin Powell, the new US Secretary of State, stressed his commitment to developing NMD during his confirmation hearing. He told senators at the hearing that whereas the US would "consult" its allies on the plan, it had an obligation to move forward as quickly as possible.

Powell also said the Bush administration would move ahead with its plans for a US Theater Missile Defense system, an allusion to a joint US-Japan system in East Asia, clearly aimed at the Chinese. During the hearings, Powell rejected the view of the outgoing Clinton administration that China should be viewed as a "strategic partner". "We will treat China as she merits. A strategic partner, China is not," he said. "China is a competitor, a potential regional rival but also a trading partner ... but China is not an enemy and our challenge is to keep it that way."

Within hours of Powell's statements, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said, "China's government and people are strongly opposed to the inclusion of Taiwan into the US Theater Missile Defense system. If the United States is bent on its plan to include Taiwan in its TMD system, it will constitute a wanton interference and threat to Chinese sovereignty and security."

Russia's and China's objections have found support amongst European leaders. Although Bush had said that the NMD shield could "provide protection for America's allies", it is not intended to cover Europe.

France has been the most open opponent of the new system. While Washington was preparing its inaugural festivities, French Defence Minister Alain Richard flew to Moscow for talks. Afterwards, Sergei Ivanov, secretary of Russia's Security Council, said the two countries had discussed "joint efforts by our countries in maintaining the [1972] treaty on Anti-Ballistic Missiles".

Ivanov complained, "The US administration has not put forward concrete plans or proposals on a national missile system and has not offered any proposals to its allies or partners, including Russia, on consultations over the issue." He stressed that Russia and France were seeking a common

approach towards the US plans. Once concrete proposals on NMD were set out by the US, Ivanov continued, "We will carefully examine and conduct consultations with the French, taking maximum account of the positions of both sides."

International tensions over the NMD project are creating severe problems for the Blair government in Britain. Traditionally Britain has likened its international role to that of a "bridge" between the US and Europe, enabling them to march in step. But growing divisions between the two, over both trade and military issues, threaten to undermine this strategy.

Open opposition by the British government to the NMD project would threaten its "special relationship" with the US. This originated during the Cold War, when the UK was America's closest European ally, and continued in the 1980s under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan. Britain continued to provide military assistance to the US—allowing the stationing of US Cruise missiles at Greenham Common and providing refuelling stops for American warplanes during the 1986 bombing of Libya.

The arrangement allowed Britain to "punch above its weight" in international circles, particularly in Europe, where it had already been eclipsed economically by Germany, and increasingly by France. Blair had sought to continue the "special relationship" under the Clinton administration, participating enthusiastically in the US-led offensives in Yugoslavia and Iraq.

A fully developed NMD system would be dependent on US military installations sited in the UK, and use of the Fylingdales early warning base in North Yorkshire is considered particularly crucial. Opened in 1962 as part of the US Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, it has been earmarked for upgrading under NMD to provide vital mid-course tracking data that could assist US-based radars in guiding an interceptor missile onto the target. Another site of potential importance is Menwith Hill communications centre, also in Yorkshire, currently used to receive and pass on satellite information to US command centres. Given the critical role of such UK facilities, British opposition to NMD would not pass lightly in Washington.

However, open British support for the missile project could risk isolation within Europe, reducing Britain's influence on the continent still further. It could also prove extremely unpopular in Britain, where complaints have already been voiced that although the UK is expected to provide support for the NMD shield, it is not protected by it and could find itself an easy target for America's opponents.

The government is said to be deeply divided on the issue, as is political opinion generally.

A committee of British members of parliament has strongly criticised the missile scheme. On January 14, in the *Observer* newspaper, former Labour Defence Minister Peter Kilfoyle called on other government members to oppose the project, which he described as "a dangerous flight of fancy".

Fault lines over NMD increasingly parallel those regarding possible British adoption of the European single currency, the euro. In a speech on January 11 designed to establish the Conservatives as the staunchest allies of President Bush and the US, Tory leader William Hague pledged his party's support for the missile plan. Hague insisted that Britain should be the foremost supporter of NMD, and warned European countries not to force the US to go it alone. A purely American shield, he said, "would heighten the fear that America's enemies would instead target vulnerable European allies".

In the same speech Hague attacked European Union (EU) plans for a new rapid reaction force, calling it the "further trappings of statehood". Hague's remarks were also made with a view to the upcoming general election, probably taking place in the next four months. Labour ministers attacked the Conservative leader for "politicking" over such a "sensitive issue" and stressed that the government would not make a decision on whether to support the NMD project until Bush had made his intentions clear.

Privately, however, Blair had stressed to Clinton the need for the US to secure some form of international agreement for the project. Mindful that the new Republican administration may not be so receptive to such entreaties, Blair despatched two of his most senior representatives to meet the Bush team last week. The *Guardian* newspaper reported Monday that the unannounced official meetings had "breached protocol," as President Clinton was still in office.

However, in separate meetings on January 15 and 16, Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, and foreign affairs adviser John Sawers reportedly spoke to General Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser. A spokesman said that the main issues for discussion concerned the US proposed National Missile Defense plan and the European Rapid Reaction Force.



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