

Thatcher forced onto SDI bandwagon

by Laurent Murawiec

Britain became the first NATO nation on Oct. 30 to sign a government-to-government agreement with the United States on its participation in the Strategic Defense Initiative. The step is to be welcomed, regardless of the peculiar circumstances under which it was taken, especially since it clears the way for other European nations, West Germany in particular, to jump on the SDI bandwagon. Of equal interest is the manner in which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government was compelled, in spite of itself, to initial an agreement that makes it party to the SDI.

Mrs. Thatcher has been trapped in the complex games of her own rhetoric: Since President Reagan's March 23, 1983 speech, H. M. Government's attitude had been to pay reluctant lip-service to the "prudence" of "conducting some research" into space defense, while trying to impose a crushing burden of qualifications and restrictions on the SDI. In short the SDI should not suppress or weaken "deterrence" (Mutually Assured Destruction, or MAD), should be restricted to research—whose testing, nevermind deployment, should "respect" arms-control treaties (interpreted as *a priori* banning strategic defense)—and should be negotiated with both friend and foe.

In the long Anglo-American negotiations on British participation in the SDI, British Defense Secretary Michael Heseltine, whose opposition to space defense was well known, had formulated exorbitant pretensions, such as a fixed amount of \$1.5 billion in contracts to be allocated to British firms, and further demands concerning the transfer of technologies. When he met with his American counterpart Caspar Weinberger in Brussels on Oct. 30, the result of their extended talks was indeed the initialing of a memorandum of understanding, but without any guarantees attached. And as the London *Guardian* wrote the day after, Heseltine's "ultimate bargaining counter—refusing to support Star Wars—could not be played because Mrs. Thatcher had already promised British support, provided that research was clearly separated from deployment." Weinberger's briefing to NATO defense ministers presenting Soviet arms-control treaty violations, also eliminated the British government's Chamberlain-like

denials of Soviet violations, which had featured prominently in transatlantic disputes about SDI. Reports from Brussels indicated that the talks had been what diplomats would call "frank and productive"—that Weinberger drew the line and compelled the British ally to drop once and for all the passive resistance and active foot-dragging of Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe—who quietly orchestrated the opposition of other NATO foreign ministries.

A revealing twist to Thatcher's "pro-SDI" position was given one week later, when the Pentagon announced its selection of the \$4 billion French RITA battlefield communication system, over the competing British Ptarmigan bid. Outside the cost gap—Plessey's system would have cost 70% more than the French one—there had been a lot of political interference in the U.S. Department of the Army's choice. Mrs. Thatcher had boldly written a much-publicized personal letter to President Reagan, evoking Britain's support for the SDI and superior loyalty to the alliance to demand that the "right" choice be made. Failure to make that choice, it was hinted, might lead Britain to drop support for the SDI. The final decision and "the manner of the losing that compounds the misery . . . make both Britain and Margaret Thatcher look foolish," wrote the London *Times'* defense correspondent.

As soon as Washington's decision became known, Heseltine, speaking from Malaysia, "questioned the likely effectiveness of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative," according to press reports. "He expressed doubts that SDI would not provide a foolproof defense against missiles and that the Soviet Union could increase its offensive weapons. Threats from low-flying missiles remained. He said it was prudent to carry out research into SDI, but it would take many years before a reliable system could evolve." That was one display of foul mood. The *Daily Telegraph* blared, presumably not without encouragement from the Foreign Office, "Setback Leaves Number 10 Cool to SDI." This was "expected to be a factor when the Government considers its participation in America's space defense program." The leaks rashly asserted that the Weinberg-Heseltine agreement "was only provisional. It has to be approved by Mrs. Thatcher and the Cabinet and their enthusiasm will not, in the circumstances, be increased by the absence of a figure for the value of the work that will come Britain's way."

After a few days, however, poise has been restored: Speaking at the Lord Mayor's Banquet, Mrs. Thatcher insisted, "You can't hold back scientific and technological advance. Throughout history, the response to a new offensive weapon has been a new defense. Moreover, the Soviet Union has for some years been devoting a massive effort to defense against nuclear weapons." Even though she insisted on "handling the results of research on both sides in accordance with treaty obligations," Mrs. Thatcher has been compelled to take the SDI door after having expected to "whittle down" the SDI. Her failure exemplifies the development of the SDI

process: Even its Western opponents are forced to jump on board lest they utterly discredit themselves.

If Whitehall and the "strategic studies community" in London and Oxbridge are moody about their defeat, large sectors of British industry aired their contrary sentiments at a conference held in London on Nov. 4-5 by the *Financial Times*. Michael Clark, deputy chairman of British defense contractor Plessey, extensively refuted the SDI opposition (see *Documentation*.)

Standard-bearers of the "official" Foreign Office line, such as Oxford historian Michael Howard and the former scientific adviser to MI6, the British secret service, Prof. R.V. Jones, only served to demonstrate the widening gap between the strategically motivated rejection of the SDI by the Whitehall appeasers, and those in industry who are not reconciled with either the de-industrialized status of Britain, or the "balance of power" game.

Documentation

The view from industry

The keynote address at the Financial Times' conference "The SDI, Eureka and Industry," held in London on Nov. 4-5, was delivered by Mr. Michael Clark, deputy chairman and deputy chief executive of the leading British defense contractors Plessey PLC. Mr. Clark, a former officer in the Grenadier Guards, worked for Ford Motors and Bendix Aviation before creating Plessey's Electronics Division in 1950. He has been the company's second in command since 1975.

When President Reagan made his now famous "Star Wars" speech on March 23, 1983, he evoked a wide spectrum of response. . . . Those ordinary Americans who understood him to say that it had now become scientifically practicable to consider placing a defensive umbrella over the United States, which would reduce or eliminate the chance of a successful nuclear attack, enthusiastically supported the proposal. More sophisticated listeners reacted in quite different, and, in some cases, distinctly hostile ways. No doubt that they had their good reasons, but I believe, and shall argue today, that the response of the ordinary people contained wisdom which ought not to be disregarded.

. . . It is argued by some that to date, the policy [of mutually assured destruction] has successfully guaranteed the peace of the world. Perhaps that is true, but what a hazardous and terrifying peace if it depends on maximizing the destructive effect in the event that it is broken! . . . A peace lived on the brink of disaster seems to most altogether too dangerous to be the permanent state of things, hardly

worthy of the name of peace at all, and surely in this they are right.

It is even doubtful . . . whether the 1972 [ABM] Treaty did achieve the stabilization of the international defense scenario so often claimed for it. The progressive reduction in numbers of nuclear weapons to which—let us not forget—it was supposed to be a preliminary never in fact took place. On the contrary, the level of nuclear armament has increased, but much more on the Warsaw Pact side. The West is now weaker than at the time the Treaty was first drafted. . . .

The intentions of the Treaty have been evaded both in the letter, with such projects as the building of the infamous Krasnoyarsk phased-array radar, and in the spirit, with their very extensive "undergrounding" of the organs of Soviet Government, and their anti-satellite programs, arguably in advance, so far, of those of the West. . . .

The SDI is in fact a proposal for a major advance in defensive military technology, which will impact almost as much on conventional war as on nuclear. The whole thrust of SDI thinking, for example, is towards the detection and destruction of ballistic missiles in their launch phase: if successful, it may be quite as useful for destroying weapons of short range as of long, and the techniques of electronic surveillance and of command and control which it will demand must also assuredly revolutionize the conduct of so-called "conventional wars." . . .

If you follow me this far, you will, I am sure, understand why I consider it so very important that Europe, and specifically the United Kingdom, should play a part in the SDI; why indeed, I believe that it should be a program to meet the needs of the West as a whole, and not simply those of the United States . . . if we are facing, in the longer term, a radical change in the principles and philosophy of the conduct of war, then not to participate would leave Europe wretchedly vulnerable and ultimately defenseless. . . .

European participation in SDI will not occur without an affirmative program by the U.S. administration to bring this about. . . .

The history of the last quarter century holds out no substantial evidence of success in negotiated arms reduction to date, so the prospect of SDI is unlikely to make things worse. . . . If a defensive military strategy can, in due course, be implemented, the importance of arms control will vanish. Once adequately defended, we shall have no need to seek to reduce our potential enemy's nuclear stocks: they will have become, as President Reagan has said, irrelevant. The effluxion of time will carry them away, as their costly obsolescence becomes ever more apparent. . . .

The engineering challenge presented by SDI is a very large one, but no larger, I dare say, relative to the current virtuosity of the technical community, than were the Manhattan Project or the program to put a man on the Moon in their day. I am confident that if we determine that it shall happen, and are prepared to devote the necessary resources to it, SDI can be done, one way or another. . . .