

BRITAIN AFTER THE INF TREATY

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The INF treaty signed in December 1987 by President Reagan and Secretary Gorbachev is widely held to signal the beginning of a new era in super-power relations. But this landmark agreement also could signal the beginning of a new era in the NATO alliance, especially between the United States and Britain and France, the two NATO powers with their own independent nuclear forces. In this paper I propose to review the United Kingdom's role in NATO now and in the future, and to offer some observations on the possible impact of the American and Soviet agreement to eliminate intermediate range nuclear weapons from their national arsenals.

The first step in the chain of events that led to the INF treaty may be said to have been the Soviet decision in 1977 to deploy their new SS-20 missiles against targets in Europe. With three MIRV (Multiple Independently-Targetable Re-entry Vehicle) warheads each and a range of some 3,000 miles, these new IRBMs (Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles) appeared to the Carter administration and the British government to represent a significant change in the strategic balance in Europe. In 1979 came the NATO reply to what was seen as sheer provocation by Moscow.

In January 1979 President Carter, President Giscard d'Estaing, Chancellor Brandt, and Prime Minister Callaghan took the decision in principle to place American IRBMs in Europe. In December of the same year the members of the Atlantic Alliance confirmed what was known as the "dual track decision," which implemented the deployment of two new types of weapons (the Pershing-2 and ground-launched cruise missiles) in accordance with a prearranged timetable, and the opening of talks with the Soviet Union. In the face of this growing crisis, the blocs agreed to begin negotiations, with preliminary discussions beginning in Geneva in 1980. Throughout the years of posturing, deadlock, and serious negotiations that followed, the British government lived up to its decision and strongly supported the Reagan administration's commitment to maintain the timetable for deployment. Britain's own role in the nuclear build-up called for the basing of 160 cruise missiles at American bases in the United Kingdom between December 1983 and the end of 1988. The actual arrival of the missiles caused large anti-nuclear demonstrations in Britain and other NATO nations, but the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher remained unmoved in its determination to honor its part of the 1979 Brussels agreement.

Before looking at the official British reaction to the actual

signing of the INF agreement, it will be helpful to examine the United Kingdom's role in NATO's defense plans. The bedrock of British defense policy since the late 1940s has been her membership in NATO; the ultimate instrument of that policy is her strategic nuclear deterrent, backed up by her three armed services. The bald statistics of British defensive capabilities are simple: 320,000 men and women in uniform (with 159,000 of these in the land forces), four nuclear-powered submarines armed with Polaris ballistic missiles (and plans underway to replace these in the 1990s with larger and more powerful submarines and missiles), 1,500 tanks, nearly 100 major warships, and over 600 combat aircraft capable of dropping anything from paratroops to nuclear weapons. In absolute terms, Britain is still one of the major world powers, able to spend about 16 billion pounds a year on defense and able to project her authority 8,000 miles to the South Atlantic in the 1982 Falklands War. She is capable of fielding enough nuclear firepower to obliterate a sizeable portion of the Soviet Union, and yet, without NATO, she would be of little account in practical terms. But at the same time, NATO would be much less of a threat to a Soviet offensive without Britain's participation.

Britain's strategic geographic position forces upon her a major role in the event of a Soviet attack upon Western Europe. Current NATO plans call for the full deployment of all three armed services from the North Atlantic through the Central Front in Germany, with special units assigned to Norway and Turkey. The British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) consists of a single army corps, I (BR) Corps, of some 55,000 men and has responsibility for the least easily defended area of Northern Germany, the stretch from Hamburg to a point on the East German frontier east of Bonn. The British commander of BAOR is also the Commander-in-Chief of all NATO forces in this sector, and would have under his command Dutch, Belgian, Canadian, and German troops. His first major concern in the event of hostilities would be to bring his own forces up to strength, for a full third of the BAOR is kept in England and would have to be ferried across the Channel. He would certainly have his hands full, for opposing him would be fourteen Soviet tank and motorized divisions, with fourteen more in close reserve. Total NATO forces in the Central Front (North) would be about twelve divisions, given sufficient warning, but with no reserves.

While the British Army of the Rhine is charged by NATO with delaying a Russian offensive against northern Germany, the Royal Navy shares with other allied fleets the task of protecting the re-supply routes across the North Atlantic. Plans call for British naval forces to assist in preventing Russian submarines from breaking

out the Arctic Ocean into the North Sea and for Royal Marines to assist Dutch and Norwegian marines in the defense of the Russian-Norwegian border. The role of the Royal Air Force would be to support the land battle on the Central Front (North) from its bases in Germany and England through interdiction, air superiority, air defense, and strike operations.

Clearly the military role assigned by NATO to Britain is formidable and would call for the full mobilization of all her military resources. The question to be examined now is how will the INF agreement change the military role of Britain, and the commitment to maintain that role? A related question will be to consider the political implications of the INF agreement upon the Thatcher government and the loyal opposition.

To most military and political leaders of the United States and Britain, the American military presence in Europe has been essential if NATO is to be a serious obstacle to a Soviet advance upon Western Europe. This is one reason the Thatcher government supported the Brussels agreement so firmly; the American decision to match new Soviet missile systems with new systems of its own was clear evidence that the United States intended to maintain and even strengthen its commitment to its European allies. Although the deployment of these American missiles represented an escalation of the arms race, it was defended as an unavoidable response to the Soviet attempt to change the strategic balance in Europe.

The capabilities of the new American missiles was also a factor in the British support of deployment. Prior to 1983, "going nuclear" for NATO forces meant the use of tactical nuclear weapons against a Soviet advance, with the threat of strategic nuclear weapons against Russia itself as the ultimate deterrent. Such tactical nuclear weapons, with ranges of from a few dozen to a hundred or so miles, meant that Russia itself and rear area support and command centers would be secure from nuclear attack unless there was an escalation to strategic weapons, after which it wouldn't really matter. The Pershing-2 with a range of about 1100 miles and the GLCM (ground launched cruise missile) with a range of about 1500 miles obviously changed these assumptions. The accuracy and speed of the Pershing-2 also represented a significant new factor in war fighting assumptions; supposedly NATO would now be able to destroy Russian targets 1000 miles behind the East German frontier within ten minutes after launch with a warhead accurate to within fifty feet. The converse side of these new possibilities, which the Labour party was quick to perceive and use as one of its major objections to deployment, was that the Americans and Soviets could not engage in

a substantial nuclear exchange that would leave their strategic weapons intact, but reduce Europe to a radioactive wasteland.

The INF agreement will now return the nuclear and conventional balance to its previous status. NATO conventional forces are again substantial enough to delay, but probably not defeat, a Soviet advance unless substantial reinforcements arrive quickly. NATO's tremendous tactical nuclear stockpile once more serves as a counterweight to the Warsaw Pact's numerical superiority. The prime factor determining British and overall NATO strategic assumptions in this new post INF world remains the overwhelming superiority of Soviet conventional forces in Europe.

The response of the Thatcher government to future decisions concerning its role in NATO will undoubtedly be governed by what has become a hallmark of British foreign policy in the 1980s--the maintenance of close, cordial, and cooperative relations with the United States, in essence, an attempt to keep alive the "special relationship" so dear to the hearts of American Anglophiles and English Ameriphiles. This was shown very clearly at the meeting of NATO leaders in Brussels in March 1988. Prime Minister Thatcher openly supported the American policy of calling for modernization of conventional forces and attempting to restart the long-stalled talks with the Russians on reducing conventional arms. Perceiving continued American support as essential and fearful of congressional rumblings about reducing American forces in an era of huge deficits and European prosperity, the Thatcher government obviously wishes to give no grounds for offense or raise any doubts about its willingness to do its part in the maintenance of a strong defense, both conventional and nuclear, against possible Russian expansion. Thus, in spite of the huge expense and Labour party criticism, the Conservative leadership has pledged to continue with the replacement of its Polaris submarines with the Trident system by the mid-1990s. But the Thatcher government is also aware of the very real possibility that American support for NATO may be reduced in the near future and is attempting to stay on friendly terms with its NATO allies. Thus, the British and French governments have announced the beginning of consultations that will lead to the development of a European version of the GLCM and ALCM (air launched cruise missile).

It is safe to assume that such policies will continue in effect at least as long as the Thatcher government lasts, so the last question to consider is how long will that be? The short answer to this question is probably for the next four years, and possibly another five beyond that, barring unexpected developments. With a majority of

some 100 seats in Commons and the left in disarray, Thatcher seems secure for the near future, no matter who is elected in November.

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