On 22 December 1984, shortly after a meeting at Camp David, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher publicly confirmed her government’s support for the Reagan Administration’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a proposed US plan to establish a ground- and space-based missile defense system. Stating that she had told the American President of her “firm conviction” that SDI research should go ahead, Thatcher further clarified that she agreed with the US that their joint aim was “…not to achieve superiority, but to maintain balance.” The overall objective of the SDI program was, in her words, to “…enhance, not undercut deterrence.”

What is noteworthy about Thatcher’s Camp David announcement is that it had taken over a year for the British government to publicly announce its support for SDI, after President Ronald Reagan had first announced the initiative in March, 1983. This was indicative of the two allies’ differing positions regarding the missile defensive system, a subject which Thatcher later mentioned in her memoirs had been a “source of contention.”

Aaron Bateman’s article examines the British response to SDI, and its impact on Anglo-American defense cooperation during the later Cold War period. Although it is widely known that Reagan and Thatcher had quite different positions regarding nuclear weapons—Reagan was a nuclear abolitionist, whilst Thatcher believed in deterrence and the stability that nuclear weapons provided, Bateman argues that the nature of their military-intelligence space relationship was an “…essential, though often invisible,” aspect of the Cold War ‘special relationship’ (355). The paper also seeks to explain the reasons for the difference of opinion between the British Prime Minister and officials in her own government, together with Thatcher’s initial reservations about certain aspects of the SDI program, a view which eventually softened as the last decade of the Cold war progressed.

Bateman summarizes SDI as a “research effort to develop the technologies for land- and space-based missile defense.” He further argues that it soon “…unleashed anxieties about an arms race in space” (355). He explains that the militarization of space by the superpowers (especially the Soviet Union), was of “significant concern” to Britain, because of the impact on its national security in two areas: “space-based intelligence collection, and the credibility of its nuclear deterrent” (355). Therefore, although SDI faced some opposition

from key advisors in the Thatcher government, the British Prime Minister still viewed SDI as important, both in terms of the US and UK keeping up with the Soviets, and as regards promoting Britain’s own national security interests by the West cautiously managing the space “arms race.”

Although the thrust of the article focuses on the British reaction to the SDI program, Bateman shows how this reaction was linked to the wider issue of Britain’s nuclear deterrent, Trident. He details how the British government was concerned that the implementation of SDI would undermine the Trident system, potentially rendering it “obsolete.” (359). It was for this reason that Reagan’s speech of 23 March, 1983 speech “…shocked Thatcher and her advisors,” who felt that the proposal for a defensive space missile system potentially threatened the British position regarding nuclear deterrence (359). Bateman makes clear that Thatcher’s main objection to the weaponization of space was that it would “fundamentally” challenge nuclear deterrence. Thatcher was concerned by Reagan’s talk of using SDI to promote the total elimination of nuclear weapons, and this added to her reservations about it (363). As Bateman notes, Thatcher believed that “...nuclear deterrence had kept the peace and remained essential” (362).

An important point that this article highlights is the split within the British government over the SDI proposals. It provides valuable insights into the divergent views between Thatcher and her senior advisors, most notably, officials in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defense (MOD). Whilst Thatcher was cautious about fully expressing her support for SDI, she nonetheless believed that the program was vital to ensure US, and, by extension, UK, superiority over the Soviet Union in the space arms race. Advisors such as her Private Secretary, Charles Powell and Percy Craddock, a British diplomat, were of the opinion that SDI needed to be handled cautiously because it could damage Anglo-American intelligence cooperation. (361).

This article is significant in its utilization not only of recent interviews with members of the Reagan administration and senior Thatcher advisors, but a wealth of recently released British archival sources, including Cabinet Office, Foreign Office, and Prime Minister’s Office files. One of the more humorous incidents these documents divulge is an example of Thatcher’s famous ‘Iron Lady’ temperament. Bateman recounts an episode in which one of her closest advisors, Charles Powell, wrote his opinion on a joint Foreign Office and MOD memo sent to the Prime Minister that the two departments were in favor of a policy of “active discouragement of SDI.”  Thatcher wrote back with the emphatic response “NO,” “underlined in the margins,” (370) demonstrating once again, that the lady was “not for turning.”

These declassified files also reveal such details as Thatcher’s extensive understanding of the technical details of SDI, which came as a surprise to the Americans, particularly Lieutenant General James Abrahamson, the head of the program. Abrahamson was of the opinion that Thatcher’s understanding of the technological nuances of SDI was better even than that of the President or his advisors (363). Indeed, a point that this article makes clear is that Thatcher viewed the SDI program less as a strategic defense system and more as a tool that could benefit British scientific research.

Bateman further argues that the involvement of the British government in SDI had potential benefits to British defense research and technological development. Some officials in the MOD, for example, Defense Secretary, George Younger, viewed SDI as an important tool that could be used to help British nuclear research, for example ABM “penetration aids.” (367) Thatcher agreed that even if SDI was never implemented, it could reap substantial rewards for the British defense industry, including being kept aware of new developments in missile defense research that “…could have substantial implications for Britain’s nuclear deterrent” (364).

The UK's differing approach to the Strategic Defense Initiative in comparison with other European allies was tied into the issue of the Anglo-American space defense relationship.  Thatcher’s attitude regarding SDI diverged quite significantly from the broader European one. The article details well how Thatcher’s position differed in particular from the French view regarding SDI and US defense policy, and even that of her own
defense secretary, Michael Heseltine, in some aspects. Heseltine supported a “common European approach,” to SDI, in line with the French, Germans, and Italians, believing that this would reduce pressure on any individual country to support SDI beyond what had already been agreed at Camp David, and also provide the British with the benefit of a mutual collaboration. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given her noted Euro-sceptic stance, Thatcher rejected Heseltine’s advice because she thought that the French especially would not be willing to share any information, and that the UK would be “…more likely to lose from it” (365).

The French meanwhile worried about the US gaining technological superiority over them. As Bateman astutely notes, French President Francois Mitterrand viewed SDI as an attempt to advance American “technology hegemony” over Europe (365). Thatcher however, did not share Mitterrand’s concerns because she believed that any technological advantage gained by the US would in turn prove beneficial both for British national security interests, and that it would additionally aid the West in keeping ahead of the Soviets in the space arms race. Furthermore, Thatcher also believed that even if SDI was never used, its very existence could itself deter and prevent the Soviets from pursuing their own missile defense system (361).

One of the article’s central tenets is that Thatcher was not as unfavorable towards SDI as has been previously portrayed, and pushes back against the narrative promoted by other scholars of the Cold War that the British Prime Minister was largely “hostile” to the program. Instead, Bateman argues for a more nuanced interpretation, arguing that Thatcher’s views on SDI changed over the course of the decade. This was mainly due to Thatcher’s relationship with Abrahamsom (356).

Bateman emphasizes it was Thatcher’s relationship with Abrahamson that caused her views to shift to a more favorable, pro-SDI approach, (356, 372). He recounts that in a recent (2020), interview, British defense scientist Stanley Orman revealed that Thatcher valued Abrahamson’s opinion on SDI “…over anyone else’s, including British defense scientists like himself.” (369).

As the article notes, British documents reveal Thatcher’s evolving views, not only on SDI, but the larger question of space defense and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty. The treaty banned the use of defensive missile systems in space, but a record of a conversation between Thatcher and several government officials show that privately she rejected ministerial advice suggesting that she advocate for a pro-arms control position regarding space defense, and instead try to limit the scope of SDI and anti-satellite weapons. (356)

Bateman also disagrees with the oft-repeated notion in the established narrative that it was not until well after the Camp David meeting with Reagan (i.e. early 1985), that Thatcher understood about the importance of the SDI program and was willing to commit her support for it. He argues that she was already aware of the need to push forward with SDI research even before the Camp David summit (363). He contends that Thatcher’s views regarding SDI evolved significantly over the course of the decade, and that she moved from a position of cautious approval of the program in the early 1980s, to being “SDI’s most significant advocate outside of the United States,” by 1988 (370).

The period of the early 1980s was a time of reignited tensions between the West, and the USSR. Against the backdrop of SDI, further incidents demonstrated both the closeness of the Anglo-American defense relationship and its sometimes conflicted nature. Coming only six months after Reagan’s initial announcement of the program in March 1983, the US invasion of Grenada the same year created a rift in the “special relationship,” with Thatcher reportedly furious that she was not consulted regarding the decision to invade. Two months later, the Able Archer wargame, an annual NATO exercise that simulated an escalating

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conflict between the West and the Soviet Union, took place, causing both the UK and the US to consult closely in the exercise’s aftermath, over concerns that it may have nearly sparked a real nuclear incident between the West and the Soviet Union.5

British MOD documents that were declassified in 2013 demonstrated for the first time the close consultation between Britain and the United States over nuclear wargaming exercises in the early 1980s.6 They detail how the Thatcher government advised the Reagan administration as it dealt with the USSR over nuclear wargaming, revealing its role in advising Reagan to adopt a “less aggressive” approach to the Soviets regarding nuclear matters. Some historians believe that this led to a significant shift in US foreign policy towards the Soviet Union.7 Interestingly, the MOD documents show that these discussions took place during the same period as the Anglo-American deliberations regarding SDI.

Skillfully highlighted in this article is the “profound effect” that Margaret Thatcher had on President Reagan over the SDI issue as well. (363) Concerned that the weaponization of space would challenge nuclear deterrence, Thatcher managed to persuade Reagan to change his approach and instead, make a public statement that the SDI proposals did not represent any fundamental change in NATO strategy (363). This further confirms the high level of influence that the British prime minister had with the president in the area of space security as well as their wider defense relationship.

Bateman ultimately demonstrates that despite her initial misgivings, and the fact that she was often in opposition to her own advisors, Margaret Thatcher saw the Strategic Defense Initiative proposals as important - both in keeping the Western alliance one step ahead of the Soviets, and as a beneficial enhancement to British national security. Thatcher viewed SDI as “…a means to further British military, economic, and diplomatic interests.” (372) The paper also confirms that, despite the evolution of Thatcher’s views on SDI and the nuclear defense of space, her opinion on abolishing nuclear weapons did not change, and she continued to resist the nuclear abolitionism that Reagan so fervently believed in.

This article therefore adds an important additional dimension to our understanding of the existing Thatcher-Reagan nuclear defense relationship, specifically on the issues of space weaponization and SDI’s potential impact on British deterrence.

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