

The real cost of Britannia Shield

Britain needs air defence, and Britannia Shield is a welcome start. But a shield is only as good as the missiles behind it, the bases beneath it and the honesty about what it costs.



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Praise be! The British Conservative Party want to spend serious money on air defence. Britain needs it, and this week's Britannia Shield announcement promises up to £10 billion over ten years for an integrated system to protect Britain and its overseas bases. The proposal includes layered defences and larger missile stocks. The question is how far that money will stretch once the conference applause has stopped and someone must decide which airfield gets protected.

To be precise, this is not equivalent to Israel's Iron Dome. Iron Dome primarily tackles short-range rockets; Israel's defence against Iranian ballistic missiles depends on other systems, including Arrow-3 and David's Sling, within a much larger defensive network. In March, the IDF reported intercepting around 90 per cent of Iranian missiles heading towards populated areas or key infrastructure. That is an extraordinary achievement, but a missile that reaches a power station does not become less destructive because nine others were intercepted.

Britain faces different threats across a much larger territory, with overseas commitments besides. £10 billion cannot guarantee protection against every threat, everywhere. Ministers will still have to choose what they can afford to defend.

Iran's attacks devastated the Bahrain base housing Fifth Fleet headquarters, including its command building and satellite communications. Personnel were evacuated; by September, the US Navy still saw no early return to full operations. This caused significant logistical disruption to the Americans, increasing their reliance on distant Diego Garcia. Iran had effectively blasted a principal American naval hub out of normal operation, lengthening the supply routes on which its warships depended.

Ukraine offers a lesson in how to keep defending yourself. Its forces are destroying Russian drones with interceptor drones costing a few thousand dollars, reserving expensive missiles for threats that require them. Using a costly missile to save a hospital is plainly justified; comparing the price of two weapons while ignoring the people beneath them would be idiotic. A campaign of nightly attacks can turn those justified decisions into an unsustainable drain on ammunition. Cheap, mass-produced drones can consume interceptors faster than the defender can replace them. Eventually, the problem becomes the empty launcher. British alliance with Ukraine will continue to pay dividends in developing our own capabilities.

Western defences therefore need affordable weapons available in quantity, with guns and electronic warfare alongside interceptor drones. Ballistic missiles still require sophisticated and expensive interceptors. Each layer needs reliable detection and trained crews, connected through command systems that can quickly allocate the right weapon. On top of that, Britain's contribution must fit within NATO's wider network and our alliance commitments. Procurement must also cover replacements at wartime rates: buying the launcher while skimping on ammunition is an expensive way to postpone vulnerability.

Britain also requires a national resilience plan. Some weapons will penetrate, so we need hardened facilities and alternative power supplies, with communications that

survive the loss of a single site. Dispersing aircraft and keeping repair capacity ready can reduce the damage an attacker achieves. There is little comfort in shooting down most of a raid if the surviving drones leave an airbase unable to launch its aircraft.

Defences can help deter an attack by making success less likely, but they are only part of the paradigm. An adversary must also believe that attacking us risks losses he cannot accept, which requires credible offensive capabilities, including conventional long-range strike. These need intelligence to find military targets and sufficient ammunition to sustain operations. A government must communicate when it is prepared to use that force. The Iran war has demonstrated that even enormous destructive power cannot be assumed to compel an opponent to stop fighting. Deterrence depends on that calculation, and we need several ways to influence it.

Coordinated export controls can obstruct weapons production, while sanctions can increase the cost of financing aggression. Diplomatic work secures access to bases and intelligence cooperation; it must also set the terms under which an opponent can step back. That requires patient bargaining with allies whose interests will not always align with ours. Threatening retaliation while leaving the aggressor's procurement networks untouched would be a remarkably incomplete approach to national security.

Britannia Shield could become a worthwhile programme if the Conservatives explain its limits and fund the forces required alongside it. Sustaining those forces, funding civil protection and maintaining diplomatic influence will require spending well beyond an air-defence procurement programme. Voters will have to accept the taxes or competing spending cuts that follow. The politician promising a shield owes them an explanation of that bill.

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