By Kate Hudson, Chair, CND

Towards the end of the 1990s, the US administration began to take further steps in the development of the US National Missile Defence programme (NMD). This was a new version of President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative from the early 1980s, and part of the arms race that he initiated at that time, together with the cruise and Pershing missiles that gave rise to such massive opposition across Europe in the early 1980s. SDI was popularly known as 'Star Wars', because of its sci-fi characteristics, using infra-red sensors to track and destroy missiles. The system was not pushed through to completion at that time, because the arms race finally broke the economy of the Soviet Union, and the Cold War ended, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

SDI and the current US missile defence systems are both forms of anti-ballistic missile systems. They are designed to shoot down incoming missiles as they head towards their targets. These systems were banned during the Cold War, under the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, signed by the USA and Soviet Union in 1972. The treaty was introduced to ensure that neither country would risk attacking the other, because of fear of retaliation. The obvious point about ABM systems is that they end the common vulnerability of countries; there would be no 'mutually assured destruction' – thus the end of even any gesture towards the notion of 'deterrence'. A country without such a system has to rely on the country that does have one choosing not to attack. That is not a stable situation.

During the 1990s there was some difference of view within the US about which way to go on missile defence. The US Congress was dominated by the Republicans from 1994, albeit under a Democratic presidency – indeed Congress prevented Clinton from ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1999. Clinton also came under Republican pressure over missile defence: the Republicans were extremely keen on it, but the Democrats opposed it on the basis of its cost, its dubious reliability and the likelihood that it would cause a new nuclear arms race. Under pressure from the Republicans, in 1996 Clinton agreed to its development. In March 1999 its deployment was endorsed by Congress, even though a workable system did not yet exist. In September 2000, Clinton announced that he would not authorise deployment of the system, and left that decision to his successor. Unfortunately his successor turned out to be George W. Bush, so a green light for the system was assured.

So the ABM Treaty held good for three decades, but was destroyed by US withdrawal in June 2002. There can have been few starker warnings than that of US determination to dominate the world militarily. Even before September 11, the US Department of Defense had issued a document entitled Joint Vision 2020, which outlined US plans for achieving 'full spectrum' dominance by the year 2020. This dominance will be achieved in land, sea, air, space and information, and the document addresses full spectrum dominance across a range of conflicts from nuclear war to major theatre wars, from regional conflicts to smaller scale contingencies.

One of the most worrying features of this very comprehensive vision of dominance, is the emphasis on the domination of space, bringing with it the danger of the introduction of weapons – possibly even nuclear weapons – into space. Indeed, the US does not rule out the possibility of fighting war in space and US Space Command has been quite explicit about this. As former Commander in Chief General Joseph W. Ashey has said: 'Some people don't want to hear this...but – absolutely – we're going to fight in space. We're going to fight from space and we're going to fight into space.' Already many of the supposedly civilian communications and satellite systems in space can be – and have been – used for military purposes. They were used in the recent war on Iraq, and the great danger now is the possibility of actual weapons being put there. As well as withdrawing from the ABM Treaty, the US has also shown complete contempt for the spirit of the Outer Space Treaty that came into force in 1967. This states that: 'Space belongs to all humankind, should benefit everyone and should be explored peacefully to promote international co-operation and understanding.' Instead, the US plans to put military bases on the moon. Perhaps the US approach to space is best summed up by Vision 2020's description of US Space Command: 'dominating the space dimension of military operations to protect US interests and investment. Integrating Space Forces into warfighting capabilities across the full spectrum of conflict.'

These developments around Star Wars and weapons in space are clear examples of the US administration's contempt for international treaties and a multilateral approach to global affairs. This has been the case on a range of issues, including the dismissive US attitude towards the 1997 Kyoto Agreement on reducing greenhouse emissions, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the International Criminal Court.
Current US insistence on pursing the missile defence system is giving rise both to increased global tensions and to significant opposition within Europe. It has already sparked international controversy and provoked a new global arms race, with the danger of nuclear weapons use. President Bush insists that the US needs missile defence in case terrorists or 'rogue' states ever develop inter-continental ballistic missiles able to reach them. In fact, this is extremely unlikely, as terrorists or states without long-range missile technology could deliver nuclear weapons more easily, cheaply and with less likelihood of detection in other ways – in a truck, on board ship, or even as part of an aeroplane. Thus, missile defence is widely understood to be a system deployed against major state actors such as Russia or China. It is no doubt understood as such within those two countries.

Over the past few years, Britain has assumed a critical role in the missile defence programme, without parliamentary scrutiny or accountability. An offer apparently made in early 2007, by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, to host interceptor missiles – which would shoot down enemy missiles on their way to the US - was made without any public or parliamentary consultation. In addition to contributing to global tension, these missiles would clearly place Britain on the front line: at risk of attack by anyone seeking to attack the US, and would continue the use of British soil to support the aggressive US military agenda.

There are two key bases used for missile defence in Britain, both in Yorkshire. Fylingdales is one of five US Ballistic Missile Early Warning Radar stations across the world. The US unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty – which outlawed such systems - in 2002. In 2003 Tony Blair gave permission for the base to become part of the NMD programme.

Despite major public and political opposition on the grounds of international security and local health concerns, the process continued, without planning permission, and is due to be completed this year. On paper, this US base would be able to track enemy missiles and locate their intended targets, allowing interceptor missiles to be fired from other locations to knock them off their trajectories. So far, the system has proved to be ineffective: controlled tests have had minimal success over tracking and shooting down missiles, but this has not deterred the US from pressing ahead.

Menwith Hill is run by the US National Security Agency (NSA), operates outside US law and is not accountable in British law. It is part of a global network of bases used to spy on all forms of international telecommunications - including private phone calls, emails and faxes - and is crucial for the intelligence-gathering necessary for any US-led military attack. In 2002, Britain gave permission for the installation of a Space Based Infra Red System (SBIRS) at the base. SBIRS is another aspect of the Early Warning system. This upgrade of the base to advance the NMD programme has been well underway with recent Pentagon budget reports showing that over $90 million has been allocated to building projects – prior to any formal agreement being given that the base could be part of the system. On 25th July 2007, on the day that the British Parliament closed for its summer recess, the Defence Secretary, Des Browne, issued a written statement, informing Parliament and the British public that Britain had agreed to US use of Menwith Hill. There has been no public or parliamentary consultation or debate about the security implications of Britain's participation in the system. Browne asserts that it will contribute to UK security, but in reality these facilities put the UK on the front line in future US wars, and they do not protect Britain.

Not surprisingly, this role for Britain is not a popular one. There is significant public opposition to Britain's current commitment to the NMD programme: a 2004 poll showed that 67% of the British public are opposed to UK involvement. But no significant parliamentary debate has taken place and decisions relating to the role of Menwith Hill and Fylingdales are made behind closed doors. The US has made it clear that its first choice for the installation of such missiles is Poland, with a new radar system located in the Czech Republic. But even without hosting the interceptor missiles the UK is already crucial to the system, with intelligence obtained by Menwith Hill and radar support from Fylingdales. As their technological capabilities develop, so will US military dominance. The role of US bases on British soil to further the US war agenda turns Britain into little more than a military outpost for the Pentagon.

But not surprisingly, the real area of controversy is over the proposed sites in central Europe. The governments in Poland and the Czech Republic, which have backed the system so far, both face substantial opposition, as high as 70% in the Czech Republic. Both governments have slim majorities. An upsurge in civil society campaigning in both countries may well bring an end to US plans.

But is Russia right to have such grave concerns about NMD? The US says the system is designed to knock out missiles from rogue states such as Iran or North Korea. And it states that the relatively small number of interceptors in the system would be absolutely useless against the full might of the Russian arsenal. That is true – the system could not deal with a massive Russian first strike. But consider the possibility of a US first strike, which knocked out the

major part of the Russian arsenal. The interceptors of the NMD system would be sufficient to knock out most of the retaliatory strike from Russia. Clearly the Russians have interpreted NMD in this way, hence a recent statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry: 'one cannot ignore the fact that U.S. offensive weapons, combined with the missile defense being created, can turn into a strategic complex capable of dealing an incapacitating blow.' That is the key to understanding the issue – first-strike plus NMD equals total destruction of the opponent without fear of retaliation.

In 2006, an article in the US journal Foreign Affairs (FA March/April 2006) put forward the view that the age of US nuclear primacy has begun; it argues that the US arsenal is growing rapidly, while Russia's decays and China's stays small: 'For the first time in almost 50 years, the United States stands on the verge of attaining nuclear primacy. It will probably soon be possible for the United States to destroy the long-range nuclear arsenals of Russia or China with a first strike.' While US officials were quick to disagree, this shifting balance, together with US insistence that missile defence must be in Europe under their control, is bound to stoke Russian anxieties.

All the indications are that Russia is genuinely concerned about these developments, hence their offer of Russian facilities for the system. During the G8 summit in June 2007, Putin proposed that the US could use Russian facilities in Gabala in northern Azerbaijan. And in order to prove that it is a viable option western journalists were invited to take a tour of the site. Gabala is a huge radar station with a 6,000 kilometre range – sufficient to cover the Middle East. Although critics said that the base is out of date, it detected the launch of the Iranian Shahab-3 missile in January 2007, and presumably upgrading it would be no more expensive than building facilities from scratch in central Europe. Russia subsequently also offered the use of facilities in southern Russia, and offered to work with the US administration over missile defence in the framework of the NATO-Russia Council. Yet these overtures were rejected by President Bush who continued with the view that facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic were a necessary part of the system. As a result, Russia then threatened to re-target missiles on western Europe if the US continued on its course of siting facilities for the system in central Europe.

Recent tensions between Russia and NATO, as a result of the conflict in the Caucasus and continued pressure for NATO expansion into Russia's backyard, have been exacerbated by President Bush's insistent promotion of NMD. Indeed while the Caucasus crisis was at its height, he pushed ahead with an agreement on NMD with the Polish government, causing an angry and concerned response from the Russian leadership. Russian statements on re-targeting missiles on western Europe, together with new investment in nuclear weapons systems, indicate that one's worst fears about a new nuclear arms race – and a new Cold War – may come to pass. Constructive cooperation between Russia and the west is essential – to advance nuclear disarmament, to solve global economic problems, to deal with the problems of climate change and terrorism. US insistence on NMD will serve eventually to make that cooperation extremely difficult, if not impossible.