

US missile defence plan set to provoke new arms race

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The US is pushing ahead with its missile defense program, which looks set to provoke a new arms race and Britain is closely involved.

Scarcely noticed, the US last month deployed its first ground-based missile interceptor at Fort Greely in Alaska. It was a significant step in the Bush administration's ambitious and hugely expensive missile defense system a project the Blair administration says it supports but one that, in the view of its many critics, will provoke a new arms race leading to the weaponization of space, a true "son of star wars" with profound implications for the rest of the world.

Deployment of the interceptor "marks the end of an era where we have not been able to defend our country against long-range ballistic missile attacks", said Maj. Gen. John Holly, program director for the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense system. This has nothing to do with terrorists, repeatedly described by Bush and Blair as the greatest threat to the west. The Al-Qaeda network of terrorists may want to get their hands on biological or chemical weapons, or a dirty bomb, but they are unlikely to be able to launch a long-range intercontinental ballistic against the US, or anywhere else. "This extraordinary emphasis on missile defense represents misplaced priorities," says the US Union of Concerned Scientists. "The administration's top priority should instead be combating the threat of nuclear terrorism." Up to five more interceptors are due to be deployed at Fort Greely by the end of this year. By the end of 2005, the US plan is to deploy 10 ship-based intermediate-range interceptors, a sea-based tracking radar and an upgraded radar at Fylingdales in Yorkshire, in the north of England.

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Nfire will in effect be the first space weapon. That is the warning in *Fighting for Space*, a paper written by the Yorkshire Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) to be published later this month said. While Nfire is "being marketed as a defensive system playing a part in the missile defense infrastructure, it could also be effectively deployed as an anti-satellite weapon able to destroy the space assets of other countries", it says. It quotes a recent interview with an anonymous senior US government official who stated: "We're crossing the Rubicon into space weaponization". Or as the US Space Command noted last year:

"We cannot fully exploit space until we control it". CND comments that, "given the widespread concerns that missile defense won't work effectively, the statements by the US administration and military about controlling space and the asat (anti-satellite) capabilities of the missile defense system, it is no wonder that many states and individuals believe the system is being developed primarily for offense rather than defense".

Russia has already developed a basic asat system. The Pentagon has expressed concern that China will be capable of launching asat weapons in two to six years. There are international agreements governing space, notably the 1967 outer space treaty. But these ban only "weapons of mass destruction" nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. They would not prohibit the kind of satellite wars now in prospect.

Washington, meanwhile, is determined to push ahead with its missile defense project, with the help of its allies, old and new. The British American Security Information Council notes that last month during a visit to the UN, Australian Defense Minister Robert Hill said that Australia planned to help the US develop a missile

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Rumsfeld is also a driving force behind US plans for weapons in space, the next step in America's still-limited missile defense program. He has talked about a threat from a "space Pearl Harbor". As little-noticed as the missile deployment at Fort Greely, his Missile Defense Agency has now earmarked nearly \$70m for Nfire — the acronym for the near field infrared experiment.

This project, due to have been launched this year but delayed because of rumblings in Congress, involves a series of test satellites in low-Earth orbit carrying infrared sensors. Initially, the idea is to enable the US military to distinguish between the rocket plume, or exhaust, of a missile fired by a potential enemy and the missile itself. But the system is also designed to carry a "kinetic kill-vehicle" that will intercept a missile after it has been

defense system, although it "faces no current threat from ballistic missiles". The JS was last month reported to be negotiating with Poland and the Czech Republic over its missile defense program and the location of the largest missile defense site outside America. The US also says it wants Japan to jointly develop equipment for missile defense systems.

In Britain, there is little or no debate, although the expanding US satellite ground station at Menwith Hill in Yorkshire, England, will play a key part, along with Fylingdales. Earlier this year, Geoff Hoon, the UK defense secretary, told Lindis Percy, the veteran campaigner against US bases in Britain: "We are keen to see how the US system evolves. The agreement to the upgrade at Fylingdales and the close links between UK and US industry will give us close access to, and involvement in, the US missile defense program." It is for members of the British Parliament (MPs) to pick up the cudgel. Hoon's senior military advisers are deeply concerned about the US missile defense project and what it could lead to. The issues are far too important for decisions to be allowed to go by default.