SPACE - THE NEW FRONTIER - FOR WARFIGHTING?

Weapons in Space - Missile Defence

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Space - The World View

“Space should be proclaimed a scientific territory available to mankind” said an unprecedented report about the ethics of space policy from the European Space Agency published mid-July 2000. The news we see and read concerning activities in space suggests that this concept is already widely accepted. This idea has long been embodied in The Outer Space Treaty which came into force on October 10, 1967. This treaty sees space as a domain to which all have equal right of access, to be used for peaceful purposes in accordance with international law. State parties to the treaty are forbidden from stationing nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction in space or from installing them on celestial bodies. The depository governments are Russia, the UK and the US. Many countries are party to the treaty. So why the concern to spell out these views again this century?

We are generally only made aware of scientific activities in space like the exciting International Space Station project rather than military activities, and most people clearly would not want to see space become militarised. But this view is not, unfortunately, universal, and attempts to restrict the use of space for military purposes are being strongly resisted by the United States which has excessive plans to militarise space. The situation is sufficiently disturbing for the fifty-fourth session of the UN General Assembly, 31 December 1999, to adopt Resolution 54/53 on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space, calling for the peaceful use of outer space and for urgent action to prevent an arms race in outer space. This was supported by all countries except the US and Israel. See http://www.un.org/Documents. The UN Conference on Disarmament has for some time been discussing the problem of space becoming a warfighting region but has not yet made much progress due, in no small part, to US intransigence.

United States Space Command and Weapons in Space

The United States formally established the United States Space Command (USSPACECOM) on 23 September 1985, “to consolidate and streamline its space defence operations”, a September 2000 Space Command release tells us. Studies of the military use of satellites date back to 1954 or earlier. In 2000 the United States Space Command presented its Long Range Plan. The Introduction to the plan tells us this:

This plan sets the course to attain desired 2020 warfighting capabilities, CONOPS [concepts of operation], and organisations necessary to protect US national interests and investments in space. The combined effects of the current strategic pause, the evolving...
space and information age, and the possibility of a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) enabled by space capabilities, indicate that the time is right to have an integrated Long Range Plan for space. Fulfilling the Unified Command Plan’s mandate to shape the region of space USCINCSPACE [Commander in Chief United States Space Command] has identified key capabilities or thrusts that will ensure the United States remains the world’s pre-eminent space power.

Key warfighting capabilities required to reach the goals of USSPACECOM’s Vision for 2020 are identified. The document does acknowledge that at present, “the notion of weapons in space is not consistent with US national policy.” But it then states that “Planning for this possibility is the purpose of this plan should our civilian leadership later decide that the application of force from space is in our national interest.” The globalisation of the world economy will continue, with a widening between haves and have-nots, the plan says. “Therefore, the United States will be challenged regionally and needs to dominate future battlefields.” - including space.

USCINCSPACE’s vision seeks to revolutionise surface and air surveillance, missile defence, and Force Application from the ultimate “high ground” (space), the chapter on Global Engagement tells us. Integrated Focused Surveillance is the cornerstone of global engagement. “Its systems provide on-demand, continual surveillance of high-interest-targets to support missile defence and force application for all commanders.” Missile defence envisages by 2020 100% operational national (to defend the US mainland) and theatre (to defend other areas) missile defence systems able “to engage targets throughout all phases” of flight and to provide “automatic evaluation of engagement results and enable immediate re-engagement if necessary”.... “Theater systems will cover some geographic areas, space-based systems will provide global coverage [against missile attack]. Ground-based Interceptors, Space Operations Vehicles, Space-Based Platforms and [space-based] Lasers, and High Power Microwaves are crucial.” Also envisaged are space-based radar and space-based infrared systems (SBIRS). Missile defence by 2020 will be designed to provide protection against both ballistic and cruise missiles. Contracts have recently been awarded for the Space Based Laser programme which are intended to see an experimental laser launched into space 2012 to shoot down a ballistic missile in 2013.

Figure 6-13 Key Tasks for Force Application
No evidence has so far been seen suggesting that China or Russia is considering similar plans for space based weapons systems. The February 2001 report by the US Space Commission makes clear that space militarisation should proceed, see http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/space20010111.html.

Missile Defence

The United States now appears determined to proceed with the construction of a system to protect its mainland territory from attack by ballistic missiles, a National Missile Defence (NMD) system and a precursor of the systems envisaged by USSPACECOM. This proposal has been met with widespread opposition and condemnation from many sources. While some critics are concerned with the technical feasibility of the proposal, the more important criticisms centre around the whole philosophy of the world’s only superpower setting out to protect itself against attacks of the sort it is itself capable of launching against other countries. Critics also argue that it would be suicidal for any small power to attack the United States in this way because this would precipitate massive and devastating retaliation. Further there are simpler and more accessible methods of attack, chemical and biological, that do not directly identify the attacker and leave them open to retaliation.

In principle, any country has the right to defend itself from any and all missile attacks. A major problem for the US is that in 1972 they and the Soviet Union signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile or ABM Treaty which specifically bans national missile defence systems. In the late 1960s, as well as developing and expanding their long range nuclear missile capabilities, both superpowers were developing systems to intercept and destroy such missiles in flight, ABM systems. The shared concern that led to the ABM Treaty was that if each side went on expanding its ABM capabilities, both sides would try to counter this by expanding their stock of long range missiles to overwhelm the other side’s ABM defences. A nuclear arms race would ensue. To prevent this the two countries signed the 1972 Treaty which restricts ABM deployment, bans nation wide systems, and ABM systems or components thereof at sea, air based or space based. The proposed US NMD system clearly violates this Treaty, as do their plans for a sea based Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) system, or space based missile defence using, for example space based lasers. The US is proposing amending the ABM Treaty to accommodate their NMD system, but Russia has so far rejected these proposals, stating that problems of long range missile proliferation and the associated threats they may pose can be overcome by political and diplomatic means, with no need for NMD systems.
China and Russia have been particularly vehement in their criticisms of the NMD proposal fearing that such a system could prevent them responding from a US attack by destroying their missiles before they reached their US targets. But the US claims that this system is not aimed at those countries. It is intended for protection from attack by “the emerging long-range ballistic missile threat” a State Department spokesman said in July, and is directed at “states of concern” like North Korea, Iran and Iraq.

However, these assurances do not carry much weight in the face of the proposals in the US Long Range Plan for “global coverage”. And provision of TMD to cover Taiwan was not ruled out by US arms control adviser John Holum during a July visit to Beijing, a move that would be of great concern to China, as would extension of the system to other areas in Asia to shelter US and allied troops. Further, leading American congressional figures are now openly saying that China is the real source of concern. All such moves are seen in many countries as likely to lead to a new arms race as countries move to counter these systems by expanding their long range missile arsenals. Nevertheless, the new Bush Administration definitely intends proceeding with NMD, and on a scale expanded from previous proposals, regardless of the ABM Treaty. Leading Administration figures, particularly the new Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, say the Treaty is now “history” as the Soviet Union no longer exists and the world has changed since 1972 with an increasing number of countries having long range missiles. The possibility of US withdrawal from the Treaty if Russia will not accept amendments to allow NMD has been aired. Russia has recently revealed that in response to the Star Wars proposals of President Reagan, the Soviet Union developed “three mighty programmes to asymmetrically counter the national defence systems of the United States”, and is ready to dust off its Soviet “star wars” systems if the United States deploys NMD. Russia is also proposing a more limited joint Russia-Europe mobile shield.

In a very disturbing development reported by the very reliable Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the United States is claimed to have proposed to Russia a new protocol to the ABM Treaty that would allow the deployment of the first stage of the planned American NMD system. This first stage would see 100 interceptor missiles deployed, the number allowed under the ABM Treaty. A subsequent second phase would extend this to 200 missiles. The NMD system would require a more extensive radar system within and outside the United States to detect incoming missiles than allowed under the ABM Treaty. To convince the Russians that this system would not threaten Russia’s ability to overcome the system should they wish to launch a nuclear attack or counterattack on the US, the Americans are arguing that Russia (and the US) should for the foreseeable future maintain a significant number of nuclear ballistic missiles and airborne nuclear weapons, more than 1,000 inter-continental and submarine launched ballistic missiles, and should keep its ballistic missiles on constant alert. The proposed American first stage NMD system could never overcome an attack by even a fraction of an arsenal of this size, the Americans argue.

These proposals for indefinite maintenance of a large nuclear strike force on constant alert run completely counter to recent developments at the 2000 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference where in May 2000 all five nuclear powers pledged their “unequivocal commitment to the ultimate goal of a complete elimination of nuclear weapons”.

What We Can Do

New Zealand as a small but respected member of the United Nations should be doing everything in its power to further the goals of keeping space as an international region free of weapons and controlled by effective legal mechanisms with strong verification procedures. We have demonstrated in the campaign to reduce the nuclear threat that we can play an important part on the international stage. We can do the same to save space from the looming threat of militarisation, and to oppose NMD and TMD development.