

The New US Agenda: Militarising Space

Ajey Lele

Space science, like nuclear science and all technology, has no conscience of its own. Whether it will become a force for good or ill depends on man, and only if the United States occupies a position of pre-eminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theatre of war.

President John F. Kennedy
Address to Rice University
September 12, 1962

The Bush Administration is preparing a shift in US policy to allow for protection of existing and futuristic space assets. Convinced by the logic of securing space to deter probable attack, the US Air Force has sought Presidential approval for a national security directive. The official view of the Air Force is that since the US depends so crucially on space capabilities, it must, remain prepared to confront adversaries on the high ground of space. Correspondingly, the Department of Defence (DoD) is outlining a new policy which may just stop short of putting weapons into outer space. However, according to a *New York Times* report,¹ the Bush Administration is close to implementing a new space policy that could move the US closer to placing offensive and defensive weapons in space.

If implemented, the Bush directive would be a radical departure from the one articulated by Clinton in 1996, which concentrated more towards peaceful uses of space technologies. From a military perspective, Clinton emphasised a less aggressive use of space. It involved spy satellites support for military operations, arms control and non-proliferation pacts. In contrast, the new policy is expected to not only call for militarising space but also talk of having free access in space for protecting US space assets. The global reaction has largely been one of concern and dismay. Many analysts feel that the US proposed space policy would pave

Strategic Analysis, Vol. 29, No. 2, Apr-Jun 2005

© Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

the way for deployment of both defensive and offensive weapons in space. The Bush Administration, however will face opposition from its allies and potential enemies alike.

Russia has already reacted very strongly to this proposal. Its senior counsellor in the Washington embassy stated, "We intend to work through diplomatic channels to urge the US not to move towards fielding weapons in space. But, if diplomacy fails then we will not hesitate to react possibly with force if the US successfully puts 'combat weapons' in the space."² Russia has voluntarily declared in the past that it will not be the first to weaponise space and thwart the US from its desire to pursuing any such plans. Also, the scientific community within the US, convinced that the move would be prohibitively expensive and could trigger an uncalled for arms race, has warned against putting weapons in space. Indeed, any future deployment of space weapons is expected to face financial, technological, political and diplomatic hurdles.

On the domestic front, the Democrats are likely to resist any move towards space weaponisation as it would tantamount to overruling the Clinton policy. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Bush Administration is convinced about its space policies and will not hesitate to go the extra mile to achieve its desired objective. The US administration is of the opinion that new threats to its satellites have emerged since the space doctrine was last reviewed in 1996 and that its space assets must be protected at all costs. It has been argued that since significant changes have occurred over the last decade or so with some countries taking greater interest in space and in possession of technologies that can threaten US space systems, an updated space policy is the need of the hour.

Both the Gulf Wars (1991 and 2003) and the Afghanistan conflict proved to a great extent that space observations are an integral part of modern day conflict. Space is considered as the fourth dimension of the warfare. In both the wars, the US space-based assets had the asymmetric advantage over their enemy particularly in the arena of reconnaissance, intelligence gathering and navigation. Now, it appears that the Bush Administration wants to enhance this asymmetry further by putting offensive and defensive weapons into outer space.

The base document for this forthcoming space directive is a January 2001 report of a national commission (headed by Donald Rumsfeld) on the use of space for national security needs, which has recommended that the military should 'ensure that the president will have the option to deploy weapons in space'. In fact, Rumsfeld fears that 'space could be the next Pearl Harbour for the US'. In 2002, after

weighing the report of the Rumsfeld space commission, President Bush withdrew from the 30-year-old Antiballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) with Russia, which banned space-based weapons.

The ABM treaty barred the placement of not only missile defence components (such as radars) in space but also of space based weapons (such as conventional kinetic energy kill vehicles (KKVs) or space based lasers (SBLs) intended to intercept warheads or rockets. The US withdrawal from the ABM treaty in 2002 had sounded the alarm bells about its intent. Now Pentagon officials admit that the air force's determination to field space weapons had also been accelerated by its failure to build an earth-based missile defence system after 22-years and nearly \$100 billion in expenditure. Presently, it appears that the US is planning to take this bold initiative because it is aware that it can work this out within the gamut of existing UN treaties on this issue. It sees no need for new space arms-control agreements. The US is already party to the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which prohibits only stationing weapons of mass destruction in space and presently no treaty exists to deal with other methods of weaponising the space. Technically, the US cannot be faulted on their proposed space agenda.

The militarisation of space is not a simple mission. It will require new weapons, new satellites, and more importantly hundreds of billions of dollars. The US has had space-based weapon systems on its drawing board for years, including miniature satellites that can attack other satellites, high-powered lasers, and even a space plane that can drop weapons from orbit. Some are expected to be ready for deployment in about 18 months. The space weapons debate began in earnest in the late 1960s, after the US and USSR tested their first anti-satellite systems in 1959 and 1968, respectively. Subsequently, the issue lost steam and particularly after the end of Cold War, it was expected that weaponisation of space would never become a reality. The recent demand by the US Air Force brings the issue back to centre-stage. It appears that the administration may be toying with an idea of making space the battleground of the future. The Bush Administration understands that no immediate threat to its space assets is in the offing from any nation-state. Also, no terrorist organisation is at present capable of posing a threat to the space assets. Clearly, US intentions of exploring the possibility of space weaponisation emerge out of its futuristic concerns.

It is interesting to note that the Rumsfeld commission came into being much before 9/11. When Rumsfeld voiced an opinion that "space could be America's next Pearl Harbour" he was referring to space as a soft underbelly of the US. Apart from Russia, the US is chary of China. Over the last few years, China has

been diligently developing its space infrastructure with greater emphasis on indigenous technology and has emerged as a force to reckon with in 'military space'. Reports indicate that China has completed ground tests for an advanced anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon called 'Parasitic Satellite'.

China is developing ASAT systems with both long and short-term strategic objectives. The long-term objectives are probably to break the US monopoly in this field. China understands that compared to the US, it lags far behind in terms of assets and technology in the space arena and hence the best way to challenge the sole space superpower is to possess offensive anti-space-based weapons. It is also in the process of building lasers to destroy satellites.

China, quite clearly, is doing a balancing act on the space front. Overtly, it is spearheading an international movement to ban conventional weapons from space along with Russia and few other countries. At the same time, as reports suggest, it is discretely developing anti-space-based technology and formulating tactics in order to target American military assets.³ China understands the critical advantage the US had in the 1991 Gulf War as well as in Kosovo, Afghanistan and the recent war in Iraq. China's PLA feels that if a conflict breaks out in the Taiwan theatre, then it can neutralise or destroy US space assets, and deny the Pentagon the asymmetric advantage in space.

Russia, in contrast, even though it has a history of development of ASAT systems, continues to respect the ASAT weapon-testing moratorium which began in 1983. However, if the need arises, Russia is capable of developing ASAT technologies within a short period of time. Although no new-dedicated ASAT programmes has been initiated by the US in the recent past, the Bush Administration is increasing funding for research and developments in related technologies. According to some reports, the Pentagon has already spent billions of dollars developing space weapons and preparing plans to deploy them.⁴

It appears that apart from the Chinese and Russian concerns, the US is convinced that weaker nations also may carry out surprise attacks in space to neutralise the big powers' nuclear war-fighting advantages. Hence, the best way to secure US interests in space is a planned transition from space superiority to space dominance.

The Bush Administration has made arrangements in the defence budget for space-based weapons to defend satellites, strike ground targets and defend against missile attacks. However, the major hurdle in getting the new space initiative off the ground would be convincing Congress to approve its enormous price tag,

which is tentatively estimated at between \$220 billion and one trillion dollars. If Bush manages to pass this hurdle successfully, then it could be the beginning of the biggest and costliest space arms race in the post-Cold War era.

References/End notes

- ¹ *New York Times*, May 18, 2005. See <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0518-02.htm>
- ² “Russia urges US to avoid space arms race”, *Financial Times*, May 18, 2005.
- ³ Larry Wortzel, “China War on Space-Based Weapons,” August 31, 2003, at capmag.com/article.asp?ID=3034
- ⁴ Tim Weiner, “Air Force Seeks Bush’s Approval for space weapons programs”. *The New York Times*, May 18, 2005

Wg Cdr Ajey Lele is Research Fellow at IDSA