

Militarising Space: The Fallujah fallacy

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The Pentagon has made remarkable strides in militarisation of space this year, but its techno-schemes are built on the same sandy foundations as the rest of its defence policy, laments Eric Walberg

In April, Air Force Space Command activated a new unit — the 24th Air Force at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas — to keep pace with “the rapid changes in information technology and allow space and cyberspace capabilities to be more accessible to military ground commanders”, according to the Space Command’s top military officer General Robert Kehler. Kehler called the activation “the beginning of what will be a deliberate and focused effort to develop and evolve cyberspace forces and capabilities.”

In August, the Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency (MDA) commenced its 12th annual Space and Missile Defense Conference in Huntsville, Alabama, at the shiny new Von Braun Centre, named after the father of Nazi Germany’s missile project and one of the creators of the US ICBM programme, who along with several German colleagues was sent to Huntsville in 1950 (Operation Paperclip) to work on the first live nuclear ballistic missile tests conducted by the Pentagon.

Von Braun — sorry, I mean Kehler — told the Space and Missile Defense Conference that global deterrence is necessary to encourage restraint, deny benefits and impose costs to those nations and non-nation states that threaten the Reich — sorry, I mean the US and its allies. The 2,000 participants heard lots more sabre-rattling from the likes of the head of NASA, Charles Bolden, a retired Marine Corps general. Bloomberg news agency predicted correctly in January that “President-elect Barack Obama will probably tear down long-standing barriers between civilian and military space programmes to speed up a mission to the moon amid the prospect of a new space race with China.”

There were no dissenting voices at the inauguration of the 24th Air Force Cyberwar Unit in April or at the Star Wars conference in August. It appears to be conventional wisdom that, as Army Lieutenant General Kevin Campbell told the conference, space is “key terrain” which the US can’t afford to cede. More and more countries have the money to use space, if not to fund their own launch and development programmes, and “we should expect our adversaries to take advantage of that.” Lieutenant General Larry James, commander of the 14th Air Force space forces in California (how many air forces does one country need?) said a major problem commanders face is “space situational awareness” — knowing what’s in orbit, whom it belongs to and what it’s supposed to be doing. Among the suggested solutions is greater use of commercial partners. How clever, let’s privatise space warfare while we’re at it. Perhaps it will be more “efficient”.

The MDA told Von Braun’s disciples that it is accelerating the pace of full spectrum air, sea,

land, cyber and space missile shield developments in addition to laser weapons, having just completed a successful sea-based missile interception from Hawaii. A disabled spy satellite was shot down in February 2008 by the USS Lake Erie, an Aegis-class Guided Missile Cruiser, which, as the Pentagon insisted at the time, had no military implications whatsoever. In July, the Pentagon announced plans to integrate its latest generation drone, the Reaper, into the global missile shield system. At the same time, Israel tested its Arrow II interceptor missile, jointly developed with the US, off the coast of California. The US and Israeli Defense Forces will hold a joint missile defense exercise in October, Juniper Cobra, testing the advanced X-Band radar, a farewell gift to the land of Shalom from the Bush administration. The radar is capable of tracking small targets thousands of kilometres away. Thousands of kilometres away means surveillance of not only Syria and Iran but a large swathe of southern Russia.

All this makes perfect, if horrible, sense. The US empire is on the march and the Pentagon learned the perils of the draft from the massive public protests it provoked during the Vietnam war. It already operates on a global electronic battlefield where the fighting is increasingly done by robot drones guided by surveillance systems, the idea being to minimise US casualties. This was what Rumsfeld had in mind when he thought he could conquer Iraq and Afghanistan with a handful of troops on the ground. Even so, there is a lack of drafted cannon fodder, so in addition to robots, foreign nationals are offered immediate US citizenship if they sign up, and mercenaries (aka private contractors) — US and foreign — are employed to help fight on the ground. Hence the impotence of the peace movement in the face of US multiple wars, although the logic of the Rumsfeld doctrine is already looking pretty threadbare.



Defining moments in US military logic: Kim Phuc Phan Thi, centre, gave the Vietnam War a human face as she fled her village after a napalm attack in 1972 (photo: Nick Ut, AP)



The killing of four Blackwater mercenaries in March 2004 prompted the US to destroy Fallujah (photo: Karim Sahib, AFP)

Iraq offers a heart-breaking example of a war in which mercenaries so inflamed the locals they were sent to “liberate” that, when given the chance in Fallujah, enraged mobs dragged the bodies of four of them through the streets, burned and hung two of them from a bridge. This scene was televised globally and prompted the US to make a punishing, retaliatory assault on Fallujah, causing widespread death and destruction, with no protest from Western governments. The new old logic on the ground is: conquer hearts-and-minds by terrorising and killing those who resist, preferably with robots and mercenaries.

The logic in the heavens is merely an extension of this: Star Wars is unashamedly a first strike global missile shield system. “The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy” in the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Foreign Affairs (March 2006) states: “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. The US Air Force has enhanced the avionics on its B-2 stealth bombers to permit them to fly at extremely low altitudes in order to avoid even the most sophisticated radar.” Deploying short-, medium- and long-range interceptor missile batteries, mobile missile radar stations, long-range super-stealth nuclear bombers, Aegis-class destroyers equipped to sail the world’s seas to hunt down conventional and nuclear missiles, and surveillance satellites and weapons in space is not designed to target non-existent intercontinental ballistic missile threats from Iran or Syria, or even from North Korea, concludes analyst Rick Rozoff, but to blackmail Russia and China and prepare the groundwork to “win” in a first strike nuclear war.

On August 11, just a few days before the Von Baunites gathered in Alabama, Russian Air Force commander Alexander Zelin warned, “By 2030 foreign countries, particularly the US, will be able to deliver coordinated high-precision strikes from air and space against any target on the whole territory of Russia. That is why the main goal of the development of the Russian Air Force until 2020 is to provide a reliable deterrent during peacetime, and repel any military aggression with the use of conventional and nuclear arsenals in a time of war.” The following day Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi told the 65-nation Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, “Outer space is now facing the looming danger of weaponisation. Credible and effective multilateral measures must be taken to forestall the weaponisation and arms race in outer space.”

Make no mistake, the Pentagon is busy shooting for global military supremacy. This year is crucial to get things right before the expiration of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-1) in December. A joint understanding for a follow-on “agreement” to START-1 was signed by Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in July. The US strategy appears to be to replace the treaty with a less formal agreement that eliminates strict verification requirements and weapons limits. Former US assistant secretary of state Paula DeSutter said in May 2007 that the major provisions of the treaty “are no longer necessary. We don’t believe we’re in a place where we need have to have the detailed lists and verification measures.”

More US “logic”, this time dismissing the need for much-hated treaties, which would have to be confirmed by the Senate and, worse yet, adhered to, instead of informal “cooperation”, meaning arm-twisting or merely ignoring protests. The connection between the lack of interest in a replacement for START-1 and Washington’s missile shield designs is not lost on the Russians. The CFR admits that US missile plans in Europe are seen by the Russians “not

so much as missile defense as a deployment of first-strike capability.” Zelin revealed that defence upgrading would include developing “new missiles that will be capable of defending against space-based systems.”

Despite the fact that there is no popular will for militarising space, there is little standing in its way, with “defence” policy now solidly bipartisan, and Euro-silence and even Euro-cheerleading. Only “authoritarian” Russia and China call for a treaty against space warfare. The US dismisses these calls as designed to block its plans for the missile interceptor system. Well, yes, that is the point. “The practice of seeking absolute strategic advantage should be abandoned. Countries should neither develop missile defense systems that undermine global strategic stability nor deploy weapons in outer space,” Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi told the peaceniks in Geneva, as the Von Braunites were promoting peace US-style. He added that China welcomed moves to rid the world of nuclear weapons, including China’s. “The complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons and a nuclear weapon-free world have become widely embraced goals,” Yang said, referring to Obama’s call in April for a “world without nuclear weapons”. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told them much the same. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was conspicuous in Geneva by her absence.

Too bad no US generals or senior government officials bothered to drop in on the Geneva conference, where the fallacy in their “logic” could have been explained to them: a treaty signed by the nations of the world, led by all the permanent members of the UN Security Council, would prevent any “adversaries” from taking “advantage” of using space for military purposes. The most touted blaggard, North Korea, cannot even get its satellites into orbit, assuming they are of any military significance. The rogue states that can and do (no names are necessary) would be forced by a treaty to curb their appetites for cyber Armageddon, allowing the world to breathe slightly more easily.

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