

Rising Budget Stakes for Space Warfare

Exclusive: As a backdrop to the Russia-gate hysteria and the heightened fear of China is a budget war over how much U.S. taxpayer money to pour into space warfare, explains Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

There's a civil war being fought on our nation's soil, right in our capital. It pits the Secretary of Defense and senior generals against a bipartisan band of militant legislators who accuse the Pentagon of standing pat while Russian and China work to achieve military superiority over the United States in space.

No doubt these bureaucratic warriors will eventually call a truce. But in the meantime, the American people will almost certainly become less secure and more indebted (in budget terms) as a result of both sides' macho posturing for new warfighting capabilities in space (differing mostly on how far and how fast to go).

Eager congressional advocates of space warfare have attached an amendment to the House defense authorization bill requiring the Pentagon to create a new U.S. Space Corps to join the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard by 2019. Currently, the Air Force oversees most space warfare projects.

The amendment has sent senior Pentagon leadership into a tizzy. Secretary of Defense James Mattis "strongly" urged Congress to rescind the requirement, stating in a letter that "it is premature to add additional organization and administrative tail to the department at a time I am trying to reduce overhead."

Similarly, Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson protested that the proposal will simply "add more boxes to the organization chart." Meanwhile, Gen. John W. Raymond, commander of Air Force Space Command, insisted that his service has space matters well in hand. (He should be happy – the Pentagon recently raised his position to a 4-star rank.)

Upping the Ante

In response, Rep. Mike Rogers, an Alabama Republican and chairman of the Strategic Forces subcommittee, announced that he was "pissed" and "outraged" at the Air Force for fighting the new Space Command, saying its obstructionism would "set back efforts to respond to adversaries and space threats" and allow Russia and China "to surpass us soon."

"The Air Force leadership would have us trust them: I don't think so," Rogers

sneered, as if speaking about the Russians. “They just need a few more years to rearrange the deck chairs: I don’t think so. This is the same Air Force that got us into the situation where the Russians and the Chinese are near-peers to us in space.” He vowed, “We will not allow the status quo to continue.”

Behind all the fiery argumentation lies a bipartisan consensus that the United States must sharply increase its spending on the militarization of space to maintain global supremacy. Gen. Raymond applauded Congress for recognizing the “national imperative” of his mission to “normalize, elevate, and integrate space as a war-fighting domain.”

Secretary Wilson published an op-ed column last month on her new initiatives to “develop space airmen who have the tools, training, and resources to fight when – not if – war extends into space.” She fully expects Congress to follow through on her request for a 20 percent increase in Air Force space funding. (Total military spending on space, including non-Air Force programs like the National Reconnaissance Office, came to about \$22 billion last year.)

What’s driving all this activity – aside from baser motives of bureaucratic advantage and financial gain – are “intelligence assessments” that “China and Russia have aggressive programs to both demonstrate and produce eventual operational capability to . . . attack our space assets across the spectrum,” in the words of David Hardy, acting deputy undersecretary of the Air Force for Space.

“While we’re not at war in space, I don’t think we can say we’re exactly at peace, either,” said Navy Vice Adm. Charles A. Richard, deputy commander of U.S. Strategic Command, in March. Gen. John Hyten, head of the Pentagon’s Strategic Command, recently declared that the United States needs not only a good defense, but “an offensive capability to challenge” space threats from Russia and China.

The High Stakes in Space

The stakes are potentially huge because the United States uses space for all manner of command, control, and intelligence missions, not to mention civilian applications. Orbiting satellites provide near-real-time images of conflict zones, sense missile launches and nuclear tests, provide precise positioning coordinates to guide weapons systems, and route secure communications to remote regions of the globe.

Of some 1,400 operational satellites currently in orbit, 40 percent belong to the United States, nearly twice as many as Russia and China combined. About 150 U.S. satellites serve military applications.

Any threat to satellites would thus pose a serious, even disproportionate

military risk to the United States. But instead of supporting international initiatives to put space off limits to warfare, Washington has led the way in developing anti-satellite missile technology, encouraging a space arms race that puts our assets in peril.

The United States and Russia experimented with primitive anti-satellite technology as far back as the 1960s, but the United States first used a missile fired from a fighter jet to destroy an aging satellite in 1985. Not until 2007 did China conduct a similar test, blowing up an old weather satellite, while emphasizing its interest in multilateral talks to prevent the weaponization of space. The following year, the United States used a Navy interceptor missile to shoot down a dying military satellite. Russia followed suit with an anti-satellite test in 2015, proving that no military advance goes unanswered.

Some Key Facts

Alarmists who selectively cite Russian and Chinese activities to warn of an impending military space “gap” ignore a few key facts:

1. The United States holds a clear technology lead and spends at least 10 times more on military space operations than *every other country* on earth combined.
2. Although U.S. satellites are vulnerable to attack, most have maneuvering capabilities, shielding against various forms of radiation, and jam-resistant communications.
3. For years, Russia, China and other nations have sought to control the spread of weapons into space – only to face consistent opposition from Washington.

An Outer Space Treaty signed in 1967 limited only the deployment of nuclear weapons in space. In 2002, the George W. Bush administration withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty with Russia, opening the door to widespread deployment of weapons that put U.S. satellites at risk. A year later, the Air Force declared in its Strategic Master Plan that “the ability to exploit space while selectively disallowing it to adversaries is critically important and . . . an essential prerequisite to modern warfare.”

Candidate Barack Obama proposed an international “code of conduct” in space, but as president he met resistance from the State Department and Pentagon, and dropped the idea as U.S.-Russia relations soured. In 2011, Congress passed an amendment banning cooperation with China in space, thus encouraging a military space race between our countries.

In 2014, the United Nations General Assembly voted 126 to 4 to pass a Russian

resolution banning an arms race in space. The four dissenting countries were Georgia, Israel, Ukraine – and the United States.

Because the United States depends on space more than any other nation, both for military security and commerce, it has the most to lose if wars spread into space. Instead of relying only on military superiority to keep us safe, the time is long overdue to pursue diplomatic options for arms control – which potentially could help us achieve greater security for far less money.

“Unfortunately, the structural inertia that supports and, indeed, advocates, aggressive space postures requiring expensive weapon systems is strong,” notes Joan Johnson-Freese, a professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College and expert on space warfare. “Congressional support for their efforts is easily garnered, as building hardware creates lucrative jobs and corporate profits, whereas diplomacy does not.

“But if the goal of U.S. space security efforts is to maintain stability in space so it can fully utilize its space assets, then the time seems ripe for proactive diplomatic leadership and, at the same time, sustained strategic restraint. Otherwise, the U.S. will be seen (not for the first time) as advocating a policy of do-as-we-say-and-not-as-we-do regarding pursuit of offensive space capabilities.”

Johnson-Freese is not alone in her call for fresh new thinking about space warfare. A 2016 policy paper that she co-authored was published of all places by the Atlantic Council – a pro-NATO, Pentagon-funded think tank.

Its introduction declared, “The days of ‘space dominance’ are over and we need to move from thinking of space as a military domain of offense and defense to a more complex environment that needs to be managed by a wide range of international players. Doing so would calm growing tensions in space and, with deft management, lead to a more stable, peaceful space domain.”

The author of those words was retired Marine Gen. James Cartwright, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They are words that sensible Americans – who want a safer world and a sane limit on military spending – should rally round. We will stand a greater chance of preserving our civilization if we reserve space wars for movies and novels.

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