

Hyperventilating Over 'Space Weapons'

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HOUSTON, June 17 (SPX) -- Mere military exploration of space hardware doesn't mean the next Star Wars is at hand. In fact, misinformation in such matters is quite dangerous in this world. Is the sanctity of the heavens about to be violated by the United States making a unilateral introduction of aggressive weapons that could spark a destabilizing arms race? Is the White House about to unleash an unprecedented expansion of regions to fight over in the future?

You'd be forgiven for thinking so, based on news reports in recent weeks and on complaints from foreign countries such as Russia and China.

According to major U.S. newspapers, a wide range of high-tech armaments may soon be approved and funded, with deployment in space only a matter of time. At that point, reluctant foreign nations will feel compelled to "respond in kind," unleashing an expensive and dangerous new arms race.

But a sober reality check can put the issue into better perspective. If anything is likely to spark a "new arms race," this time in outer space, it's unlikely to be the usual suspects. Gung-ho space-superiority mantras have been coming from U.S. Air Force leaders for decades, but without funding, it has mostly been just bold talk.

Space hardware with weapons-like applications has also been around, on Earth and in space, for decades - but using it to break things in orbit never made much military sense, then or now or in the foreseeable future.

Nothing here has changed. No, the impetus for a future foreign "reaction" doesn't need a genuine U.S. "action" - it only needs the near-hysterical ranting from American newspapers, from lobby groups posing as "information centers" but having long-familiar agendas, and from foreign nations eager to score cheap propaganda points.

By whipping up anxieties with little rational justification, these self-serving fear mongers may actually lead to the creation of something well worth fearing: the arming of a new battleground, out in space.

Phantom threats

We've seen it before, nations reacting not to threats but to illusory phantoms, or to badly reasoned deductions. Russia is particularly vulnerable to such manipulation, from the major defensive weapons systems it fielded to counter U.S. armaments that appeared only on the pages of Aviation Week, to scary space hardware it actually built to combat what it saw as "soldier-astronauts" aboard militarized Gemini, Apollo and space shuttle vehicles.

In recent years, historians have revealed that Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev bankrupted his country's space program by demanding that his engineers build a copy of NASA's space shuttle because his advisers persuaded him that the United States wanted to use it for bombing Moscow. Aside from the waste, building such hardware created new hazards to everyone involved.

Now come the newest stories that echo down the interconnected corridors of the American mainstream media, about "killer satellites" and "death stars" and "Rods from God" bombardment systems - as if the Hollywoodized terminology wasn't a clue that most of the subject matter was equally imaginary.

Take the opening paragraph of a recent Christian Science Monitor editorial that denounced what it portrayed as "the possible first-ever overt deployment of weapons where heretofore only satellites and astronauts have gone." But history reveals an entirely different reality.

Weapons have occasionally been deployed in space for decades, without sparking mass arms races or hair-trigger tensions. These are not just systems that send warheads through space, such as intercontinental missiles or the proposed global bomber. These are systems that put the weapons into stable orbits, circling Earth, based in space. And these systems were all Russian ones, by the way, most of them predating President Reagan's "Strategic Defense Initiative" to develop an anti-missile system.

But it's not the equipment that's important (that's why the United States never responded to earlier Russian space weapons); it's the offensive capabilities the hardware is supposed to deliver. That's what must be considered foremost before considering the likelihood of responses.

The reality of space

So scary tales about U.S. "death stars" hovering over target countries promising swift strikes from space rely merely on readers not understanding the basics of orbital motion in space. A satellite circles Earth in an ever-shifting path that passes near any particular target only a few times every 24 hours, not every 10 minutes. It's quicker and cheaper to strike ground targets with missiles launched from the ground.

Nor is a space rendezvous robot, such as those under development by half a dozen nations and commercial consortia, a "space weapon" - despite media claims that one of them, the Air Force's XSS-11 satellite, could perform as a weapon. Plenty of productive peaceful rationales for these vehicles exist, from refueling to repair to resupply, and they are

going to be deployed in large numbers in coming years.

Raising unjustified fears about them and other so-far-totally-conceptual space vehicles may be politically or ideologically satisfying to some, but in the big picture, feeding foreign prejudices and stoking the insecurities of some naturally paranoid cultures is a dangerous game.

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