



briefing

[#04/3]

Space and Missile Defence: Sorting Fact from Controversy

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March 2004*

The essential facts surrounding ballistic missile defence (BMD) and its possible role in weaponizing space are not really in serious dispute. Canadian BMD proponents and opponents alike understand that the feasibility of placing into orbit weapons that have the capacity to be fired from space at any time to successfully intercept hostile ballistic missiles is, to understate the matter, yet to be proven. Much of the technology for such a feat has hardly been imagined, and any concrete development of prototypes, much less operational weapons, is a long, long way off.

There is also no denying the American intention to pursue such a capacity as part of its overall BMD effort. The US Administration has stated it clearly and repeatedly. The most recent budget request sets out a plan to begin research in 2005 on a space-based weapons test bed, with the intention, or hope, to deploy such a test bed in space in 2012 and then to begin testing interceptor technology sometime after that.¹

Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham was also essentially correct when he recently told the House of Commons (Government of Canada 2004) that one could interpret the trend in the US as being away from weaponization of space

because the target date for deploying a test bed has been delayed from 2008 to 2012. But that delay is not claimed by anyone, including the Minister, as evidence that an American policy to claim the prerogative to weaponize space is also receding. Indeed, the US Air Force Transformation Flight Plan lists a range of additional space-based energy weapons, space-based weapons platforms, and air- and ground-based anti-satellite weapons that are on the drawing boards.²

The current American effort related to placing ballistic missile defence interceptors in space is technologically uncertain but politically audacious. The technological uncertainty is imposed by science, but the political audacity is rooted in the US intention to challenge and decisively break what is now a broad international consensus, a norm against the weaponization of space.

The norm against weaponizing space dates back to President Eisenhower's 1958 proposal to the Russians that outer space be preserved for peaceful purposes,³ and has been reinforced annually in the past 20 years by the almost universally supported UN General Assembly resolution on "prevention of an arms race in

outer space” (PAROS). Only the United States, Israel, and Micronesia reject the consensus through abstentions.

PAROS has been on the agenda of the Conference on Disarmament (CD) since 1985. The CD is a treaty-negotiating body and the point of the PAROS agenda item is to convert the *norm* against weaponizing space into a *law* to prevent the placement of weapons of any kind in space. The CD, however, operates by consensus and since 1994 the United States (indirectly aided by China which, while supporting PAROS, links its willingness to negotiate to action on another issue) has blocked action on PAROS. Many other CD members assume that there will be no action on PAROS at least as long as the US continues to promote BMD as an evolutionary technology and asserts a specific intention to include space-based weapons in that evolution.

Both sides of the Canadian debate basically accept all of the above. However, they offer different answers to the question of whether a Canadian decision to support any element of US BMD development and deployment gives political support to the proponents of weaponizing space and thereby undermines Canada's opposition to weapons in space and, more particularly, action at the CD.

The Government insists that the two issues are not connected. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs and National Defence have both repeatedly stated that Canada is exploring participation in the ground-based, mid-course interception element of BMD only and that this element does not envision weapons in space. But, now that discussions are actually getting down to specifics, we are finding that these earlier assurances and distinctions have become blurred.

The January 15, 2004 letter from Defence Minister Pratt to US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, which formally purports to set out the parameters of the Canada-US negotiations on BMD, is explicit about a number of things that are to be included, but not about anything that is to be excluded. It says, for example, that missile defence cooperation should be through NORAD, that the NORAD agreement should be amended, that a Memorandum of Understanding should facilitate industry-to-industry cooperation, and that such an MOU would “include Canada as a participant in the current US missile defence program.”

In the context of all that detail, the letter's omission of any reference to space weaponization has been widely remarked upon, and is especially relevant because it commits Canada to the “current” US BMD program, which includes research on placing weapons in space. So, the more interesting omission is the failure to confirm the Government's earlier insistence that Canadian participation is to be limited to the ground-based, mid-course interception element. The letter adopts the Pentagon's vague language of an overall system that is to “evolve” over time, including into space if that is where the technology takes it. And Minister Pratt's letter explicitly says that Canada's cooperation “should also evolve.”

While Canadian officials and political leaders, in their statements in Canada, emphasize Canada's exploration of only the ground-based mid-course interception element as if it is a discreet system, that claim did not make it into the framework letter because the United States does not recognize any element of the system as discreet. In its 2005 budget request the MDA (2004) explains the integration of BMD work into a single system: “We have transitioned the program from a collection of individually defined elements to a program focused on a

single, integrated system whose performance is measured as a whole. In this context, elements and components are measured by their contribution to overall system performance.”

In a recent House of Commons debate Mr. Graham sought to ameliorate the resulting concern: “What matters for this debate and our decision is that our participation in the weaponization of space is not something that Canada will be part of nor that the Minister of National Defence or myself envisage being involved in.” But the objective of Canadian policy has not simply been to keep Canada from becoming involved in a space weapons program; the Canadian objective has been to prevent all weaponization of space.

Canada's aim, in common with that of most of the rest of the world, has been to ensure that the current global norm against the weaponization of space is honoured and codified as international law. The way in which the Government has framed the current negotiations with the United States puts its commitment to that objective in doubt, and if Canada's policy is now confined simply to keeping Canada out of space weaponization, it represents a major reversal.

Furthermore, the objective must not only be to prevent the placement of weapons in space, but to prevent space from becoming a theatre of armed conflict. The consequences of space combat, from the generation of space debris, to undermining the security of the communications, commercial, scientific, and other uses of space that terrestrial society now relies on, are truly immeasurable.

Through the effective work of the Non-Proliferation, Arms Control & Disarmament Division (IDA) in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT),

Canada is developing a broad policy of space security. For space to be secure its use must be regulated (including orbital slots, radio frequencies, as well as minimizing the creation of space debris), and it must most certainly be prevented from becoming a theatre of war (meaning not only a ban on placing weapons into orbit, but also a ban on anti-satellite weapons [ASATs], whether ground-, air-, or space-based).⁴

The United States has been entirely frank about its intention to weaponize space and to prepare its forces for combat from, into, and within space. Its pursuit of ballistic missile defence is at the core of that intention and unambiguously violates Canada's historic policy against weaponization of space and against space becoming a zone of combat. The very least that must be said is that support for BMD is an obstacle to the success of the latter.

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Notes

¹ Funding for the space-based interceptor research beginning in 2005 is modest and is part of \$47 million (US) for new missile defence technologies, that include boost/ascent phase as well as sea-based launcher research (without specific information available about how much of that is for space-based interceptor research) (Missile Defense Agency 2004). *Aerospace Daily* reports that the amount requested for 2005 is \$10 million, and that the first “on-orbit experiments” are scheduled for “around 2010” (Samson 2004).

² Theresa Hitchens of the Center for Defense Information reported on the US Air Force Transformation Flight Plan of November 2003, which lists a broad range of planned space

weapons programs. These include air- and ground-based anti-satellite weapons, space-based radio frequency energy weapons, and space-based vehicles and weapons platforms. Hitchens reports that while earlier space plans were generally described as requiring special presidential authorization to deploy and even test such weapons, the USAF Space Master Plan now refers to the need for Presidential authorization to “employ” such systems (not “deploy”). All these systems are currently projected for deployment beginning around 2015 (Hitchens, 2004).

³ President Eisenhower proposed, in a January 13, 1958 letter to Nikolai Bulganin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, that both nations agree to use outer space for peaceful purposes only.

⁴ US policy and research currently and actively pursue the development of space-based weapons and anti-satellite weapons of various types. Indeed, the ground-based, mid-course interceptor missiles will in the foreseeable future probably have much greater potential, and will be seen by others as anti-satellite weapons rather than anti-missile weapons.

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Project Ploughshares is an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches, formed to implement the churches' imperative to pursue peace and justice. The mandate given to Project Ploughshares is to work with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict.

“and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4)