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US turns space into its colony

By Ehsan Ahrari

President George W Bush signed an executive order creating a new National Space Policy on Wednesday. The most crucial feature of this policy is that it "rejects future arms-control agreements that might limit US flexibility in space and asserts a right to deny access to space to anyone 'hostile to US interests.'" It adds: "The United States will preserve its rights, capabilities and freedom of action in space ... and deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to US national

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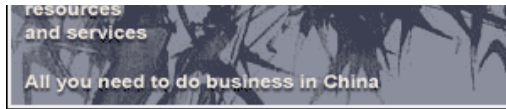
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interests."

As much as the United States is hesitant to admit it, the arms race is very much on in space. However, the United States is not the only country pursuing its own military dominance of space. The Bush administration soon will be known for issuing a slew of "strategies." The upside of that pattern is that it enables those in charge of any strategy to think comprehensively and systematically, and to remain focused on all its aspects.

However, the downside of having a strategy is that it unduly raises hopes for the solution of a problem that any strategy is aimed at resolving. What dashes the hopes of those affected is the realization that having a strategy holds no promise that the issue of its focus will be resolved in the short term. That is what is happening to US strategies to fight global terrorism, and for homeland security, infrastructure protection and cyber terrorism.

The National Space Policy also suffers from the fact that it is issued in the post-September 11, 2001, era when militarism is such a dominant characteristic of almost all American approaches to national security. So, the policy sends unmistakable signals to Russia, China and India - the first a veteran space power; the latter fledgling actors in that realm - that the United States intends to monopolize its long-standing space presence by militarizing it.

The Bush administration continues to deny that it has any intention of militarizing space. However, there is ample evidence to conclude otherwise.

What concerns international observers and America's potential competitors in space is that the US refuses to negotiate a space arms-control accord. Its rationale is that no such agreements are needed, because there is no space arms race. However, the US Air Force has published a Counterspace Operations Doctrine, which "calls for a more active military posture in space", and says that protecting US satellites and spacecraft may require "deception, disruption, denial, degradation and destruction".

America's space competitors also vividly recall that the current Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld chaired a commission which recommended to Congress that it develop space weapons to protect military and civilian satellites.

The Bush administration also made its space-related objectives quite clear at the outset. They comprise strengthening "the nation's space leadership", ensuring "that space capabilities are available in time to further US national security, homeland security and foreign policy objectives" and ensuring "unhindered US operations in and through space to defend our interests there".

For China, the chief problem related to space competition stems from America's overwhelming dominance in satellite technology. Consequently, the US military can study, on a detailed basis, the movement of forces, movement of vehicles and missile platforms, and other highly sensitive military activities of its potential competitors and adversaries pretty much at will and develop appropriate countermeasures.

Considering the fact that satellite technology expertise cannot be developed quickly, and in view of the fact that it is a highly controlled Western technology, a country like China does not expect to close the gap with the US in the foreseeable future. However, despite the wide technology gap in the realm of

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satellite development, China is not without countermeasures of its own.

Early this month, the Pentagon confirmed that Beijing had "tested its anti-satellite laser and jammed a US satellite". Even though China was not able to damage the capabilities of the American satellite to collect intelligence, it underscored the issue of vulnerability of satellites in future warfare. In a conflict, say, with Iran, Chinese anti-satellite technology could be quite effective in blinding American spy satellites.

In all likelihood, Congress may revisit its previous opposition to its own anti-satellite laser program, Starfire, whose funding was blocked by the House of Representatives. What also bothers America's competitors is that, during the Bill Clinton administration, the US was willing to abide by treaty obligations regarding freedom of action in space. The Bush administration is willing to do the same. However, it has declared that it "will oppose the development of new legal regimes or other restrictions that seek to prohibit or limit US access to or use of space".

America's overwhelming space-based military superiority is also driving its opposition to any negotiations banning space weapons. A number of its "key weapons systems are now dependent on information and communications from orbiting satellites ... The US military has developed and deployed far more space-based technology than any other nation, giving it great strategic advantages. But with the superior technology has come a perceived vulnerability to attacks on essential satellites."

There is little doubt that the space arms race is on. Right now, the US is soft-peddling its profound predilection to make sure that it stays way ahead of the game. However, like in all realms of scientific activities, there is no doubt that its predominance will be seriously challenged. China may be the country that leads in closing that gap within the next decade or so. When it does, there is little doubt that China will be as much preoccupied with having its own share of militaristic presence as the United States.

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