



Defense News

Published 07/18/05

Arming the Cosmos Sat Protection Could Be Step to Weaponizing Space

By Ralph Earle and Jack Shanahan

The New York Times reported May 28 that the Pentagon wants to protect U.S. satellites with space-based weapons, a plan the Union of Concerned Scientists says is prohibitively expensive and could trigger an arms race in space.

The scientists are correct, but their concerns address only the tip of the iceberg. The larger and unspoken truth has more to do with national missile defense than it does with protecting undefended satellites.

The Pentagon and its array of defense contractors are slowly concluding, if they haven't already, that the land-based ballistic missile defense (BMD) system currently deployed and characterized as operational is inadequate to the task.

No matter how much money is poured down the rat hole, BMD as currently planned will not be capable of defending U.S. territory against even a limited number of incoming nuclear warheads.

One can assume the money needed can be dealt with, and that's probably true given the Pentagon's track record on spending. However, technology is the controlling factor; technology cannot provide a land- and sea-based BMD that is 100 percent leak proof, and nothing less should be accepted by our citizens.

The solution for many National Missile Defense advocates is to move into space with space-based sensors and weapons designed to kill intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) launched against U.S. territory.

The Bush administration seems to be laying the groundwork for just such a jump. Defending our system of unarmed satellites is a good excuse to support planning

and spending on the Space Based Infrared System High (SBIRS High) and SBIRS Low.

SBIRS High would put five infrared sensors in a high space orbit. SBIRS Low would place 24 sensors in a low space orbit. In addition to supporting these space-based detection systems, a number of National Missile Defense supporters are calling for space-based lasers to intercept and kill enemy ICBMs during the boost phase of the rocket.

National Missile Defense advocates in the military-industrial-congressional complex see weapons in space as the only viable way to put an ICBM umbrella over U.S. territory. But given the technological uncertainties and the difficulty (if not impossibility), once again, in achieving 100 percent certainty of success, we would simply be moving to an even bigger rat hole.

If they have their way and weapons in space becomes U.S. policy, then we ain't seen nothing yet. The concerned scientists worry about the prohibitive expense, where the costs will actually be astronomically prohibitive.

The policy will not only cause an arms race in space but will reignite an arms race in offensive ballistic missiles here on Earth, and we can forget about a reduction in the nuclear arsenals of current nuclear powers as called for in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Regional stability will be replaced with instability as nations such as Japan, the Koreas, Iran and others join the race to achieve nuclear insecurity.

There must be a better way to enhance our security and that of the world community than by arming the cosmos.

Ralph Earle is a former director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Jack Shanahan, former U.S. commander of the Atlantic Fleet, is chairman of the Military Advisory Committee for Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities.