

8-2018

Will Trump's Space Force Lead to the Militarization of Space?

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Citation of this paper:

Simpson, Erika. "Will Trump's Space Force Lead to the Militarization of Space?" *Peace Magazine*, Vol. 34, No. 3, July-August pp. 16-19.

Trump's Space Force will Incite an Arms Race in Space



BY ERIKA SIMPSON

*"We're
getting
very big
in space"*

-D. Trump

US President Donald Trump has decided to develop an entirely new branch of the US military called the "Space Force." It will be primarily geared toward war efforts in space. Trump told an audience at Miramar Air Station, near San Diego, during a speech on March 13 that "Space is a warfighting domain, just like the land, air and sea" and such a visionary idea could become reality soon: "I was saying it the other day, because we're doing a tremendous amount of work in space – maybe we need a new force, we'll call it the Space Force." Mr. Trump added, "I was not really serious, and then I said 'what a great idea, maybe we'll have to do that. That could happen.'"¹

In an address to members of the West Point football team at the White House on May 1, the President announced, "You will be part of the five proud branches of the United States Armed Forces – Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and the Coast Guard. And we're actually thinking of a sixth, and that would be the Space Force.... You probably haven't even heard that. I'm just telling you now. We're getting very big in space, both militarily and for other reasons, and we are seriously thinking of the Space Force."²

Most recently in a speech at a meeting of the National Space Council on June 18, Trump envisioned the Space Force would protect American interests in space through monitoring commercial traffic and debris. Such initiatives would be "great not only in terms of jobs and everything else it's great for the psyche of our country."³

AN ARMS RACE IN SPACE?

The President's musings about outer space and developing plans to make it a national security priority could lead to an arms race in space. Taken together with other abrupt news, like Trump's announcement that the U.S. will abandon the Iran nuclear deal,⁴ the proposed Space Force could further undermine the nuclear arms control regime.

The risk is that the US could eclipse both Russia and China, beyond Earth's atmosphere, and for

ulate technology that could interfere with its adversaries' ballistic missiles, as well as satellites. Just before Christmas, the US Congress rushed through the Pentagon's request for US\$4 billion to detect, defeat, and defend against ballistic missiles. "We are ordering \$4 billion worth of missile defense equipment and missiles themselves. Very important," Trump said at the White House. "Top of the line. Best in the world. We make the best military product in the world and nobody is even close."⁵

There are few details and there seems to be little understanding among military and arms control experts about what the new American money will be spent on. According to the President, \$4 billion will be spent by designating missile defence as an "emergency defense fund." His reasoning is that, "And I'm very honoured to be doing that. Our military has been doing a fantastic job in so many ways, with ISIS. And everything they're touching lately has been working out. So we're signing that."⁶ It is difficult to figure out why the military's success at defeating ISIS on the ground, and its Midas touch, means that the US should dominate space, but Trump's urge to dominate others on all fronts may be a prime factor.

THE NEW NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW ALSO MENTIONS OPERATIONAL SPACE FORCES

On the other hand, the Trump administration recently released the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)—the document that guides the US nuclear strategy—and it makes clear that nuclear modernization is the U.S. administration's highest national defence priority. The US military intends to strengthen its protection against space-based threats, as well the Nuclear Command, Control and Communications (NC3) system that is "a legacy of the Cold War, last comprehensively updated almost three decades ago." According to the NPR, "The United States will enhance the training of operational space forces to ensure we are prepared to successfully achieve mission objectives against the range of 21st century threats."⁷ Thus, the concept of a Space Force is not just Trump's own idea but a product of long-term planning that came into play well before Trump attained office.

Will the US seek the cooperation of its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in developing the Space Force and its Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) project? Concerns have arisen that the US administration might once again ask Canada, its closest NATO ally, to participate in missile defense.

WILL CANADA BE ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SPACE FORCE AND BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENCE?

The last time a US president requested Canada's cooperation in missile defence was when George W. Bush made a high-profile public plea on Canadian soil. Back in 2003, the Liberals and the NDP had already raised many questions about US plans to militarize space and attain full-spectrum dominance in the space war theatre. Former foreign affairs minister Lloyd Axworthy and other prominent Liberals feared the US missile-defence program could be a prelude to an arms race in space. New Democrat Alexa McDonough, then leader of the party, told the House of Commons her party believed the Liberals wanted to "kiss up" to US President Bush.⁸

Then-Prime Minister Martin decided against participation in February 2005, and all the political parties supported the Liberal decision not to participate in BMD, except the Conservatives. Conservative leader Stephen Harper promised that, if elected, he would reverse the Liberal de-

cision and put the question before Parliament for a free vote. Nevertheless, as prime minister from 2006 to 2015, he did not hold a free vote and the issue laid dormant, until now.

2017 DEFENCE POLICY REVIEW IS AMBIGUOUS ON THE QUESTION

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government is so far not taking a stand on the issue either, apart from a few perfunctory lines in the 2017 defence policy review, *Strong Secure, Engaged*. The government notes, "While Canada remains fully committed to the peaceful use of space, our assets have become potential targets, with some states developing a range of anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) that could potentially threaten access to the space domain." The government adds, "Canada can demonstrate leadership by promoting the military and civilian norms of responsible behaviour in space required to ensure the peaceful use of outer space." On the other hand, the review also asserts that to keep pace, "Canada must develop advanced space and cyber capabilities, and expand cutting-edge research and development"; moreover, "Canada and the United States must work closely together on NORAD modernization in order to defend North America."⁹ Taken altogether, the government seems ambiguous on the militarization of space rather than firmly opposed.

CANADA'S FRAYED RELATIONS WITH THE U.S.

Thus, it is too early to say whether the Trudeau administration might reconsider or reverse the Martin and Harper's governments' legacy on the outer space and missile defence files. But many MPs and their constituents might want, somehow, to mend frayed relations with Washington. Trump has already blasted Canada and other NATO allies for lower defence spending on NATO. On his first foreign trip, he pressured NATO leaders to raise their defence spending to two per cent of their country's GDP.¹⁰ Then after the Group of Seven summit in Quebec in June, Mr. Trump tweeted that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was "very dishonest & weak."¹¹

EMERGING PLANS IN THE U.S. CONTINUE, ALBEIT CANADA-U.S. FRICTION

No matter what the Prime Minister, the Liberal caucus or the Canadian Parliament decides about how to deal with the US President,

Prime Minister Trudeau is so far not taking a stand on the issue

Canadians just didn't believe in participating in missile defence

the actual development of Ballistic Missile Defence and a Space Force will be expensive and difficult. But the US is experimenting. The Trump administration is expanding its strategy to use cyberweapons to interfere with an adversary, like North Korea's control systems, before missiles are launched. Emerging plans are to use drones and fighter jets to shoot missiles down moments after liftoff, and to expand the missile defence network on the West Coast for use in case all else fails.¹²

A RISK EITHER WAY

No matter whether Canada joins the expanding US missile defence project or not, there will always be the risk that nuclear debris from errant or colliding ballistic missiles rains over Canada. In the 1960s, there were top-secret US plans for nuclear-armed American Bomarc missiles based in Canada to intercept Soviet bombers carrying nuclear payloads over Canadian airspace, thus possibly raining nuclear fallout over southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan. However, former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker and his minister of external affairs, Howard Green, ultimately decided not to equip the Bomarc with nuclear warheads.¹³

Concerns are that if a new US BMD system pursues the capability to conduct a first strike from space, possibly against a rogue state like North Korea's hardened underground nuclear silos, then Russia, China and North Korea's nuclear deterrent could be threatened as well.

RECKLESS AND RUTHLESS

Among the world's youngest and most inexperienced leaders, Kim Jong-Un is supreme commander of a formidable million-member conventional army armed with nuclear weapons that can range thousands of kilometres through space. Kim Jong Un and Trump extoll their friendship now, in the wake of their diplomatic summit on June 12, but Trump officially declared North Korea still a threat to U.S. national security on June 22.¹⁴ Recall barely six months' prior, in Kim's New Year's address, the ruthless leader said, "The U.S. should know that the button for nuclear weapons is on my table," and "The entire area of the U.S. mainland is within our nuclear strike range...The United States can never start a war against me and our country."

Their new friendship could fall apart due in part to Trump's reckless temperament. The next day, after Kim's New Year's address, Trump angrily tweeted in reply, "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone from his depleted and food-starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"¹⁵

Even if Trump's button were to work (actually, what he has is known as the football, a deadly briefcase that carries the nuclear codes and never leaves the president's side), it is unlikely any nation will be able to 100 percent reliably shoot down an adversary's nuclear rockets in space. And just one miss means nuclear devastation below.

QUESTIONS GOING FORWARD

Should Canada participate in missile defence and help build a "Fortress America"? Back in 2000, the Deputy Commander of US Space Command, Vice Admiral Herbert Brown, made headlines when he warned that the US would have no obligation to defend

Ottawa from attack if Canada was not part of a missile defence system.^{xvi} Now if we continue to participate in NORAD, Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and the North Warning System (NWS)—the figurative 'walls' of Fortress America—will we have to help construct a new 'roof'—a space-based missile defence system possibly operated by a new branch of US commandos?

Would the U.S. militarization of space incite Russia and China to engage in yet another arms race, this time in outer space? Could the NATO allies including Canada be stuck with a mounting tab as costs of developing a BMD rapidly escalate? And if Canada decide to join the US, somehow, might Canadian firms benefit from research and development on space-based weapons of war?

Canadians need answers to these sorts of difficult questions so we need to seek more feedback from high-level American defence officials. It will be difficult to assess whether current Canadian defence policy—presumably against participation in a Space Force and Ballistic Missile Defence—would be seriously out of step with Washington's interests.

Problematically, in future years, the US missile defence system could establish a first-strike-from-space capability using some kind of Space Force. Further stages of Canadian involvement might turn out to be incremental, beginning with the placement of missile interceptors on Canadian territory in the Arctic. If we eventually signed onto greater involvement, we might be expected to collaborate more fully in the United States' program to militarize space.

There are no polls, yet, that tell us more about whether public opinion would support joining the US in space and contributing to BMD, but some may wonder whether Canada's reputation as a peace broker would be undermined. Our country has long been

a staunch advocate of diplomatic efforts to prevent the militarization of space. Canada has a strong interest in keeping Earth's orbit a demilitarized zone. And any Star Wars defence system pushed by the Trump administration to undertake a first strike against Iran or the DPRK might belie our position as a world-famous peacemaker.

During the first round of the BMD debate, in the 1990s, opinion polls showed that over 60 percent of Canadians opposed participating in US missile defence. That figure was even higher in Quebec — a region where every party needs support. "Canadians just didn't believe in participating," said Steven Staples, the author of *Missile Defence: Round One*.¹⁶

EARTH'S ORBIT SHOULD BE A DEMILITARIZED ZONE

BMD's strong links to the currently unpopular Trump administration might temporarily make it an unpopular cause among many Canadians who are wary of Trump's aggressive foreign policy and unpredictability. Over the long-term, ordinary Canadian citizens may feel more comfortable with our country acting as a middle power — and pushing a disarmament agenda — rather than joining forces with the United States to set up systems in space that destabilize arms control. Wary of Trump's aggressive tweets and previous threats to destroy North Korea, as well as tear up the arms control agreement with Iran, more Canadians might want to join with a growing number of Americans that share an interest in keeping Earth's orbit a demilitarized zone. □

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Notes

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