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Avoiding a space war ✓

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The implications of the new US attitude toward the military use of space are beginning at last to be discussed. This is of the greatest importance. The issue is whether it is decided that America must prepare for space war and therefore make it likely. A perverse reasoning has developed to make it appear inevitable that only "control of space" can assure national defence.

The quote is from the report of a congressionally designated commission on space headed by Donald Rumsfeld. It was made public in January just before he became secretary of defence. Since then he has ordered a reorganisation of the Pentagon bureaucracy to provide a space command under a four-star air force general to focus on plans and coordination.

This goes well beyond the question of the missile defence that the Bush administration wants to build. A high-powered campaign has been launched to persuade allies, the Russians and the Chinese to drop or at least mute their opposition to the missile defence idea, which is still very imprecise. The official name of the program has been changed from "national missile defence" to just "missile defence," which could make it much broader by including many other

countries, or narrower by limiting it to specific military theatres such as North Korea, or both.

But use of space translates the whole military concept of threat and defence from the existing political geography on earth to the limitless possibilities of borderless space. The thinking derives from what is consid-

ered - the more vulnerable is the whole US defence structure.

To protect those assets, there will have to be new weapons to attack the incoming assailant. These may be land-or sea- or even air-based weapons, as is contemplated in the current program to defend against ballistic missiles aimed at installations

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ered the self-evident fact that the United States must equip itself with the most modern, most technologically advanced weapons it can make in order to remain a power beyond challenge. Such weapons rely more and more on space-based facilities to provide crucial intelligence and communications.

Those assets are vulnerable. They cannot be protected from a conceivable hostile attack by existing American force. And the more the existing force relies on them - for the guidance of cruise missiles, for command and control, for identification of enemy strength, among many exam-

ples - the more vulnerable is the whole US defence structure.

on land. But more likely will be an effort to develop space-based defences, because time will be a most critical factor.

The circle closes. The space-based defenders must also be guaranteed. This is the recipe for space war, without even an identification of a likely enemy. There are hints that the Pentagon experts who urge "control of space" consider that China might intend to be a foe, but it is a weird element of this kind of futurism that finding out who is supposed to be the enemy is the last and least important question.

The assumption is that if a valued

asset is vulnerable, someone will want to attack it. Secretary Rumsfeld has warned that America might face a "space Pearl Harbor" from someone out there when the time comes. The suggestion is that sovereign responsibility, which applies to American territory, can also be claimed for whatever place the United States chooses to occupy in space. Mr Rumsfeld's warning is striking because the unexpected 1941 attack on the most important US Pacific base was a huge military catastrophe.

The United States does not "own" any part of space, but there is no agreement, law or convention on what it may or may not put up there. The nearest existing international rule is the concept of the high seas and everybody's right to use them without interfering with others. It is not too late to shift thinking about space from its being the next battlefield to being a global common that all have an interest in keeping peaceful. But that cannot be taken for granted while at the same time one is planning for military encounters. There must be an open, searching debate on the technology and politics of missile defence and also on how the United States views space, if the world is not to drift into another threat of cataclysmic confrontation. Unintended consequences can become unavoidable.

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