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A US Air Force X-37B robotic space plane, also known as the Orbital Test Vehicle

A US Air Force X-37B robotic space plane, also known as the Orbital Test Vehicle, was originally developed by Boeing for NASA. Its purposes are classified. (Photo: Boeing)

A Galactic Mistake: Preparing for Space War in a Time of Plague

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"It must not be forgotten that it is perhaps more dangerous for a nation to allow itself to be conquered intellectually than by arms."
Guillaume Apollinaire, "The New Spirit and the Poets" (1917)

The United States Space Force was created by US President Donald Trump on December 20, 2019, under terms of the National Defense Authorization Act. Although it is intended to bolster this country's overall military power in any expanding strategic competition with Russia, its most likely effects will be contractive, corrosive, and destabilizing. The critical underlying US policy error being committed in this creation is conceptual and historic. In essence, it consists of failing to recognize that centuries of belligerent geopolitical competition have resulted not in peace, but in various forms of international war. Moreover, at a time when the United States already faces a new and unpredictable set of dangers from worldwide disease pandemic, shifting large sums of money needed for public health to a projected arena of future international conflict represents mistaken national priorities.

At the same time that Trump has been abandoning essential treaties with Russia and economic arrangements with China, this president acts as if extending belligerent nationalism into space is somehow a rational plan. The President, who prides himself on "attitude, not preparation," is sorely mistaken.[1] Any such extension of geopolitical competition will only heighten the probability that America could be "conquered intellectually," not "by arms." Space Force represents an ironic reaffirmation of past Trump policy failures. Where it is correctly understood as logically derivative from this president's "America First" posturing, the operational role of his "Force" will be to extend Realpolitik[2] to still-pristine places where it has never existed before. Significantly, as Realpolitik has never worked here on earth,[3] any intelligent observer should feel compelled to ask:Why should belligerent geopolitics now work on a "galactic" level?

In essence, these failures are all aspects of the "balance of power" world system originally bequeathed at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This conflict-oriented state system sets up an "everyone for himself"[4] pattern of interminable international warfare,[5] and though certain "Westphalian" zero-sum interactions might still have been more-or-less tolerable before the appearance of nuclear weapons, they are unsustainable in our bitterly acrimonious and proliferating nuclear world. They are even more dramatically unsustainable at this fearful time of worldwide disease pandemic.

What America needs today is not another gratuitous or destined-to-fail weapon system[6] (how could it possibly

"succeed" if it doesn't calculably contribute to this country's "assured destruction capability"?), but rather a more conspicuous, well-intentioned presidential commitment to global interdependence and worldwide cooperation.[7] Although it may be true that—at least for the foreseeable future—the United States must take appropriate steps to ensure the overall credibility of American nuclear deterrence, it is *not true* that such credibility requires retaliatory "coverage" in all prospective theatres of large-scale military engagement.[8]

Even if the Russians should “succeed” in militarizing space first, and even if this militarization were to involve nuclear elements, a suitable U.S. countervailing strategy could still remain entirely on this planet. In these calculations, the prospective aggressor (here Russia) would be unconcerned with the geographic origins of any American retaliatory destruction. After all, those origins would have no material consequence as long a US retaliatory strike were judged sufficiently probable and “assuredly destructive.”

This is an absolutely key reason why the United States has no identifiable need for maintaining any specific supremacy in space. Expressed differently, this means that an American president can readily maintain an indispensable US “assured destruction” capability vis-à-vis Russia and/or China without adjusting principal target sets according to ever-changing venues of enemy missile deployments.

Nuclear strategy is certainly a “game” that an American president should always be prepared to “play,” but instead of "America First” (Trump's overall term for a system that willfully punishes the many for the presumed benefit of a contrived few), a rational American president should reject all derivatives and corollaries of “Westphalian” dynamics.[9] Accordingly, any foreign policy that naively seeks to maximize America's own well-being at the zero-sum expense of other states and peoples would be acting not only against certain binding norms of international law,[10] but contrary to its own national security interests.

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No American foreign policy success can be achieved at the sacrificial expense of other countries and peoples. No such presumptive success is sustainable if the rest of the planet must thereby expect a more violent and explosive future. In this connection, it would be difficult to argue that Donald Trump's Space Force could in any way lead us toward a less violent or less explosive global future. Today, at a time when America's fight against worldwide disease pandemic should represent this nation's very highest-priority security challenge, what is required, instead, is the readily decipherable *opposite* of Space Force—a broadened US leadership that demonstrates awareness of human and societal interconnectedness.[11]

Though seemingly oriented toward greater American power and security, building an American Space Force would merely propel this country’s disordered military strategy from one untenable posture of belligerent nationalism to another. What the proponents of Space Force ignore is that all national security options should always be examined from the standpoint of their *cumulative* impact. If the credible effect of this new America First policy initiative will be to spawn reciprocal postures of belligerent nationalism among principal foes (i.e.., Russia and potentially China), the net effect will prove sorely destabilizing and comprehensively negative.[12]

US Space Force official flag unveiled in the White House Oval Office in May 2020

US Space Force official flag unveiled in the White House Oval Office in May 2020. (Photo credit: Getty Images)

Though “force of arms” will assuredly remain a derivative source of military power and threat, America's principal emphasis must now be placed on more promising far-sighted concepts and ideas, not on expanding the “hardware” or tactics of willful human destructiveness. Instead of withholding funds from the World Health Organization,[13] America’s leadership must finally acknowledge the interminable futility of belligerent nationalism, and take certain tangible steps toward expanded worldwide cooperation. Moreover, this president should avoid at all costs any wanton extension of gratuitous belligerence to *intra*-national issues and social relations. Egregiously, in early June 2020, at the height of anti-racism demonstrations across the US, Trump’s Secretary of Defense issued military orders to “dominate the battlefield space” in Washington DC and elsewhere here at home. In this imperiling instance, Mark Esper sent a once-inconceivable presidential message that certain domestic “enemies” were as threatening as foreign powers, terrestrially and otherwise.

It is hardly a medical or biological secret that the factors common to all human beings greatly outnumber those that differentiate one from another. Accordingly, unless leaders of all great states can finally understand that the survival of any one state will inevitably be contingent upon the survival of all, true national security will continue to elude every nation on earth, even the most "powerful." Planet Earth is an organic whole, a fragile unity that exhibits rapidly disappearing opportunities for avoiding successive war and dismemberment. Working together as a global community on a coherent pandemic response represents one such opportunity.

Obviously, the United States has no inherently special obligations in this regard, nor can it afford to build its own most immediate security policies upon narrowly distant hopes. Still, if expressed as an ultimate vision for more durable and just patterns of world politics, Donald Trump might recognize the indissoluble link between America's own physical survival and that of the wider international system. In the final analysis, merely to keep itself "alive," America will have to do whatever it can to preserve the global system as a whole. For the moment, this idea seems insurmountably, perhaps galactically far from the consciousness of America's current president.

Notes

1. "Who is to decide which is the grimmer sight," asks Honore de Balzac, "withered hearts, or empty skulls?"

2. See, by this author, Louis René Beres, *Reason and Realpolitik: US Foreign Policy and World Order*, Lexington Books, 1984; and Louis René Beres, *Mimicking Sisyphus: America’s Countervailing Nuclear Strategy*, Lexington Books, 1983. Regarding philosophical foundations of *Realpoliitk:* "Right is the interest of the stronger," says Thrasymachus in Bk. I, Sec. 338 of Plato, THE REPUBLIC (B. Jowett tr., 1875). "Justice is a contract neither to do nor to suffer wrong," says Glaucon, *id.,* Bk. II, Sec. 359. See also, Philus in Bk III, Sec. 5 of Cicero, DE REPUBLICA.

3. Power politics or a "balance-of-power" has never been more than a facile metaphor. Despite its name, it has never had anything to do with ensuring or ascertaining equilibrium. As such, balance has always been subjective, a matter of assorted individual perceptions. Adversarial states in this "Westphalian" dynamic can never be sufficiently confident that strategic circumstances are suitably "balanced" in their particular favor. In consequence, each side to any contest or competition must perpetually fear that it will somehow be left behind, this creating ever wider and even cascading patterns of national insecurity and collective disequilibrium.

4. Says French Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man*: "The egocentric ideal of a future reserved for those who have managed to attain egoistically the extremity of `everyone for himself' is false and against nature."

5. International law remains a "vigilante" or "Westphalian" system. See: *Treaty of Peace of Munster*, Oct. 1648, 1 Consol. T.S. 271; and *Treaty of Peace of Osnabruck*, Oct. 1648, 1., Consol. T.S. 119, Together, these two

treaties comprise the *Peace of Westphalia*.

6. The Devil in George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* observes correctly that "Man's heart is in his weapons....in the arts of death he outdoes Nature herself....when he goes out to slay, he carries a marvel of mechanisms that lets loose at the touch of his finger all the hidden molecular energies...."

7. We may think here of the applicable Talmudic metaphor: "The earth from which the first man was made was gathered in all the four corners of the world."

8. Understood at purely conceptual levels, US strategic thinkers must inquire accordingly whether accepting a visible posture of limited nuclear war would merely exacerbate enemy nuclear intentions, or whether it would actually enhance this country's overall nuclear deterrence. Such questions have been raised by this author for many years, but usually in explicit reference to more broadly theoretical or generic nuclear threats. See, for example, Louis René Beres, *The Management of World Power: A Theoretical Analysis* (1972); Louis René Beres, *Terrorism and Global Security: The Nuclear Threat* (1979; second edition, 1987); Louis René Beres, *Apocalypse: Nuclear Catastrophe in World Politics* (1980); Louis René Beres, *Mimicking Sisyphus: America's Countervailing Nuclear Strategy* (1983); Louis René Beres, *Reason and Realpolitik: US Foreign Policy and World Order* (1984); Louis René Beres, *Security or Armageddon: Israel's Nuclear Strategy* (1986); and Louis René Beres, *Surviving Amid Chaos: Israel's Nuclear Strategy* (2016).

9. For the most part, these dynamics describe a more-or-less variable condition of "chaos." Though composed in the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* may still offer us a vision of this condition in modern world politics. During chaos, which is a "time of War," says the English philosopher in Chapter XIII ("Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, as concerning their Felicity, and Misery."): "... every man is Enemy to every man... and where the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Still, at the actual time of writing *Leviathan,* Hobbes believed that the condition of "nature" in world politics was less chaotic than that same condition extant among individual human beings. This was because of what he had called the "dreadful equality" of individual men in nature concerning the ability to kill others. Significantly, however, this once-relevant differentiation has effectively disappeared with the continuing manufacture and spread of nuclear weapons, a spread soon apt to be exacerbated by an already-nuclear North Korea and by a not-yet-nuclear Iran.

10. According to Article 53 of the *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*: "…a peremptory norm of general international law is a norm accepted and recognized by the international community of states as a whole as a norm from which no derogation is permitted and which can be modified only by a subsequent norm of general international law having the same character." See: *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties,* Done at Vienna, May 23, 1969. Entered into force, Jan. 27, 1980. U.N. Doc. A/CONF. 39/27 at 289 (1969), 1155 U.N.T.S. 331, *reprinted in* 8 I.L.M. 679 (1969).

11. On this indispensable awareness, we may learn from the ancient Greek Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, "You are a citizen of the universe." A broader idea of "oneness" followed the death of Alexander in 322 BCE, and with it came a coinciding doctrine of "universality" or interconnectedness. By the Middle Ages, this political and social doctrine had fused with the notion of a *respublica Christiana,* a worldwide Christian commonwealth, and Thomas, John of Salisbury and Dante were looking upon Europe as a single and unified Christian community. Below the level of God and his heavenly host, all the realm of humanity was to be considered as one. This is because all the world had been created for the same single and incontestable purpose; that is, to provide background for the necessary drama of human salvation. Only in its relationship to the universe itself was the world correctly considered as a part rather than a whole. Said Dante in *De Monarchia*: "The whole human race is a whole with reference to certain parts, and, with reference to another whole, it is a part. For it is a whole with reference to particular kingdoms and nations, as we have shown; and it is a part with reference to the whole

universe, which is evident without argument." Today, of course, the idea of human oneness can and should be fully justified/explained in more purely secular terms of understanding.

12. Included in this assessment must be the expanding risks of US Presidential nuclear decision-making. By this writer, see Louis René Beres, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* https://thebulletin.onuclear rg/2016/08/what-if-you-dont-trust-the-judgment-of-the-president-whose-finger-is-over-the-nuclear-button/

13. In stark contrast to President Trump, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director General of WHO, spoke modestly, intelligently and purposefully: "COVID-19 does not discriminate between rich nations and poor, large nations and small. It does not discriminate between nationalities, ethnicities, or ideologies. Neither do we," he said. "This is a time for all of us to be united in our common struggle against a common threat, a dangerous enemy. When we're divided, the virus exploits the cracks between us."

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