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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

19 June 2018

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20.06.2018

Trump announces plans for “Space Force” as new military branch

During a meeting with the National Space Council yesterday, President Trump announced his intention to create a “Space Force” as the sixth branch of the US military.

The move would elevate US military operations in space within the overall command structure of the military, placing it on an equal footing with the Navy, Air Force, Marines, Army and Coast Guard. US military operations in space are currently overseen by the Air Force’s Space Command.

Trump made clear that the move was part of preparations for war with Russia and China. “Our destiny beyond the Earth is not only a matter of national identity but a matter of national security,” Trump said yesterday, adding that the United States should not have “China and Russia and other countries leading us.”

In his typically ignorant fashion, Trump declared that the new branch would be “separate but equal” from the Air Force, a phrase infamous in American history as the legal pretext for segregation in the public schools.

The announcement came unexpectedly, during a signing ceremony for an apparently unrelated policy directive aimed at streamlining the tracking of space traffic and debris. However, it follows months in which Trump has repeatedly floated the idea in public appearances and lengthier discussions within the military and political establishments. An early draft of last year’s military spending bill included provisions for the creation of a “Space Corps” as a new branch of the military.

Whether Trump's plan will come to fruition remains to be seen. Last year's proposal in Congress was opposed by Secretary of Defense James Mattis and by the Air Force on the ground that it created needless organizational complexity, indicating that Trump's announcement could face opposition within the Pentagon and his own cabinet. Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL), a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, also tweeted his opposition, adding that Trump could not carry out such action without congressional approval.

All of Trump's opponents, however, share the basic strategic aim of maintaining and bolstering American military supremacy in space. Since the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) under Reagan, commonly known as "Star Wars," the establishment of space superiority has been a significant and growing element in American military planning.

The US military already has a considerable presence in space. The latest military budget includes \$12 billion for unclassified space programs, a sum which has increased steadily even as funding for the civilian space program under NASA has stagnated or declined. Over 20,000 personnel are already under the Air Force's Space Command, which is larger than the entire air force of Canada. The US operates 123 of the approximately 320 military satellites orbiting the Earth, according to World Atlas, serving a variety of functions like reconnaissance, GPS and communications.

Together, they form a critical element in the military infrastructure of American imperialism. Drone pilots, for example, rely on satellites to carry out assassinations from halfway around the world. The Air Force also operates an experimental drone space shuttle, the X-37B, whose purpose and mission remain shrouded in secrecy.

The US also maintains significant counter-space capabilities, or the ability to deny access to space to its adversaries. In 2008, it demonstrated the capacity to shoot down orbiting satellites with ground-launched missiles when it destroyed a malfunctioning spy satellite, under the pretext that it would pose a danger to people on the ground if it re-entered Earth's atmosphere. The test followed a similar Chinese exercise the previous year.

The renewed focus on space as a "warfighting domain," as Trump put it during a speech earlier this year, flows from the growing preparations for war, not with impoverished, war-torn countries in the Middle East, but with more advanced countries, which have their own capabilities in that sphere, including not only Russia and China but also Europe.

There are evidently serious concerns within sections of the ruling class that American technological dominance in space has been severely eroded. Congressman Mike Rogers (R-AL), one of the foremost congressional advocates of a "Space Force," warned last year

during NDAA (National Defense Authorization Act) negotiations of a “Space Pearl Harbor,” i.e., the possibility that American space supremacy could be challenged or successfully countered in the outbreak of a major war.

Of particular concern is the rapid growth of China’s space program over the past 30 years. China is now a major player in the commercial satellite market and became the third country to conduct a manned spaceflight with the launch of Shenzhou 5 in 2003. Russia also maintains a robust space program inherited from the Soviet Union, and US domestic aerospace companies are heavily reliant on the Russian-produced RD-180 for their own rocket launches.

The major European powers also maintain a significant presence in space, with launches conducted from France’s overseas territory in South America. India, Israel, North Korea and Iran have also successfully placed small satellites into orbit.