

WEB-EXCLUSIVE COMMENT

John Polanyi

War beyond Earth is not inevitable. But only the rule of law can prevent it

BY JOHN POLANYI

TUESDAY, MAY 17, 2005
UPDATED AT 11:13 PM EDT
SPECIAL TO GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

Canada's major political parties are united in opposing the weaponization of space. It was principally the strength of this feeling that caused Canada to decline its closest ally's invitation to participate in continental missile defence, seen by many as opening the way to weapons in space. The popular support for missile defence in Canada was lacking.

This was not the first time Canada said no to missile defence. Fifteen years earlier, a Conservative government rejected Ronald Reagan's Star Wars. The technology on that occasion was impressive, the political pressures great, and the commercial advantages apparent.

Why does Canada make such seemingly perverse decisions?

One answer is that we are a nation of many cultures, directing attention outward. Such a nation is less likely to seek its security behind the walls of borders, or missile defence. The other part of the story is Canada's commitment to a different sort of bulwark: international law. This is the key to Canadian attitudes on both missile defence and the weaponization of space. One should not claim this as pure virtue; it's to be expected that the weak will favour law. It was not King John but the nobles who insisted on the Magna Carta (the nobles were right).

Today's transformation of the world scene is as important as that of King John's day. It stems from the fundamental question where current trends in weapons development are likely to extrapolate. To what secure outcome could they possibly lead? To each new weapon, there will always be a counter, and to each fear that gave rise to that weapon, a sequel. The most obvious sequel will be the spread of the weapon into the hands of our opponents. Technological dominance cannot endure. Prevention of the spread of weapons is regarded as an essential adjunct to their possession. But power alone will not prevent that spread. One also needs persuasion. And there lies the problem. How does one persuade others to behave differently from oneself?

Only the example of restraint can foster restraint; one can only have recourse to the restraint called law, if one acknowledges the supremacy of law. It is this realization that is slowly transforming the world. But too slowly.

In their respect for law, nations, like individuals, will always be deficient. But they cannot afford to be as deficient as today.

It would be difficult to envisage a better arena for restraint than space. It is a medium all share, since all border on it. Its worth can be judged from the global investment that has literally rocketed in a lifetime from zero to the order of a trillion dollars.

Hugely valuable, it is equally vulnerable. Nonetheless, it remains for the present protected only by custom and law. These are the instruments we must strengthen.

How far have we come?

Before Donald Rumsfeld became Secretary of Defence, he headed a bipartisan commission that warned that war in space was "a virtual certainty." In its 2001 report, it argued, "We know from history that every medium - air, land and sea - has seen conflict. Reality indicates that space will be no different." In a nuclear-armed world, this sort of argument from history is a counsel of despair, telling us that whatever can happen will.

The proponents of the argument do not despair; they offer the illusory hope of single-nation dominance. They urge the United States to claim the strategic high ground of space. But a large constituency is aware that a few per cent of the world's population cannot forever dominate.

With that in mind, the United States joined with other major powers, as long ago as 1967, through the Outer Space Treaty, in embracing the obligation to use outer space "for the benefit of all countries [and as] the province of all mankind." The impetus toward that agreement can be traced back still further to Dwight Eisenhower's visionary 1958 proposal for banning

weapons from space.

The norm against hostile acts against satellites was established more explicitly by the U.S.-Russian Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which for decades banned interference with another nation's eyes or ears in space. The spirit of that agreement has been re-enforced by repeated resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly in support of the "Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space" (PAROS).

We have an opportunity today to move further in the direction of a regime of law in space, which would prohibit the testing and deployment of weapons, with all possible provisions for verification. There will be problems, but they are comparable with those we have addressed in preventing mayhem on our streets and piracy at sea. It is hard to believe that these problems will be more demanding than those we'll face if we allow outer space to degenerate into a jungle.

Sixty years into the atomic age, we have not yet committed ourselves to restraint. Where outer space is concerned, the opportunity will not come again. Carpe diem.

Nobel laureate John Polanyi is a professor of chemistry at the University of Toronto. This article is adapted from a speech he gave on Tuesday in Washington at a conference on Full Spectrum Dominance, part of the U.S. Defence Department's vision statement.

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