

An Unending Appetite for War?

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Bruce Gagnon, a prominent activist in the 'Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space', was the guest speaker on Wednesday 5 September at a meeting in Aberystwyth organised by the 'Aberystwyth Peace and Justice Network'. His topic was 'Star Wars and the US Empire', and Gagnon treated his receptive audience to a devastating critique of the Bush Administration's military strategy. At root, he argued that US national security policy was driven by the greed of multinational corporations for money and markets, and these engines of global capitalism were so powerful that they were able to manipulate the levers of power in the White House and on Capitol Hill. Whoever was President – whether it is democratic or republican did not matter - since the economic forces shaping US foreign policy were well beyond the reach of the US electoral process. The resulting prognosis was a depressing one. Gagnon argued that Washington's current plans to develop a National Missile Defence (NMD) had nothing to do with the threat from 'rogue' states like Iran and North Korea – the ostensible justification for the programme – but should be viewed instead as part of the White House's policy of achieving nuclear superiority over Russia and China. This interpretation of US policy is one that resonates with decision-makers and strategic planners in both Moscow and Beijing who are anxious that current US policy on NMD reflects Washington's malign intent.

The United States has put the world on notice – but crucially China – that it will act to maintain US military control of space. The Bush Administration's new National Space Policy announced in 2006 declared that the United States would 'deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to U.S. national interests' and 'oppose the development of new legal regimes or other restrictions that seek to prohibit or limit U.S. access to or use of space' (National Space Policy 2006). As Gagnon warned, such a policy is a recipe for a new arms race in space, since Beijing is unlikely to acquiesce in Washington's control of the heavens. China has been trying for several years now in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva to reach agreement on a new treaty banning space weapons, but Washington has been opposed to developing a new legal

regime that would constrain its actions in outer space. It argues that such a regime would not be able to address the problem that civilian space based assets can have military uses. There is always the risk that civil capabilities which have military applications (like satellites and nuclear power plants) can be used for nefarious purposes, but to make arms control conditional on the elimination of such risks and vulnerabilities is to doom the enterprise. As Bruce Blair and Chen Yali cautioned, 'there is nothing China can do to convince American worst-case analysts that China could not possibly adapt its dual-use space capabilities for "possibly" posing military threats to the United States' (2006: 5). The only way forward here is for both sides to develop the trust which enables them to live with the uncertainties and risks of arms control in space. The alternative is an unrestrained competition in space, and China's successful test of an anti-satellite weapon in January 2007 indicated that Beijing should not be underestimated as a future competitor in space.

There are good reasons, then, for sharing Gagnon's analysis of the dangers of current US space policy. But his particular spin on this – reflecting his neo-Marxist starting point – is that the ultimate goal of the US in upping the strategic ante with Moscow and Beijing in space is to create an atmosphere of fear and suspicion on earth which will feed what he sees as the insatiable appetite of the US war machine. At one point in his talk, Gagnon even suggested that Americans were 'addicted to war'. He might have done better to say that the American economy was addicted to oil, since he argued that Washington's control of space is aimed at giving it leverage over both China and Russia. With regard to the latter, Gagnon argued that the growing confrontation with Moscow had to be understood in terms of the desire of the oil giants to gain access to Russia's large oil and gas reserves. And like all neo-Marxists of Gagnon's persuasion, there was only one explanation for the occupation of Iraq – the creation of 'enduring bases' (to use Pentagon speak) that would guarantee US access to Iraqi oil. For Gagnon, the United States has not been a status quo power, and it cannot be one whilst the economy is so dependent upon the military for jobs. In a chilling conclusion, Gagnon argued that there was a fatal inevitability about the United States going to war against Iran. This would have nothing to do with preventing the spectre of a nuclear armed Iran, since Gagnon poured scorn on the argument that Iran posed a

nuclear threat to Washington. The driver for war will be oil as Iran follows Iraq in the next stage of the US quest for global dominance.

For those not persuaded by an economic determinism which reduces issues of war and peace to the greed of global capital, there was plenty to question and quibble at. Was the occupation of Iraq only about oil? Did the terrorist attacks against the US homeland on September 11, 2001, and the fear that this might be a nuclear strike next time have no bearing on the Bush Administration's determination to rid the global neighbourhood of regimes capable of developing weapons of mass destruction? In Gagnon's world, the United States acts and the rest of the world reacts, but what this account misses out is the moves made by China, Russia, Iran etc which, in turn, create uncertainties in the minds of US decision-makers about the motives and intentions of these states. An account of world politics that ignores the relative autonomy of the inter-state realm, and crucially the role of the security dilemma in generating conflict (Booth and Wheeler 2008) is as deficient as one that neglects to analyse how global economic processes and actions shape the possibilities of war and peace.

Having fatalistically charted the course of a US hegemon exporting ever more violence, Gagnon did leave his audience with a message of hope. He argued that the transnational corporations which were the ultimate drivers of the armaments industry and war had to be countered by an equally global movement of peace and justice activists. The global movement had a mission to raise consciousness, especially in the United States, about the links between jobs and war, and the challenge was to find ways of freeing those millions of individuals in the United States who were shackled to jobs in the arms industry. He set out a vision which could be embraced by the peace and environmental movements of channelling jobs into rebuilding the US railway, and developing sustainable energy technologies like solar. It was an inspiring vision, and Gagnon's audience in Aberystwyth responded with the admiration and applause befitting this veteran of the peace movement who has dedicated most of his adult life to campaigning for a more peaceful world.

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References

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