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# Pentagon eyeing weapons in space

The Boston Globe

## Budget seeks millions to test new technologies

By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | March 14, 2006

WASHINGTON -- The Pentagon is asking Congress for hundreds of millions of dollars to test weapons in space, marking the biggest step toward creating a space battlefield since President Reagan's long-defunct "star wars" project during the Cold War, according to federal budget documents.

The Defense Department's budget proposal for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 includes money for a variety of tests on offensive and defensive weapons, including a missile launched at a small satellite in orbit, testing a small space vehicle that could disperse weapons while traveling at 20 times the speed of sound, and determining whether high-powered ground-based lasers can effectively destroy enemy satellites.

The military says that its aerospace technology, which has advanced exponentially during the last two decades, is worth the nine-figure investment because it will have civilian applications as well, such as refueling or retrieving disabled satellites. But arms-control specialists fear the tests will push the military closer to basing weapons in space than during Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative in the mid-1980s -- without a public debate of the potential consequences.

"Some of these things are going to be put up and tested and that is where you have the potential to cross the line" into creating actual space-based weapons systems, said Theresa Hitchens, director of the Center for Defense Information in Washington and coauthor of a new analysis on space weapons spending.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, warned that any US move to position weapons in space "will lead countries to pursue countermeasures. Before we cross that threshold, the United States should explore with other countries some guidelines or limits on what is deployed in space."

The big-budget projects are spread across the Defense Department, but most are under the purview of the Missile Defense Agency, which oversees the development of a national missile shield, a system heavily dependent on space-based hardware. The shield could also be used to destroy those missiles or strike back at the adversaries who fired them.

The descriptions included in the budget request mark only what is publicly known about the military's space warfare plans. Specialists believe the classified portion of the \$439 billion budget, blacked out for national security reasons, almost certainly includes other space-related programs.

Rick Lehner, an agency spokesman, said there are no plans to base weapons in space, noting that out of \$48 billion planned for missile defense over the next five years, just \$570 million will fund space-related activities.

"We just want to do some experiments" on weapons technology in space, he said.

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Under President Bush, the White House has emphasized what's known as "space dominance" -- the notion that the United States must command space to defend the nation, a strategy that gained traction under Reagan. The military already has reconnaissance and communications satellites, but the Pentagon says weapons systems in space can protect commercial satellites as well.

In 2004, the Air Force published a paper outlining a long-term vision for space weapons, including an air-launched antisatellite missile, a ground-based laser aimed at low-earth orbit satellites, and a "hypervelocity" weapon that could strike targets from space.

The paper stated that it is essential for the United States to deny its adversaries strategic access to space; success "will require [the] full spectrum, sea, air, and space-based offensive counterspace systems" that the military can muster. The Pentagon has always examined space as a possible battleground, but the budget request marks a transition from laboratory theory to reality. And the Bush administration has sought to keep the military's options open despite international opposition to weapons in space.

Indeed, for the first time ever, the United States voted last fall to block a UN resolution calling for a ban on weapons in space. In the past, the US delegation abstained from voting on similar measures.

"There is a very strong desire among most states to get a negotiation going," said Peggy Mason, Canada's former UN ambassador for disarmament. But the UN Conference on Disarmament operates according to consensus and the United States has stymied talks on the issue, Mason said.

Arms-control advocates believe the space projects in the defense budget, which is under congressional review, explains the opposition.

According to a joint analysis by defense specialists at the Henry L. Stimson Center and the Center for Defense Information, several of these space programs, if brought to fruition, will create "facts in orbit" -- weapons in space before a public debate is complete.

One \$207 million project by the Missile Defense Agency features experiments on micro-satellites, including using one as a target for missiles. This experiment "is particularly troublesome," according to the joint report, "as it would be a de-facto antisatellite test."

The defense budget doesn't have a timetable for that test, but a Missile Defense Agency spokesman said the test is merely intended to study the missile during flight.

In another program, called Advanced Weapons Technology, the Air Force wants to spend \$51 million for a series of space-oriented experiments, according to budget documents. A project description says the Air Force would test a variety of powerful laser beams "for applications including antisatellite weapons."

A Missile Defense Agency project set to begin in 2008, the Space-Based Interceptor Test Bed, would launch up to five satellites capable of shooting down missiles, according to budget documents.

"A space layer helps protect the United States and our allies against asymmetric threats designed to exploit coverage and engagement gaps in our terrestrial defenses," the agency says in its budget proposal, referring to the interceptor test. "We believe that a mix of terrestrial and space-basing offers the most effective global defense against ballistic missiles."

The agency also has asked Congress for \$220 million for "Multiple Kill Vehicles," a program that experts say could be proposed as a space-based missile interceptor.

Meanwhile, the Air Force wants \$33 million for the Hypersonic Technology Vehicle, envisioned as space vehicle capable of delivering a military payload

anywhere on earth within an hour, according to an official project description.

Philip Coyle, who served as the Pentagon's top weapons tester from 1994 to 2001, said in an interview that he sees "new emphasis on space weapons" even though "there is no threat in space to justify a new arms race in space."

"US missile defense is the first wave in which the United States could introduce attack weapons in space, that is, weapons with strike capability," he said. "Once you've got space-based interceptors up there, they can just as well be used for offense as defense."

*Bryan Bender can be reached at [bender@globe.com](mailto:bender@globe.com).* ■

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