



Aaron Bateman, *Weapons in Space: Technology, Politics, and the Rise and Fall of the Strategic Defence Initiative* (The MIT Press, May 2024)

Reviewed by Mustafa Bilal

In 1984, the Reagan administration in the United States (US) warned allies about Soviet military space activities. In international politics, sometimes history repeats itself; forty years later, 2024 started with US defence officials warning allies of Russia's potential deployment of a nuclear weapon in space. The stark parallels between the present and the past raise the question of why space weaponisation has again become an international concern. Aaron Bateman seeks to grapple with this fundamental question in his first book, which builds on his doctoral thesis.

The author, a former U.S. Air Force (USAF) Intelligence officer and an Assistant Professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University delivers an illuminating historical account of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), which President Reagan envisioned as a space-based missile defence shield. Bateman explores the technological debates sparked by SDI and its political and international dimensions. He analyses the intensified space militarisation in the final two decades of the Cold War by offering an archive-driven account of SDI's meteoric rise, rapid descent and enduring legacy on astropolitics and contemporary debates concerning space security. The book can be scrutinised in three ways: central theme, style of expression and key takeaways.

The central theme, which cuts across all the chapters, is divisions. Whether it be divisions in the Reagan administration on the technological foundations of SDI (pp. 52-110), divisions between Western European states both over SDI and the extent of their participation (pp. 110-142) and the overarching divisions between the US, its European allies and the former Soviet Union over the limits on military space activities and the ABM treaty (pp.144-174). Bateman situates these divisions in the context of the contentious space arms control negotiations by stressing the inextricable technological linkage between ASATs and SDI (p. 146). He posits that because of such disagreements, the issues left unresolved in the space arms control dialogue of the late Cold War are gaining renewed international concern, such as the debates over space weaponisation (pp. 220-226).

As for the style of expression, the book is narratively engaging. History can sometimes be boring, but Bateman supports his arguments by referencing intriguing unclassified conversations between officials across the US, Western Europe and the former Soviet Union. Despite placing 'technology' at the start of the book's title, the technical aspects of SDI are largely overshadowed by the politics surrounding its rise and fall. Bateman does examine the technological challenges accompanying the first phase of SDI deployment in the latter half of the book (pp. 181-216), but he does so without dry, lengthy technical descriptions. The lack of technical details might disappoint readers from a purely military-technical background. However, it would improve comprehension for most general audiences, who would also appreciate the absence of complex vocabulary.

What takes away from the reading experience is how the book doesn't proceed chronologically. Despite Bateman stating in the beginning that the events would follow chronologically (p. 20), the timeline in the book is not linear until the last few chapters, which narrate events post-Cold War. Thus, it eventually becomes hard to keep track of the specific dates (which are, of course, plenty). Additionally, throughout the book, ideas and concepts are repeated. Some of it can be excused for emphasising key aspects, such as Reagan's utopian conceptions

of SDI (p. 53) and his conviction that SDI would make nuclear weapons obsolete (p. 67), but it is hard to ignore in most cases.

However, looking past these issues, one can see that Bateman's work has many insightful takeaways, especially from the present lens. Bateman's first assertion is that 'technological innovations and cooling superpower relations created the conditions for expanded space militarisation in the 1970s' (p. 51). In the present context, ongoing technological breakthroughs in Artificial intelligence (AI) and miniaturising electronics combined with deteriorating Sino-US ties could similarly lead to a new phase in the militarisation of space. Indeed, throughout the book, one can notice glaring similarities between US-Soviet and Sino-US great power competition in space. Bateman also highlighted a conviction deeply held by the US that space technologies were linked with security and prosperity (p. 82). Presently, this conviction is underscored by the increasing cooperation between commercial space firms and the US space force. Bateman has also noted how idealistic public perceptions of the cosmos were at odds with the expanding militarisation of space (p.153); this is true even today, partly explaining the growing opposition to space weaponisation. Bateman also asserted that the fear of being technologically left behind diluted the opposition of major European states towards participating in SDI and militarising space (p. 141). This eventually culminated in space now being designated by NATO as an 'operational domain.' Perhaps the most significant takeaway from the book is that while there were undoubtedly technological uncertainties surrounding the deployment of SDI, the lack of political will to deploy space-based weapons played a key role in the downfall of the SDI (p. 206). Therefore, one cannot help but wonder if we will soon see a revival of the SDI with significantly lower launch costs and rapid technological innovations. Considering Donald Trump is once again set to take charge of the Oval Office, it's possible since he had alluded towards 'space-based missile defence' in his first term, as noted by Bateman in the conclusion (p. 223).

To sum up, the book is a timely and highly relevant publication that provides an enlightening history of space arms control and SDI in the late Cold War without explicitly supporting or condemning it. It certainly has issues with style and expression. Still, they can be overlooked as readers can derive valuable insights from Bateman's key takeaways and his narration of historical events, which draw parallels with the present. Hence, the book is worth reading for anyone who seeks to understand how the more things have changed in astropolitics, the more they have remained the same.

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