

Book Review

Astropolitik: Classical Geopolitics in the Space Age

By Everett C Dolman

Reviewed by Gp Capt Ian Shields

The Royal Navy practiced sea power long before Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote in 1890 telling the world what they had been doing. So it is with space power, at least up to a point... Space power implies a function parallel to sea control in space control. But in order to seize and exercise space control, first a polity needs to understand space as an environment for war, in essence no different from the land, the sea, the air or cyberspace.



USAF Air University at Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

Thus writes Professor Colin S Gray in his introduction to Everett Dolman's 2002 *Astropolitik*, capturing the spirit of this excellent volume. The reason for reviewing the book again, 7 years after its initial publication, is two-fold. First, there are still very few writers on space from a strategic, even operational, viewpoint; Dolman's work remains all but unique. Second, how does his book hold up to critical

scrutiny approaching a decade after it was first conceived?

Before considering the book itself in order to try to answer my question above, who is Dolman, and what did he hope to achieve by writing this book? Everett C Dolman lectures at the USAF Air University at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. He is regarded, universally and justifiably, as one of the foremost thinkers on space in the West and has influenced a generation of USAF space practitioners. It is also worth highlighting two further points straight away. First, Dolman is something of an arch-realist, and this colours his views and judgements. Not necessarily a bad thing, but it



Dr. Wernher von Braun became Director of the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center on July 1, 1960.

is worth being aware of this when reading his book. Second, he wrote this book around a decade after the end of the Cold War. He had seen the spurring of the “space race” as an extension of both national pride and the Cold War (a variation of the proxy wars around the core region of Eurasia that so characterised the years 1945 – 1989) and had then seen the optimism of the post-Cold War years fade.



Apollo-Soyuz Test Project Apollo Mission insignia showing the docking of American and Soviet spacecraft in Earth orbit, 1975.

Dolman set himself five targets in writing this book. First, he wanted to prove that many of the classical geopolitical theories are compatible with evolving theories on space. Second, he postulated that these theories, already exploited for sea and air power, would prove to be equally applicable to space. Third, he suggested that the unique characteristics of space would demand specific tactics if space was to fully exploited. Next, he wished to prove that the concept of space as a power base, as we would understand it from a classical, military viewpoint, was, with some minor modification, valid. Finally, he pleaded that if we wish to exploit space, particularly as military strategists, we needed a thorough understanding of the

astromechanical and physical demarcation of space itself. I believe that Dolman achieved all these aims handsomely, and in doing so added markedly to an understanding of space when he wrote this treatise. So how did he go about this?

This is not a long book, only some 180 pages of text, split into 7 short chapters. It is not, it must be admitted, an easy read but nevertheless well worth the effort. The introductory chapter is, perhaps, the weakest of the book and those without a good foundation in International Relations theory, or a sympathy with the realist viewpoint, could afford to skip it. The chapter is almost a charter for Dolman’s views on power balance and the meaning of strategy, and although it signposts what is to follow it can legitimately be ignored or skipped over. The same could not be said for the remainder of the book. Chapter 2 is the true foundation of the book: titled ‘From Geopolitics to Astropolitics’ Dolman traces the rise of the notion of geopolitics and then extrapolates into astropolitics in an entirely logical manner. Starting with Parker’s definition of geopolitics as: “the study of states as spatial phenomena, with a view towards understanding the geographical bases of power” (p. 13), he draws on the writings of, among others, Sir Halford Mackinder and the German school of *realpolitik*, to define astropolitics as: “the study of the relationship between outer space terrain and technology, and the development of political and military policy and strategy” and then (deliberately more negatively) astropolitics as: “a determinist political theory that manipulates the relationship between

state power and outer-space control for the purpose of extending the

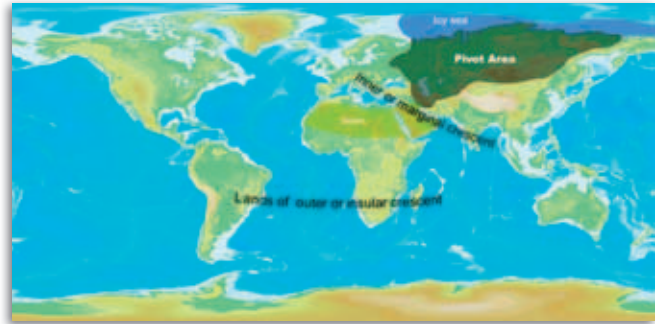


Portrait of Sir Halford John Mackinder.

dominance of a single state over the whole of the earth" (p. 15). From this solid foundation, Dolman takes a canter through history to underline the credence of his definitions by considering how geographical influences have influenced social and political development, a process he describes as geodeterminism. From here, he postulates that there are direct parallels between geodeterminist theories and astropolitics, an extension afforded by technological advances. Dolman rightly acknowledges that geodeterminist theories of state power were largely discredited after the end of the Second World War, but that technological advances are constantly challenging this position and he remains convinced, and bases his theories of astropolitics on geopolitical thought.

If Chapter 2 is heavy going, Chapter 3 is, in contrast, one of the clearest and best-written explanations I have yet come across on orbits and orbital mechanics. But the great strength of this Chapter, indeed of the entire book, is that Dolman does not stop at a description of the physics, but then combines these physical laws and attributes with a real understanding of power politics by showing why

they are important. He maps space, in a way similar to Mackinder's mapping of the earth, into regions of importance and influence, he draws on Mahan's work to identify key astropolitical positions in space (such as the Lagrange Libration Points) and combines geopolitical and geostrategic thought in a challenging and entirely convincing way to demonstrate the value of his thesis of Astropolitik.



Situation of the pivot area established in the Theory of the Heartland developed by Halford John Mackinder.

Having set the scene, Dolman's next three chapters build his case further. He starts by examining what we mean by space domination, and highlights the historic anomaly that led to the US being (at least at the time of his writing) the undisputed master of space due to the Cold War legacy and American technological dominance. In Chapter 5 he explores how the governance of space has been shaped and asks what are the implications. In this he is less than convinced of the value of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, arguing that it has hindered space exploration by controlling space exploitation (one of the occasions on which I disagree with Dolman's views). The penultimate Chapter draws these various threads together into an examination of power, policy

and their applications, concluding that a benign hegemon in space (by which he means the United States) could and should dominate that sphere thereby increasing peace and prosperity. Whether you agree with his arguments or not, they are well and powerfully made. The final Chapter, concludes the book with a somewhat gloomy assessment of where space might have been heading (remarkably prescient in all respects other than his assumption of continued US dominance) at the time of writing.

And this was the great strength of this book when first published: the examination of space as a realm that, just as the sea and the air before, demanded a politico-military understanding if we are to lever the maximum benefit from it. Only by combining an understanding of space, strategy and politics, as Dolman did, into a single theory can the importance of space be truly appreciated. At the time he did strategic military thinkers a great service by highlighting space as a distinct realm, and not merely a continuation of the air environment, demanding its own understanding and applications. He meets, as I hope my review has demonstrated, his own five targets and produces a compelling narrative.

The acid test, though, is whether it has enduring relevance? At a fundamental level, space has little altered since Dolman's book was first published, and although he would have been aghast at the decline in the pre-eminent American position in space when he was writing, the US still enjoys such a degree of dominance as to support much of

his thinking. However, does his theory survive as we move from a uni-polar to a multi-polar era of contested space? I believe that the answer has to be a resounding yes: Dolman's fundamental points that we must understand the space domain in order to lever its advantages, that space has remarkable parallels to the air and maritime environments and that we can therefore exploit its advantages, and that, above all, space is another arena of political conflict all hold good. This is not the easiest book you will ever read, but if you have a serious interest in the growing part that space has to play for we professional military exponents, it is one that you should read.



Backdropped by a blue and white part of Earth, the International Space Station is seen from the Space Shuttle Discovery as the two spacecraft begin their separation at 6.42am (CDT) on 11 June, 2008.

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