

## **Satellite Test Recalls Need for Space Treaty**

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The world's reaction to the Chinese destruction of one of its own weather satellites has been a mix of irritation, bafflement, and fear the Chinese may be starting an arms race in space. Such an arms race is a very real danger, but to hold the Chinese responsible misreads the problem and avoids coming to grips with the real solution.

Anti-satellite (ASAT) tests are not regulated by treaty. Both the United States and the former Soviet Union conducted similar tests in the 1980s. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibits placing nuclear weapons in space, and calls for "consultation" on any activity in space that might affect its peaceful use by others. In practice, this has meant little. While the U.S. and the Soviet Union formally agreed not to attack each other's satellites in the 1972 SALT agreements, there was no negotiated restriction on ASAT testing. This remains a concern to the arms control community, as the U.S. and Russia continue to maintain thousands of nuclear warheads on strategic alert. The secretive environment of post-Cold War nuclear proliferation makes satellite intelligence more important than ever, now that the provenance of nuclear mobilization is a key issue.

Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. armed forces have become almost totally—and uniquely—dependent on a whole array of satellite-based communications, intelligence gathering, and command and control. At the same time, civilian use of satellites for communications, weather forecasting, disaster relief and much else has grown by leaps and bounds.

Given this global trend, the need for a treaty to protect satellites against attack is obvious. In the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament (CD), efforts to launch negotiations banning weapons in space and limiting ground-based threats go back to 1982 under an agenda item, "the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS)." Despite their recent test, the Chinese have been amongst the most vociferous advocates of a PAROS treaty, and have consistently refused to approve a CD work program that does not include PAROS. Even the European Union last year declared PAROS "an essential condition for strengthening strategic stability and for... the free exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes by all states."

### **U.S. Wants Space Solely for Itself**

Paradoxically, the world leader in satellite technology has opposed a PAROS treaty, and has consistently refused multilateral solutions to the ASAT problem. The U.S. opposes creating a working group even to discuss the issue of banning weapons in space, abstaining on the annual vote in the UN General Assembly. In 2005 the U.S. became the only nation

to vote against the call for a ban on weapons in space, relying instead on unilateral dominance. The U.S. Space Command's statement of doctrine, "Vision 2020," speaks of a "critical need to control the space medium," and establishing space as a sole American "area of responsibility," asserting its well-known vision of unilateral political order beyond the atmosphere.

This is not an idle boast. While the U.S. has experimented with ASAT weapons since the 1980s, it is the only nation that has a fully deployed, ASAT-capable system: The antiballistic missile hit-to-kill interceptors recently deployed in Alaska. While poor at their designated task of finding incoming ICBM warheads, they could more easily adapt to an ASAT mission.

The Chinese ASAT test was a wake-up call both for the United States and the world. It brings into stark relief the now unavoidable choice between two competing and incompatible visions of space security: A multilateral regime that stabilizes the space environment through universal agreement, or one of attempted unilateral domination that will inevitably lead to armed competition in space and thus a threat both to military security and peaceful economic growth.

### **Challenge for Canadian Policy**

For many years, Canada has supported a multilateral approach to controlling space weapons. With our knowledge of satellite sensing technology, Canada has solidly contributed to one of the most complex areas of any successful arms control treaty: The negotiation of a verification regime. In 2004, the Department of Foreign Affairs published a consultative working paper on a "space security index," with the aim of establishing an agreed body of knowledge from which to commence negotiations. Canada needs to put this knowledge to use in creative international political leadership with the aim of negotiating a space security treaty. What better time to do this than on the 40th anniversary of the Outer Space Treaty.

Unfortunately, the Canadian government has done little since its 2004 initiative. Its stated multilateral goals are modest, eschewing space treaty leadership with the admonition that "We are not likely to achieve [space security] in one giant leap. Our aim is therefore to make progress through small, practical and achievable steps which create the preconditions for space actors to consider space weapons to be of marginal utility". More worryingly, rumours persist that Canada may change its mind and join the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense program.

In reality, the Canadian policy establishment now seems to be in its customary position of straddling the fence, making tiny genuflections in the multilateralist direction while not explicitly rejecting U.S. unilateralism. Unfortunately, in politics as in real life, fence sitting becomes more uncomfortable as time passes.

China's ASAT test poses an unavoidable challenge for Canadian space policy. The U.S. sees China's test as justification of its unilateralist approach, but in reality unilateralism is doomed to failure, and will lead to a new arms race at best, and open conflict at worst. The world has too much at stake not to put every effort into preventing this. In co-operation with its allies and like-minded states, Canada should openly declare the urgent need for a PAROS treaty, and support initiatives for its drafting and ratification.

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