

Extra Feature Story

U.S. Military Intentions in Outer Space are Focus of U.N. Debate

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Outer space is emerging as the newest frontier in the quest for a technical military advantage, sparking a war of words between the United States and Russia.

While scenarios involving laser-armed spaceships and battle stations are still rooted firmly in fiction, the U.S. and other world powers are in a serious disagreement over who gets to control space, and the outcome could lead to a new arms race miles above the earth.

Russia and China seek space weapons ban

Tensions between Russia and the U.S. have deepened in recent years over President Bush's plan to revive the "Star Wars" program from the 1980s with a new generation of missile defense shields based in Poland and the Czech Republic.

This week, Russia and China introduced a treaty before the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, Switzerland, calling for the ban on all space weapons.

"Weapons deployment in space by one state will inevitably result in a chain reaction," Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in a speech. "This, in turn, is fraught with a new spiral in the arms race both in space and on Earth."

The U.S. did not comment on the proposal, but has in the past rejected any restrictions on its military efforts in space.

A National Space Policy

The National Space Policy, signed by President Bush in October 2006, allows the U.S. to develop weapons that can be used against satellites and incoming missiles, and deny its enemies access to space in the name of national security.

"Freedom of action in space is as important to the United States as air power and sea power," the policy states.

Mr. Bush suggests missile defenses would be a deterrent the same way that an overwhelming capacity for nuclear retaliation once was with the Soviet Union.

"A terrorist regime that can strike America or our allies with a ballistic missile is likely to see this power as giving them free rein for acts of aggression and intimidation in their own neighborhoods," he said in October 2007. "But with missile defenses in place, the calculus of deterrence changes in our favor. If this same terrorist regime does not have confidence their missile attack would be successful, it is less likely to engage in acts of aggression in the first place."

However, critics argue that the space policy could spark an arms race, where different countries develop more and better weapons in order to dominate space.

Michael Krepon, co-founder of the Henry L. Stimson Center, which keeps track of space policy issues, told the Washington Post that the policy would encourage suspicions that the U.S. was developing weapons for space.

"The Clinton policy opened the door to developing space weapons, but that administration never did anything about it," Krepon told the Post. "The Bush policy now goes further."

Protecting satellites

A primary issue for all countries with a presence in space is protecting satellites. Satellites are important for both the world economy and for military uses, as they can be used to spy on enemies or direct precision weapons, but are also used to monitor weather and enable a myriad of communication outlets.

The U.S. wants to prevent other nations from using anti-satellite -- ASAT -- weapons to disable or destroy the hundreds of U.S. satellites orbiting earth. Earth-based missiles, laser-armed satellites, or satellites that ram into a target are all examples of possible ASATs.

In January 2007, China caused a stir around the world when it used a missile to take out one of its old weather satellites. The demonstration was seen as a display of its anti-satellite capabilities. The U.S. has used the test to justify its policy of space control and protection of its own satellites.

Uncertainty of future U.S. strategy

The push by Russia and China to ban space weapons and the Bush administration's resistance has some military watchers worried about a new arms race.

Mike Moore, a research fellow with the Independent Institute, argues the U.S. could avert a dangerous military escalation if it agreed to a ban treaty.

"To be sure, space dominance has not been adopted as U.S. policy. But we are quietly edging toward it. And make no mistake: Such a policy would be regarded by other nations as an unacceptable violation of global norms - and a threat to their sovereignty," Moore wrote in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Poland recently put the brakes on an agreement to build part of the U.S. missile shield on Polish soil, saying that the United States might abandon the project after the American presidential election in November -- leaving Poland to bear political costs, like the deterioration of relations with Russia.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

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