

EMBASSY

Race faster to secure space

Opinion | Policy Briefing | PAUL MEYER

Published: Wednesday, 10/17/2012 12:00 am EDT

Last Updated: Wednesday, 10/17/2012 3:16 am EDT

The security of outer space has largely been taken for granted by the international community, even though the vulnerability of space assets deployed there has long been recognized.

The 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibited weapons of mass destruction from being placed in outer space, but it was silent regarding the deployment of other types of weapons.

The need to reinforce this existing treaty with additional measures has been affirmed at the UN General Assembly where a resolution on Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space, has been adopted on an annual basis.

The 65-member Conference on Disarmament added this topic to its agenda exactly 30 years ago. Although there was a committee discussing the issue up until its termination in 1995, no work on outer space or on any other item on the CD's agenda has occurred since that forum became paralyzed 14 years ago.

While diplomatic action on space security ground to a halt, the intervening years have witnessed a remarkable growth in the utilization of outer space for a wide range of civilian and military purposes.

Today it is estimated that there are some 1,000 satellites in operation, owned by over 60 states. Significantly, developing countries are increasingly to be found beside developed ones in possessing satellites, and practically every country on the globe is a consumer of space-based services, in some form or the other.

All these benefits could easily be negated, however, if outer space was ever to become a battleground. The 2007 test by China of an anti-satellite weapon and the 2008 demonstration by the United States of the inherent ASAT-capability of its ballistic missile interceptors have, for the first time since the Cold War, raised again the spectre of satellites becoming targets for weapons.

These military displays, coupled with increasing levels of debris in lower space orbits that could eventually render these orbits unusable, have prompted the international community to start thinking about some preventive action.

Not much traction

Three proposals came forward in an attempt to fill the void for outer space security.

In 2008, Russia and China submitted a draft treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space. This spare text, however, was criticized for its silence on ground-to-space weapons, and its lack of verification provisions.

In December of that year, the European Union circulated a draft International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities which re-packaged several existing principles for space operations and outlined some modest voluntary measures to build confidence amongst states.

In 2009, Canada proposed the adoption of a series of pledges by states to refrain from actions that would threaten space security. The three specific pledges were: not to test or use a weapon against any satellite so as to damage or destroy it; not to place any weapon in outer space; and not to use a satellite itself as a weapon.

None of these proposals have enjoyed much traction subsequently. Russia and China have let theirs rot in the moribund CD. The EU has seemed incapable of bringing its draft code of conduct to some form of general acceptance.

Despite having issued slightly revised versions of the code in the fall of 2010 and the summer of 2012, the EU has repeatedly postponed the convening of an international diplomatic conference to adopt the code, and has just cancelled a previously announced consultation this month in New York.

Canada, after setting out its proposal in a working paper, has ceased promoting its own ideas, although some NGOs have advocated similar steps.

The United States, meanwhile, has acted like a bystander throughout this period. A National Space Policy released by the Obama Administration in 2010 declined to put forward any arms control proposals of its own and provided only faint support for generic confidence-building measures. In January, the administration indicated its support for an International Code of Conduct, although it has not specified how this would differ if at all from the existing EU code.

Since then the administration has effectively been silent on the matter as it campaigns for re-election. A Russian-initiated UN Group of Governmental Experts is currently examining the issue of outer space security and possible confidence building measures. This group is not due to report until 2013, and under the consensus rule that governs such groups, the 15 nations represented may not be able to agree on any substantive recommendations.

The mills of multilateral diplomacy run slowly when they run at all, and the lengthy delays experienced in bringing to completion any of the existing proposals for enhanced space security are not unprecedented.

At the same time, the increasing exploitation of outer space for a wide range of crucial services underscores the importance and the vulnerability of space-based activity.

It could be devastating to global interests if destructive acts were allowed to take place in outer space and compromise its benign environment. A stimulus to quicken the lethargic diplomacy of outer space security is urgently needed.

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