

# **Preventing an Arms Race in Outer Space**

## **A backgrounder on the militarization and weaponization of outer space**

### **Definitions**

**Militarization of Outer Space:** Space has been militarized since the earliest communication satellites were launched. Today, militaries all over the world rely on satellites for command and control, communication, monitoring, early warning, and navigation with the Global Positioning System. Therefore, “peaceful uses” of outer space include military uses, even those which are not at all peaceful—such as using satellites to direct bombing raids or to orchestrate a “prompt global strike” capability, which is “the ability to control any situation or defeat any adversary across the range of military operations.”

**Weaponization of Outer Space:** Space weaponization is generally understood to refer to the placement in orbit of space-based devices that have a destructive capacity. Many experts argue that ground-based systems designed or used to attack space-based assets also constitute space weapons, though are not technically part of the “weaponization of outer space” since they are not placed in orbit. Some also argue that weapons that travel through space in order to reach their targets, such as hypersonic technology vehicles, also contribute to the weaponization of space. Many elements of the US ballistic “missile defense” system currently being developed or planned could constitute space weapons as well, as many possess “dual-use” characteristics, allowing them to destroy space assets as well as ballistic missiles.

**Preventing an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS):** The overwhelming majority of UN member states are concerned that the weaponization of outer space will lead to an arms race and insist that a multilateral treaty is the only way to prevent such an arms race, emphasizing that this treaty would not limit space access, but would prevent such limitations. In 2006, Russia argued that if all states observe a prohibition on space weaponization, there will be no arms race. Russia and China also support establishing an obligation of no use or threat of use of force against space objects and have submitted a draft treaty to the UN on preventing the placement of weapons in outer space. (See the fact sheet on Outer Space and the United Nations.)

### **Effects on arms control and nuclear disarmament**

The weaponization of space will destroy strategic balance and stability, undermine international and national security, and disrupt existing arms control instruments, in particular those related to nuclear weapons and missiles. These effects will inevitably lead to a new arms race. Space weaponization would seriously disrupt the arms control and disarmament process. The United States' withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001 and the development of US ground- and sea-based “missile defenses” have already increased tensions with Russia and have led to increased missile proliferation.

The deployment of these technologies or the development of space-based technologies will likely cause Russia, as well as the United States (in response to Russia), to make smaller and smaller reductions of their nuclear arsenals and to reject the development of new treaties to regulate nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. China would likely build more warheads to maintain its nuclear deterrent, which could in turn encourage India and then Pakistan to follow suit.

### **The United States: The biggest obstacle to keeping space for peace**

**The United States is aiming to dominate outer space militarily.** While as far as anyone knows there are currently no weapons deployed in space, the US policy on outer space is concerning. In the US National Military Strategy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urge for “full spectrum dominance” and the 2006

US National Space Policy explains that the US will “preserve its rights, capabilities, and freedom of action in space; dissuade or deter others from either impeding those rights or developing capabilities intending to do so; take those actions necessary to protect its space capabilities; respond to interference; and deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to US national interests.”

**The United States rejects treaties “limiting its actions” in outer space.** Furthermore, US space policy firmly opposes “the development of new legal regimes or other restrictions that seek to prohibit or limit US access to or use of space,” and insists that “proposed arms control agreements or restrictions must not impair the rights of the United States to conduct research, development, testing, and operations or other activities in space for US national interests.” In a United Nations forum in 2006, a US State Department official said, “The high value of space systems has led the United States to study the potential of space-related weapons to protect our satellites from potential future attacks, whether from the surface or from other spacecraft. As long as the potential for such attacks remains, our Government will continue to consider the possible role that space-related weapons may play in protecting our assets.”

**The United States is developing space weapons and further entrenching its economy in the military-industrial complex.** The Department of Defense requested more than a billion dollars from the US budget for fiscal year 2008 to spend on programs that could provide anti-satellite and space-based weapons capabilities. Dozens of aerospace defense contractors are taking advantage of the Bush administration’s push for increased spending on space domination. While the technology itself is highly controversial, it presents major business opportunities to companies that know how to overcome moral, logistical, and financial roadblocks.

War has always been highly profitable, and dominance of outer space leads to further profits in conventional warfare. As the Air Force Space Command stated in its 2003 Strategic Master Plan, “the ability to gain space superiority (the ability to exploit space while selectively disallowing it to adversaries) is critically important and maintaining space superiority is an essential prerequisite in modern warfare.” Superiority in conventional warfare relies on military assets in space, especially satellites, which are used for intelligence, remote sensing, navigation, and monitoring, among other things. Since the US currently asserts its political will through force, protection of its own space assets and disturbance of others’ is key to guaranteeing US dominance.

### **More information**

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Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space  
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