

Beware of the Fracturing Peace in Space

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As U.S. plans on National Missile Defence and related matters continue to develop, Canadian foreign and defence policy officials may soon be forced to grapple with new challenges to Canada's traditional opposition to the weaponization of outer space. How Canada responds to these challenges will be crucial to the future of its military and commercial interests in space.

The crux of the issue centres on the future of the North American Aerospace Defence Command, a joint U.S./Canadian command centre, better known as NORAD. The United States is considering using NORAD as part of its space-based missile defence system, which would put Canada in the position of tacitly supporting weaponizing space, even though Canadian space policy has historically held the line at "militarizing" space.

Canadian policy has rightly distinguished between "militarizing" and "weaponizing" space, noting that space has been "militarized" for some time, with radar, navigation, communication, and monitoring devices having been used for military purposes for decades. However, it has yet to be "weaponized." This would involve deploying weapons both in space and on the ground that have the capability to disrupt and destroy satellites already in orbit, as well as possibly attack other targets. Such weapons are commonly referred to as antisatellite weapons, or ASATs, and have been developed but never deployed by several countries.

Today, the United States and Canada depend on more than 500 active satellites for everything from transmitting television signals, to making credit cards purchases, to communicating enemy positions on the ground in Afghanistan. The depth of our dependence on space assets was clearly demonstrated in May, 1998, when a computer system on the Galaxy IV satellite failed. In addition to a major outage in paging service across the United States, television stations went off the air, financial news services, ATM machines and credit card systems were disabled, and hospitals had to go into "disaster drill conditions" without the ability to communicate with doctors through their pagers.

And that was one satellite. Imagine what would happen if, for example, the United States and China became engaged in some kind of conflict and began destroying each other's satellites.

As the debate on weaponizing space heats up, both in Canada and the United States, it is important to bear in mind the big picture. Putting weapons in space could ignite a new arms race, and in doing so, would undermine worldwide strategic stability and have a serious negative impact on global commerce. Canada has rightly sought to avoid this.

But those who favour "weaponizing" space point to the development of ASAT capabilities as justification for seeking dominance in space. The only way we can protect ourselves from attack by potential adversaries, they argue, is to achieve total superiority in space while we have the chance. It is exactly this kind of thinking that led us into the arms races that dominated the Cold War. If there is any enduring lesson to be learned from those arms races, it is that any development of defensive weapon systems will lead to new offensive systems. Many nations have already warned of the ensuing international competition, should plans to weaponize space actually move ahead.

Nevertheless, some argue that the United States has such a significant lead over other space-faring nations that it would achieve dominance before any other nation had the chance to quash or even compete with its systems. But this is not a sound basis for securing space assets. Even if the United States always has the most advanced defensive systems, its assets would remain vulnerable to asymmetric attacks -- meaning that an adversary could easily get around defensive systems and disrupt satellite activity with relatively unsophisticated measures.

Preventing an arms race is crucial to U.S. and Canadian commercial and military interests. With its unique role as a partner in NORAD, and its special relationship with Washington, Ottawa is uniquely positioned to offer a cautious voice to its neighbour to the south.

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