



Disarmament and International Security

Topic Guide: The question of the militarization of space

Introduction

Keeping the peace in outer space has been part of the UN's agenda since 1957, when the first artificial satellite was launched into Earth's orbit. In essence, the aim is to avoid an arms race and prevent space from becoming the site of installation or use of weapons of mass destruction (such as nuclear weapons).

However, outer space is rapidly becoming an appealing means for States to enhance their military capabilities and security. This coupled with the lack of regulations and fixed norms of conduct in space have given rise to fears that space will become the site of future conflicts.

General Information

Countries such as the United States and Russia have been deploying various counterspace capabilities, including missile radars, ground-based lasers to destroy potential adversaries, and satellite jammers. Their justification for their actions is that they are deterrents of conflict and protect national security, however they could also rightly be interpreted as signs of a power struggle for military dominance in space. Indeed, in 2020, the US Department of Defense acknowledged space as "a complex security environment characterized by great power competition...primarily with China and Russia".

Those advocating for more stringent regulations on outer space military activity have criticized the fact that international law has failed to keep up with evolving technological capabilities as well as lacking a code of conduct and international norms of responsible behaviour in space. However, because the leading space powers have different views on what these regulations should be, it has proven very difficult to reach a consensus. For instance, although the US has been vocal in advocating for a set of behavioural norms to be drawn up, it has also consistently vetoed any UN resolutions aimed towards preventing an arms race in outer space.

Another issue with militarizing space is space debris, which already poses a considerable hazard to spacecraft and other satellites. The issue will only worsen if weapon testing and launches increase and could eventually lead to less space being available for civilian satellites.

Although efforts in the UN are focused on avoiding weaponry in space, countries such as France have advocated for a defensive space strategy to protect important space assets. These self-defence measures include technology such as intelligence satellites and high-energy lasers installed onto satellites to destroy threats. The question is whether this approach is better than demilitarizing space altogether, or whether an entirely new set of regulations need to be drawn up to monitor space-based military activity.

UN Involvement

The Treaty on Principles Governing the Activity of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies ("Outer Space Treaty") entered into effect in 1967 and provides a basic framework for international space law. It prohibits the placement of weapons of mass destruction in outer space as well as establishing that outer space is not subject to claims of national sovereignty: it exists for the benefit of all States. However, nothing in Space Law prevents the use of ground-based counterspace capabilities.

In 1959, the UN also created the Committee on Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) which aims to review space-related international cooperation. The Committee meets annually, and their decisions are implemented by the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs. For instance, they have adopted debris mitigation guidelines which Member States have pledged to implement to the greatest extent feasible. However, once again, the subjectivity of 'feasible' reinforces the difficulties of regulating outer space activity.

Further Reading

- UN Office for Disarmament Affairs: Outer Space
 - <https://www.un.org/disarmament/topics/outerspace/>
- UK Parliament House of Commons Library: The Militarisation of Space
 - <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9261/>
- Reaching Critical Will: Outer Space
 - <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/fact-sheets/critical-issues/5448-outer-space>