

# EUROPE DIPLOMACY & DEFENCE

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*Carte blanche*

## *Europe, breaking new ground for security in space*

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During its session on 8 December this year, the Union's General Affairs/External Relations Council adopted conclusions concerning a project on a "Code of Conduct for activities in extra-atmospheric space". The text, which has been discussed by EU member states since 2007, points to the fact that Europe is resolutely taking in hand matters related to security in space.

Since the early 60s, space has been assigned civil and military satellite systems that play an increasingly active part in the way our societies function. To date, and despite the growing number of missiles of every kind, orbit of the Earth has been relatively undisturbed. The growing role of observation, telecommunication or navigation satellites which have supported armed operations on the ground since the 1990s, however, has attracted attention to these systems which are, after all, fairly vulnerable. An enemy power might in fact find it quite tempting to destroy or hinder the way the satellites work during a military campaign or as part of a surprise attack.

In the wake of the first Gulf war and in the strategic void that followed the disappearance of the USSR, the United States therefore decided to establish its permanent dominance of space. The very high-tech anti-satellite (Asats) weapons programmes were launched around projects in orbit, such as the "space-based laser". The possibility of using this technology as part of anti-missile defence was just one more reason why it should be developed. The United States designated China as its most likely adversary in space. China's rhetoric was aggressive, promising to perfect anti-satellite weapons in the near future. It carried out an Asat test in January 2007, destroying one of its own obsolete meteorological satellites with a missile. The destruction of the Chinese satellite caused considerable low-orbiting debris, which is extremely dangerous for all satellites in that orbit. Commercial satellite operators became aware of the danger and have said they hope such action will not happen again. What the Chinese test did show, however, was that American space-related posture has its limits. "Space dominance" is no doubt an illusion, whatever efforts are deployed to develop high tech in orbit. China has shown that it is now able to inflict considerable damage on American satellites, and on others, using relatively simple technology on the ground: - laser beams for blinding the sensors, jamming techniques for blurring communications, and modified missiles for destroying low-orbit satellites. High-tech powers can do nothing against such "asymmetrical" threats.

For one year now, the Bush Administration has held a different opinion of how to ensure the security of US space assets. President Obama has already said he plans to confirm this new attitude. But it is the European Union that is in the lead as the main player on this question. As Europeans do not have any ambitions of joining an arms race in space, it can only be to their disadvantage if there is a deterioration in orbits caused by the proliferation of Asats and debris. The Italian, German and then French presidencies have therefore developed and discussed a code of conduct on space with other member states. The pragmatic choice of a code of conduct, which would not be legally binding, is linked to the fact that a real treaty would be too complex to negotiate, coming up against political resistance and technical difficulties. The Code adopted by the Council on Monday 8 December brings together a whole series of "transparency and confidence" measures, quite similar to measures set out in the major arms controls agreements of the 1970s. It commits States to communicate upstream of their activities in space (launches, orbital manoeuvring, operation of satellites, deorbiting, etc.) in order to avoid errors of interpretation that could degenerate into hostile retaliation. The Code also commits them to conduct activities that could contribute to producing further debris in space. This warning above all points to the destruction of satellites through kinetic impact, during Asat testing or in deliberate attacks. The European Code should now be suggested to the Disarmament Conference in Geneva with a view to its adoption by the international community.

Adoption of the Code by the Council is a success for the Union and for this relatively recent conquest by Man of space. By suggesting to the world that space should be de-weaponised, Europe makes the risk of future dangerous escalation more remote. Above all, it gives concrete substance to a major strategic development and takes the role of an influential world player in this strategy.

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