



SPACE NEWS

Europe Chooses Peace in Space

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Not yet known as a major actor in the strategic affairs of the world, the European Union recently adopted a draft "Code of Conduct for Activities in Outer Space." The text, which had been discussed by EU member states since 2007, was adopted by the Union's External Relations Council last December. This marks an important evolution in the dynamics of space security.

Since the early 1960s, civil and military satellite systems have played an increasingly active part in the way our societies function. To date, and despite the growing number of missiles of every kind, the orbit of the Earth has been relatively undisturbed. However, the fact that observation, telecommunication and navigation satellites have supported armed operations on the ground since the 1990s has attracted attention to these systems, which are, after all, fairly vulnerable. An enemy power might 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 Soviet Union, the United States established its permanent dominance of space. To ensure national security, it was imperative that space systems remain invulnerable. Acquisition plans listed space situational awareness systems as well as defensive and offensive space systems. The most high-tech were probably in orbit anti-satellite weapons (A-Sats), such as the Space Based Laser. The possibility of using these technologies as part of anti-missile defense constituted just one more reason why it should be developed.

Meanwhile, China appeared as the most likely peer competitor in space for the United States. China's rhetoric was aggressive, promising to perfect anti-satellite weapons in the near future. China eventually carried out an A-Sat 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 are aware of the danger and have said they hope such action will

not happen again.

The Chinese test showed, however, that the quest for space dominance has its limits. China has shown that, should it wish to do so, 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. Whatever efforts are deployed to develop high-tech space defenses and weapons, low-tech means can get through. The U.S.-China space game is a perfect case study of an asymmetrical relationship.

Officials at the U.S. State Department have rightly concluded that stabilizing activities in space now makes more sense than continuing full speed ahead with A-Sat development programs. Throughout the past year, they have mentioned the need for "rules of the road." U.S. President Barack Obama has already said he plans to confirm this new attitude. But the European Union has been the main player on this issue. As Europeans do not have any ambitions of join-

ing an arms race in space, it can only be to their disadvantage if the proliferation of A-Sats and debris causes a deterioration of security conditions in orbit.

The Italian, German and French rotating presidencies of the EU have developed and discussed a Code of Conduct in space with the other member states. The choice of a Code of Conduct, which would not be legally binding, is a pragmatic one; a real treaty would be too complex to negotiate, as it would face political resistance and technical difficulties.

The Code adopted by the Council in December 2008 brings together a series of transparency and confidence-building measures quite similar to measures set out in the major arms controls agreements of the 1970s. It commits nations to communicate upstream their activities in space (launches, orbital maneuvering, de-orbiting, etc.) in order to avoid errors of interpretation that could degenerate into hostile retaliation. The Code also commits them to avoid activities that could contribute to producing further debris in space. This points above all to the destruc-

tion of satellites through kinetic impact, during A-Sat testing or in deliberate attacks.

The European draft Code is currently being presented to other spacefaring nations of the world on the basis of bilateral negotiations. When most space powers agree, an international adoption of the text will be arranged.

It remains to be seen whether China will agree to such a Code. It may not. However, a Code adopted by enough countries will bring a new reference for the international community, as to what is allowed and what is dangerous in space. There is currently no provision in international law that forbids A-Sat testing or the production of space debris. A Code will provide a legal basis on which to blame the nations that pursue dangerous activities. Seen from Europe, the new Code marks the emergence of the EU as a significant strategic player. More to the point, it engages the international community in a new and promising direction.

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