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Publisher's Corner Space Policy's SALT Moment

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Publisher's Corner Space Policy's SALT Moment

Roger G. Harrison

The market for a leap forward in space arms control is open. Now, who's buying?

The United States is facing a fundamental decision about space policy which arises from a question: does our national interest in an ordered space environment trump our absolute insistence on a policy of freedom of action? Or is the looming threat of over-crowded orbits, frequency interference and debris – of contested, congested and competitive space – so pressing that we must accept some greater transparency for our national security space operations, even greater information sharing with China, Russia, and commercial space operators, and perhaps some limits as well on activities affecting satellites in orbit?

A reader familiar with space operations will immediately object that freedom of action in space is more apparent than real. In fact, space is a heavily regulated environment, where most operators observe a host of rules most of the time. The question is, rather, whether the current, largely voluntary regulatory environment is robust or comprehensive enough to cope with an overall satellite population growing ever larger and more technically and politically complex?

The crisis point has not yet been reached. Disputes about things like assigned frequencies and orbital position are still relatively rare and, with some exceptions, peacefully resolved. The commercial players in particular are a great deal more cooperative with each other than they were even ten years ago, a phenomenon exemplified by the Space Data Association, an information sharing agreement to which companies operating 90% of satellites in orbit are now party. Thanks to the agreement establishing the SDA, there are for the first time real penalties for disruptive activities in orbit, which can amount to tens of millions of dollars in particularly egregious cases. The result is a much more orderly environment for commercial activity in space than ever existed before.

But national satellite operators are not party to the SDA, and not governed by its provisions. Commercial companies saw reason to be more transparent about the location and functioning of their satellites because it was good business; like any frontier, including frontiers opened by new technology, the era of the gunslinger had to yield to the more settled and more sustainable era of law and order; anarchy in space might have been acceptable when the domain was still relatively empty. But gunslingers still lurk down every ally in national security space. The commercial example is therefore no precedent.

Some impetus toward order nevertheless applies to national space actors. The same conditions of increasing debris, crowded orbits, and electromagnetic interference apply to them; all swim in the same increasingly polluted stream. But there are obvious inhibitions to self-restriction, which apply particularly to national actors. Threats to profits are a minor matter compared to threats to national security. So while the SDA has been a success and shown the way, there are other problems that may inhibit the major national players from joining the fold.

These begin with mutual suspicion. The eras of relative progress in international space cooperation have coincided – roughly speaking – with eras of increased cooperation within the atmosphere. Indeed, sometimes, as in the Nixon Administration, space was used as a stalking horse for detente. The first high profile instance of U.S.-Soviet scientific collaboration, emerging from the depths of the Cold War, was the joint mission bringing U.S. and Soviet astronauts to the orbiting manned Soviet Soyuz satellite in 1972. Cooperation on the International Space Station, which flourished after the demise of the old Soviet Union, was a great leap forward in the same direction, and has continued even as relations

between a resurgent Russia and a wary United States have worsened.

To this must be added the debut of a new and very secretive China to the list of major actors in space. China's policy has for the last decade explicitly rejected the idea of greater transparency, not to mention any hint of restrictions on freedom of action. "We are like a man with a knife; you are like a man with a gun." No American who has dealt with a Chinese interlocutor has been spared this fatuous simile. Those Chinese having interaction with the West on space – which means, those who parrot but hardly influence Chinese policy – use that line as an all-purpose response to any initiative from the United States for greater information sharing about space. These smiling individuals repeat to the point of exasperation that the Chinese cannot hold transparency discussions with the United States until they achieve parity in space, to include control of space on the peripheries of their country.

Whatever parity means – and this is never detailed – the goal of achieving it seems to be ever receding into the future. And control of space on the peripheries of the Central Kingdom means the capability of controlling it everywhere. In short, Chinese policy on space is as proprietorial and aggressive as that of the most hardline and paranoid of American space control advocates. It doesn't take much to imagine that knife about which they prattle slipping silently between our ribs.

Donald Rumsfeld was once presented with a policy paper that described space as a "commons." The word apparently conjured for the Defense Secretary an image of flower children in communes; it is claimed by those who suffered his wrath on that occasion that as soon as he encountered the word, their cause was lost. It isn't, of course, the only thing Secretary Rumsfeld got wrong. Space is a commons for better or worse.

The present Administration recognized this early on. The word "cooperation" appears 13 times in the first Obama Administration space policy document, and the word "collaboration" twice. "Space Control," on the other hand – the mantra of the neo-conservatives who tried and failed to make it a reality – appears only once, in an annex. There was hope as this new Administration took office that the other major space actors would see the same looming danger we did. Since we were far and away the predominate power in space, and since we depended on no one except ourselves for space situational awareness, our willingness to cooperate should have been seized on by the other actors.

That didn't happen. The United States leaned forward almost to the point of toppling over on space with the PRC, only to be greeted with implacability, impenetrable suspicion, and some nonsense about knives and guns. There might have been a new beginning with President Xi. Instead, the lines of communication on space – never humming – went completely dead. And so the situation remains. The EU tried to jump start a dialogue about sensible order in space by proposing vague and entirely voluntary "rules of the road," which were far less onerous and restrictive than mandatory limitations of the Outer Space Treaty to which all major players were statutorily bound. Repeated offers to further empty the new "rules" of content failed to create the barest hint of consensus.

It is tempting – indeed, it is almost required – to conclude that international cooperation in space will not soon move beyond the stage it has reached. The momentum seems to be in the opposite direction. What can change? A change in Chinese attitudes would give some hope; but there is no sign of that. Some grand disaster affecting everyone and showing the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the current structure may be necessary. While we await that catastrophe, whatever it may be, the present, deeply flawed system will just have to cope. RGH