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Introduction

Roger G. Harrison
Roger.g.harrison@edu.edu

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Introduction

Ambassador Roger G. Harrison

Editor-in-Chief

All of the articles submitted for this edition of our journal deal, in one way or another, with an essential change in the relative position of the United States in space, or – to put the matter rather more bluntly – the decline of U.S. space power and what to do about it. I should add quickly that the decline is relative, and the base against which it's measured is arbitrary. What is treated as a base was in fact a high point. It came in the 1990s, when the former Soviet space program was in disarray, the Europeans had not yet found their competitive edge and the prospect of China as a power space player was, at best, on the horizon, no bigger than a man's hand. The U.S. was, for that decade, the unchallenged "shepherd of space" to use Everett Dolman's evocative imagery. It was possible to imagine the world accepting the United States as a benevolent hegemon, setting rules to benefit all while remaining (as hegemonic powers generally do) somewhere outside the rules ourselves. At least this vision of "space control" was possible for U.S. observers to conjure. The rest of the world was simply annoyed.

It isn't necessarily "declinism" to point out that the vision has faded. In space, as in golf, it isn't possible to win by preventing the other guy from doing better, and the circumstances that led to U.S. domination in the 1990's began to change as the century turned. By then, the Russian Federation had regained its balance, and reminded us that it was a near peer competitor with technology in some areas – notably rocket motors – that was still the best in the world. The European Ariane launcher had proven both reliable and

scalable, and by 2000, Europe was a legitimate competitor, too. Commercial companies increased their share of space activity, and became supra-national, moving offshore to places like the Bahamas and Luxemburg. And here came China with both commercial programs and offensive ASAT programs that brought into serious question the central proposition of "space control" ideology, i.e. that the U.S. could control "access to space" and therefore space itself. That seems to have become a hollow – albeit in some circles still hallowed – claim.

The Obama space policy and strategy are meant to deal with this new reality, and with the sobering prospect of budget shortfalls as far as the eye can see. Operating in space sucks resources at a frightening rate, a bad quality to have when the overall pie is shrinking. All of our authors seem to accept this new reality. They focus on its implications, which might be summed up in two thoughts: in the future, the United States will need to collaborate with other nations in space, and get more out of every dollar spent. The era of autarky is over.

What should we do now? That is the subject all our authors address, and I shall leave them to speak for themselves. But there is one omission – not just from these articles, but from the national dialogue on security space in general – that I must point out. In all the discussion of vaguely defined rules of the road, and norms, voluntary codes of conduct and "transparency and confidence building measures" there is a tendency to forget that space is subject to binding international law in

the form of the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. That treaty speaks to issues that are no longer relevant: no one planned even in 1967 to station nuclear missiles on the moon. But also has pertinent things to say about consultation, and interference with the satellite operations of other states. It was meant to begin a process which – had it been taken seriously – might have allowed the evolution over time of a legal structure for space to deal with the problems of crowding and debris that we face now. It might even have been a framework for the discussion of curbing an arms race in space. None of this potential was realized, largely because both the Soviet Union and the United States preferred freedom of action to any legally binding regime in space. The Treaty was signed, ratified, and then largely ignored.

I pointed this out recently to a room full of government space analysts, listing the sorts of things the OST addresses, sometimes in specific terms. Someone commented: “We could never get that sort of thing now.” Perhaps not. Luckily, we already have that sort of thing. It may be time to burrow in the archives, dust off the OST and ask ourselves whether its relevant to the concerns we now have in space – and if not, how it can be improved.

RGH