

OUTER CLARITY: ON 'WEAPONISATION' OF OUTER SPACE

Relevant for: Science & Technology | Topic: Space Technology & related matters

The Indian Space Research Organisation's successful April 1 launch of the [PSLV-C45 rocket that placed 29 satellites](#) in three different orbits is remarkable both for the complex set of multi-tasking the mission accomplished and for the timing. Coming three days after ISRO and the Defence Research and Development Organisation knocked out a satellite in a Low Earth Orbit with a direct hit, it would appear that the Indian space programme stands galvanised and poised for a giant leap. The dexterity with which so many satellites, most of them American, were placed in three different orbits certainly showcases both the reliability and the expertise that ISRO offers. This is not a new development. In February 2017, the PSLV-C37 placed 104 satellites, 96 of them from the U.S., in one go, a testimony to ISRO's ability to launch satellites at a fraction of the cost that other countries incur. Equally important, just as the February 2017 launch also placed the fifth of the Cartosat 2 series in orbit, an earth observation satellite with cameras that have a resolution of less than a metre, the PSLV-C45 placed EMISAT, which can, among other things, aid in electronic intelligence. In other words, [India is assiduously putting in place](#) a space military architecture. Over the next few months, as many as eight satellites are expected to be launched, strengthening the defence dimension.

That is precisely why the government should articulate much more clearly the doctrinal aspects of the space programme, as well as the deterrence sought to be achieved by it. India must communicate its peaceful intentions just as it showcases its capabilities, so as to contribute to a better understanding among countries it hopes to deter and thereby reduce the chances of wrong inferences being drawn in crisis situations. After all, missiles are but one aspect of space warfare. There are other, less visible but equally effective methods to incapacitate satellites that are being developed and are of equally serious concern. The problem is that there is no global regulatory regime to address the growing militarisation in space. Last year, at the UN Disarmament Commission, India expressed concern about the "weaponisation" of outer space, and sought collective action to secure space-based assets. In this regulatory vacuum, India has legitimate reasons to develop deterrence for the security of its space-based assets. Equally, New Delhi must take a bigger lead in forging a global and legally binding instrument to prevent militarisation of space. It is encouraging that after the ASAT test, India said it "expects to play a role in the future in the drafting of international law on prevention of an arms race in space". This is morally and pragmatically in keeping with India's power projection. Given the prohibitively expensive nature of space projects, India and other countries must utilise the increased presence in space to legitimately advance the well-being of their people.

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