

A RIGHTFUL PLACE IN SPACE

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

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India's successful anti-satellite (ASAT) missile test on Wednesday has added a new chapter in its defence preparedness. The global reactions to it have been mixed, which is not surprising. At this juncture, it is more important to analyse the rationale behind the conduct of the test without being influenced by the political noise. It is important that the relevance of the test should not get occluded by the demands of electoral politics.

Before India, only three countries, namely the US, Russia and China, have demonstrated this capability. ASAT had receded from the debates even in the security circles until China conducted a test in January 2007. The tests conducted by the US and USSR in the 1960s were seen as a legacy of the Cold War era power politics and have been forgotten. China conducted the test without any provocation. It destroyed one of its own ageing weather satellites that weighed 750 kg at an altitude of 850 km above the earth's surface. This ended up creating a significant amount of debris in space, which is present even today and poses a threat to every satellite in the low earth orbit, including the Chinese ones. In comparison, the test carried out by India was at a much lower altitude, at around 300 km, which means a major portion of the debris would enter the earth's atmosphere owing to the gravitational pull and get burnt owing to the high temperatures over there. Simply put, the Chinese test created a significant amount of space debris whereas India could be said to have conducted a debris-less test. It is important to note that India has been actively propagating debris mitigation guidelines for space. Hence, it is not for India to be seen as going against the principles of ensuring that space would not be littered by the human-made debris.

Should the Wednesday event be deemed as India's reaction to the 2007 Chinese test? The answer is yes and no. That it has been undertaken 12 years after the Chinese test makes it clear it is not a knee-jerk reaction to Beijing. India has made significant progress in the domain of space in the last two decades. Now India has a good number of satellites in space and it is in India's interest to ensure their security. Of course, the test is a message from India to its adversaries that its low earth orbit satellites have a security cover. Hence, this test should be viewed as a demonstration of technological capability as well a communication of deterrence message to any possible adversary; China happens to be just one of them. It needs to be emphasised that a country need not be a major space power to develop ASAT capability, it only requires proficiency in the missile domain.

India may also have considered the history of non-proliferation negotiations. The experience in global negotiations on nuclear weapons shows that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) is essentially about a group of five nuclear weapons states coming together and deciding the policies for the rest of the world. The NPT allows only five states in the world to hold nuclear weapons and treats the rest of the world as secondary citizens. Obviously, India was keen to ensure that a similar situation should not arise during any negotiations on outer space. It is not in India's interest that the US, Russia and China should decide the fate of non-proliferation negotiations regarding space. Hereafter, the big three will have to engage with India; the successful ASAT test has earned India its rightful place on the high table.

Almost for a decade, the European Union (EU) has been debating the need to introduce transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities (TCBMS). In this regard, it has also prepared a draft code of conduct (CoC). In October 2012, global negotiations for an International Code of Conduct (CoC) for Outer Space commenced. Over a period, in response to various negotiations, the initial draft was amended four times. However, major powers are yet to agree on the idea of establishing a CoC conduct. At present, it appears to be going nowhere. Another important idea that has been put on the table jointly by Russia and China is the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects (PPWT). There is a greater reluctance, particularly from the US and the EU, to have any debate on this mechanism. However, India is open to the idea and is ready to debate it under the UN system. All these indicate that India is keen to have a rule-based mechanism in space.

Is India keen to weaponise space to prove its credentials as a space power? No. India has always been against weaponising space. India understands that space is important for military, but only as an instrument to assist and improve on its existing military capabilities. India looks at space as a force-multiplier. Taking warfare to space is a no go for India. Since the days of Vikram Sarabhai, India's policy has been to use space for socio-economic development.

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