

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2950  
July 6, 2010

## Obama's National Space Policy: Subordinating National Security to Arms Control

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A close examination of the White House's National Space Policy<sup>1</sup> released on June 28 reveals that national security is subordinated to policies for seeking cooperation, transparency, and most of all, arms control agreements regarding space systems and operations. Putting arms control at the center of the National Space Policy carries the direct risk of the U.S. losing its military and intelligence advantages in space and increasing the effectiveness of the "anti-access" strategies of U.S. adversaries.

Further, Congress—and the Senate in particular—needs to keep a close watch on the Obama Administration's space arms control initiatives. The Obama Administration will most certainly be tempted to pursue this arms control agenda in ways that effectively circumvent the Senate's constitutional role in consenting to the ratification of international agreements that should be concluded as treaties.

**National Security in Space.** The national security aspects of the National Space Policy make up only a portion of the document. This is appropriate. Clearly, policies related to civil and commercial space activities play an essential role in the broader policy. What is inappropriate is that the national security requirements are not identified as the most important aspects of the policy and that the provisions that are related to national security—specifically regarding military and intelligence capabilities—are given a lower priority than pursuing international cooperation, transparency, and arms control.

Specifically, the aspects of the National Space Policy that are relevant to national security start with the following:

- Expanding international cooperation;
- Increasing transparency;
- Directing the Secretary of Defense to develop international space object databases to support collision avoidance initiatives; and
- Increasing the resilience of U.S. space-based systems and networks.

Only later are specific national security guidelines provided, the responsibilities for which are divided between the Secretary of Defense and the Director of National Intelligence. They include:

- Developing, acquiring, and operating space systems to support national security;
- Ensuring the survivability of national security space systems and networks;
- Reinvigorating the national security space industrial base;
- Improving "mission assurance" for national security space;
- Developing "space situational awareness" (SSA) capabilities; and

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://report.heritage.org/wm2950>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
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- Responding to changes in the threat environment.

**The Dangerous Implications of Misplaced Priorities.** As inappropriate as it is for President Obama to downplay the importance of national security in the National Space Policy, it is not surprising. During his presidential campaign, Obama famously promised not to “weaponize” space. Given that space has been weaponized since the dawn of the space age, his promise clearly meant that under his leadership the U.S. would move toward de-weaponizing and de-militarizing its uses of space. Such a policy, unfortunately, will force the U.S. in the direction of giving up its dominant position in terms of military and intelligence space capabilities, which provides the U.S. with enormous advantages over the enemy in the conduct and support of military operations.

The National Space Policy shows that President Obama intends to use the tools of transparency, cooperation, and space arms control to fulfill this ill-advised campaign promise. This intention is made all the more clear by his decision last year to agree to a negotiating agenda at the United Nations Conference on Disarmament that includes an item on space arms control. Accordingly, the National Space Policy states, “The United States will consider proposals and concepts for arms control measures if they are equitable, effectively verifiable, and enhance the national security of United States and its allies.”

The logic of putting a higher priority on de-weaponizing space and achieving that end through arms control points in the direction of very dangerous outcomes for the U.S. For example:

- The Obama Administration has touted its new Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA) to provide defenses against missile attack, particularly to Europe. The PAA is centered on fielding the existing Aegis-based missile defense system and supporting it with other elements of the broader ballistic missile defense system, first at sea and later on land, and improving it over time. The problem is that the Aegis-based system, particu-

larly when provided off-board sensor data and command-and-control support, has a proven space weapons capability. This was demonstrated in a February 2008 operation using the system to intercept and destroy an out-of-control U.S. satellite. Under the new National Space Policy, the PAA system will at a minimum have to be “dumbed down” or perhaps cancelled entirely.

- The National Space Policy itself endorses enhancing SSA capabilities. SSA capabilities—given their inherent capacity to detect, track, and categorize space objects—are essential enablers of anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons. But the National Space Policy adopts the principle that purposeful interference with space systems is an infringement of a nation’s rights. This statement of principle constitutes a call for a ban on ASAT weapons systems or the ability to conduct ASAT operations. Thus, this goal will prevent maintaining, let alone enhancing, SSA capabilities. Ultimately, it will require that SSA capabilities be curtailed dramatically.
- In statements defending its New START arms control treaty with Russia, the Obama Administration has indicated that it wants to maintain and modernize U.S. strategic strike weapons systems. The issue here is that all long-range ballistic missiles, which comprise the majority of the U.S. strategic strike arsenal, transit space and are by definition space weapons. Only bombers—among them the strategic strike systems currently in the U.S. arsenal—may be preserved under President Obama’s commitment not to weaponize space.
- Many conventional weapons systems in today’s sophisticated American arsenal include space components, particularly for precise targeting purposes. As such, these weapons systems are also space weapons, in this case not for attacking other objects in space but to attack objects on the surface of the earth. A policy that is focused on de-weaponizing space through arms control will drive the U.S. in the direction of curtailing the capabilities of the relevant weapon systems.

1. The White House, “National Space Policy of the United States of America,” June 28, 2010, at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/national\\_space\\_policy\\_6-28-10.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/national_space_policy_6-28-10.pdf) (July 2, 2010).

**Bush Was Right About Space.** Space arms control is a dubious undertaking. It is hard to imagine any significant space arms control step that will be, in the words of the new National Space Policy, “equitable [and] effectively verifiable, and enhance the national security of United States and its allies.”

This was the conclusion of the Bush Administration in its August 2006 National Space Policy. The

Bush Administration was right, and President Obama, his campaign commitment notwithstanding, should have left well enough alone.

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