The Militarization of Space

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The West's Militarization of Space

From exploration weaponisation: The recent developments of the new space race

Space in today's world plays a more crucial role than ever before. Communications and GPS rely on satellites that serve both military and civilian purposes. However, the application has primarily been used in the global west for scientific endeavors like space exploration. This is about to change. Militaries are launching satellites exclusively for defence purposes and defence ministries are investing significant amounts of money in commercial solutions for their militaries, a huge shift in how the space domain is

seen. So, why are we witnessing the west's militarization of space, and what investments are resulting from it?

The shift appears to stem from a changing cultural perception of space. For decades, Americans associated space with NASA's civilian and exploration missions. Though the U.S. military maintained an interest—namely through the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), established in 1962—the public was hesitant to see space as a military domain, delaying the NRO's declassification until 1992. Another example was highlighted by Aaron Bateman, assistant professor at George Washington University. During the cold war, the Reagan administration proposed a missile defence system nicknamed the "Star Wars programme", since it involved space-based laser weapons. The programme faced public skepticism and budgetary constraints, preventing its development. Today however, there is an unprecedented shift in attitude for what space is for.

So, what are the military applications in space? The most cited are satellite communications (SATCOM), Global Positioning System (GPS), early missile warning system and Earth Observations (EO). A key indicator of these demands appears in the U.S. federal budget for FY 2024. For the first time, the U.S. Space Force (USSF), the newly established space branch for the Department of Defense, has surpassed NASA in funding. The USSF received approximately $30 billion, while NASA's budget was just below $25 billion. Furthermore, both Republicans and Democrats have consistently praised the USSF, a sign that securitisation of space enjoys broad support.

Beyond the US, other NATO countries are also spending significant resources on expanding its military space capabilities, to be a contributing party in the alliance, especially after the Trump administration has put pressure on its allies to spend more on its defence. Italy, for example, recently signed a new deal with Elon Musk's SpaceX for SATCOM and in August the UK launched its first military EO satellite. Sweden, one of the few NATO countries with a spaceport on mainland Europe, launched its first military satellite in August 2024. Additionally the Swedish Ministry of Defence announced back in October that it would commit €88 million in future military space capabilities, where their minister of Defence, Pål Jonson, emphasized the strategic importance of space.

This shift can be seen as a bigger global trend towards securitisation in domains that traditionally has been used mostly for scientific endeavours, similar to the increasing strategic competition in the Arctic region. As nations increasingly explore new domains for geopolitical advantage, it is likely that space will continue to be perceived as a military significant domain for the foreseeable future.