

US, France to sign accord on tracking space debris

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French Defence Minister Alain Juppé talks to the press at the United Nations headquarter in New York. US and French defense chiefs plan to sign a space cooperation agreement on Tuesday designed to help track debris in outer space threatening vital satellites, officials told AFP.

US and French defense chiefs plan to sign a space cooperation agreement on Tuesday designed to help track debris in outer space threatening vital satellites, officials told AFP.

The accord follows the unveiling of a new US space security policy last week that calls for building a network of foreign partners to save costs and deter possible threats to sensitive satellites.

The agreement was aimed at bolstering the sharing of information on

congestion and debris in space, US and French officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP.

The US military and its allies heavily depend on satellites for communications, navigation, spying and targeting, with senior officers increasingly worried about safeguarding vital satellites.

US military radars and sensors track about 22,000 man-made objects in orbit, and experts estimate there are hundreds of thousands of additional pieces of debris that are too small to monitor.

Following a similar agreement between the United States and Australia last year, the "statement of principles" on cooperation with France is one of the first by Washington in the space arena, marking a shift in the Pentagon's approach.

For years, the United States dominated space and saw little need to seek out international partners. But with more countries launching or operating satellites and the threat of collisions rising, military leaders want to promote data sharing with allies and industry.

Titled "Space Situational Awareness Partnership," the agreement is set to be signed during a visit to Washington by French Defense Minister Alain Juppe, who is scheduled to hold talks with his American counterpart, Robert Gates, on Tuesday at the Pentagon.

Their discussions are expected to address the crisis in Egypt and the war in Afghanistan, where France has about 3,750 troops deployed in the US-led coalition.

During his stop in Washington, Juppe is due to hold talks with French General Stephane Abrial, head of NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT) based in Virginia, and will meet Republican

Senator John McCain.

In presenting the 10-year National Security Space Strategy (NSSS) last week, Gregory Schulte, US deputy secretary of defense for space policy, expressed concern over China's pursuit of space weapons that could knock out satellites or jam signals.

In 2007, China shot down one of its own weather satellites using a medium-range ground missile, sparking international concern not only about how China was "weaponizing" space, but also about debris from the satellite.

The United States reserved the right to respond in "self-defense" to attacks in space, Schulte said on Friday.

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