

France to develop anti-satellite laser weapons: minister

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France plans to develop anti-satellite laser weapons, its defence minister

said Thursday, laying out French ambitions to close the gap on rivals who are developing new arms and surveillance capabilities in space.

The United States, Russia and China have been heavily investing in technology for space, which is seen as a new military frontier.

The ability to detect spy satellites and potentially destroy or cripple them is seen as a key capability.

"If our satellites are threatened, we intend to blind those of our adversaries," Defence Minister Florence Parly said.

"We reserve the right and the means to be able to respond: that could imply the use of powerful lasers deployed from our satellites or from patrolling nano-satellites."

Around 2,000 active satellites are currently estimated to be orbiting the Earth, mostly to relay commercial and military communications, but also to track the weather and for spying.

"We will develop powerful lasers," Parly said during a speech at an air force base outside the city of Lyon. "It's an area in which France has fallen behind. But we will catch up."

Other weapons capabilities could include machineguns capable of shooting the solar panels of enemy satellites to disable them, a government source told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Experts say that the United States, Russia, China and India are capable of destroying enemy satellites using missiles fired from Earth, and probably also by engineering deliberate collisions.

An official from the NATO military alliance told AFP last month that

there was no known deployment of space-based weapons in orbit, but concerns were growing about "more aggressive behaviour" from China and Russia.

"Our allies and adversaries are militarising space... we need to act," Parly said during her speech, adding that the first capabilities under her strategy should be ready by 2025 and be completed by 2030.

In September last year, Parly accused a Russian satellite called Luch Olymp of attempting to spy on France's Athena-Fidus satellite, which is jointly operated with Italy, and is used to provide secure communications for the French military.

Not an arms race?

On July 13, French President Emmanuel Macron announced his intention to create a French space force command, which will be formed on September 1 and be integrated into the air force, Parly said.

A new space campus will be created in Toulouse in southwest France, she added, which is a hub for the European aerospace industry and home to aircraft and defence manufacturer Airbus.

Macron's declaration—made on the eve of France's July 14 Bastille Day military parade—mirrored an initiative in the US championed by President Donald Trump.

The new US force, which has yet to receive congressional approval, would create a new branch of the military on an equal footing with the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps and have some 20,000 personnel.

But annual French investment of 2.0 billion euros (2.2 billion dollars) in

its space industry, including both civilian and military spending, is dwarfed by the commitments of its rivals.

The US invests \$50 billion in the space industry every year, China invests 10 billion euros and Russia four billion, according to figures from the French government.

The French military space programme had been given a budget of 3.6 billion euros for 2019-2025, but Parly announced another 700 million on Thursday.

"I want to be precise: active defence has got nothing to do with an offensive strategy," she added, denying that France was joining the global space arms race.

EU is key

European efforts to develop a coordinated space strategy and joint capabilities would also be key, Parly explained, echoing Macron's message that EU's members need to pool their defence resources to count as a bloc.

"France has her independence and is attached to it. But she does not want to be isolated in this new zone of conflicts," she said. "I am counting particularly on Germany to become the beating heart of surveillance in space."

France is one of only five declared nuclear powers and will have by far the largest armed forces in the European Union if Britain leaves the bloc later this year.

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