

Countdown to NATO space strategy

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NATO will launch its first strategy for space this week as the alliance heads beyond the skies to defend against the likes of China and Russia.

As concerns grow about the possible militarisation of [space](#)—alongside more mundane worries about debris orbiting the Earth—allied defence ministers will sign off on a [policy framework](#).

The aim is for NATO to make space a full operational domain—alongside land, sea, air and cyber—perhaps as early as the alliance summit in London in December, diplomats say.

"Space is part of our daily lives, and while it can be used for peaceful purposes, it can also be used for aggression," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters.

"Satellites can be jammed, hacked or weaponised. Anti-satellite weapons could cripple communications, so it is important that we are vigilant and resilient."

NATO has tried unsuccessfully to craft a policy in the past, most recently in 2011-12, but officials point to fresh impetus now as space becomes

"more congested, contested and competitive."

Around 2,000 active satellites currently orbit the Earth, along with half a million pieces of debris, 30,000 to 40,000 of which are capable of damaging a satellite.

And a NATO official said that while there is so far no known deployment of space-based weapons in orbit, concerns are growing about "more aggressive behaviour" from China and Russia.

Like the US, Russia and China are capable of destroying enemy satellites using missiles fired from Earth, and probably also by engineering deliberate collisions. The three countries may also be developing lasers to blind or damage satellites.

Space jamming

Hacking, jamming and harassing communications and spy satellites are also becoming increasingly important tactics in space.

In October 2017 a Russian satellite approached a French-Italian satellite in a move Paris later denounced as espionage, and the US and China have demonstrated similar capabilities.

NATO's new policy will give the alliance a framework to discuss these issues, how to respond to them and how to maintain the alliance's current advantage in space.

NATO includes around half-a-dozen "space-faring" member states, led by the US, and initially the new policy will seek to use their resources rather than developing new capabilities for the alliance.

"NATO will not buy or operate its own satellites—the principle is that NATO will rely on space services provided by allies," a NATO official said.

But longer term, there could be a role for at least some elements of a NATO-operated space system, for example to replace the alliance's AWACS

surveillance system when it is phased out in the 2030s.

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If space becomes an operational domain, it will allow NATO's planners to set targets for different allies to provide capabilities—so many hours of [satellite](#) communications, for example, or a certain amount of data for intelligence imagery.

A vital question for NATO will be whether and in what circumstances the alliance's common defence pact—Article 5 of its founding treaty, under which an attack on one ally is an attack on all—can apply.

Stoltenberg said it was too early to speculate on how Article 5 could apply in space, but the issue will be crucial in the coming debate among allies.

Happy Trump?

The US military is carrying out a major shakeup to create the Space Force demanded by President Donald Trump.

The new force, which has yet to receive congressional approval, will be on an equal footing with the army, navy, air force and Marine Corps and have some 20,000 personnel.

While the NATO policy is not a response to Trump's plans, it may give Stoltenberg a positive message to sell the mercurial US leader at what could be an awkward summit in London in December.

The NATO summit in Brussels last year was overshadowed by Trump haranguing European allies for not spending enough on defence, and with only modest improvements on that front, the spectre of a repeat hangs in the air.

"There will not be many meaty headlines for the secretary general to go in front of media come December," the NATO official said.

"Space is one where he can say "Look, President Trump, you have announced Space Force, we at NATO understand the growing importance of this domain so we have decided to move ahead with operational domain with all the follow-on work that will come with that.""

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