Navigating Great Power Competition in Outer Space: Strategies of Middle Powers, the EU, India, and Japan

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of outer space as a key arena of competition in the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China has raised serious concerns for space security, while also resulting in an intensification of competition between the two powers to shape the rules and norms for the governance of the domain. The changing geopolitical dynamics have led to strategic concerns among Middle Powers in space, namely, the European Union (EU), India, and Japan, resulting in a reconfiguration of their space policies, postures, and partnerships as they seek to deal with the implications of Great Power competition in space and safeguard their interests. In examining their evolving space strategies, the paper argues that the emerging security dilemma(s) in outer space, fueled by great power rivalry, have pushed these powers to place greater emphasis on the security dimension of space. Additionally, it has also led them to adopt a much more proactive and participatory stance in the ongoing contest for influence over rules and norms for space governance. Ultimately, the paper contends that the transition to a multi-polar space order intersecting with Great Power competition has not only intensified militarisation and weaponisation of outer space but has also hampered efforts at formulating international rules and norms for space governance.

Keywords: Great Powers, Competition, Outer Space, Middle Powers, Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Humankind's forays into outer space began with the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957, marking the onset of its Cold War-era space race with the United States. However, despite the ongoing competition, the two powers successfully negotiated the 1967 Outer Space Treaty (OST), heralding a period of relative stability in the domain (Dembling and Arons, 1967; Nucera, 2019: 2; Lai, 2021). The end of the Cold War ushered in a unipolar moment, marked by the emergence of the U.S. as the dominant power in outer space, laying the groundwork for the ongoing US-China geopolitical rivalry in space.

The US's rise as the preponderant space power has been accompanied by an increasing focus on the militarisation and weaponisation of the domain. Its extensive reliance on space assets in the 1991 Gulf War, dubbed as the first 'Space War', and in subsequent conflicts led to China's growing recognition of the critical role played by space capabilities in modern warfare, resulting in increasing attention to the development of military space capabilities (Shambaugh, 2002; Cheng, 2011, pp. 159, 161; Harrison et al., 2017, p. 28; Liu 2021). Further, Washington's renewed push toward space weaponisation, with a growing commitment to the development of a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system, and its subsequent withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2002 sent alarm bells ringing in Beijing (Steff & Khoo, 2014, p. 240). The 2006 US National Space Policy called for developing means to deny adversaries the use of space in ways deemed hostile to US national interests and opposed the development of any new arms control agreements that might impose limits on its space activities (U.S. National Space Policy, 2006, pp. 2). These developments raised significant concerns in the PRC, especially regarding the efficacy of its nuclear deterrent, and their potential to trigger a destabilising arms race in space (Zhang, 2006, pp. 26; Hagt, 2006, pp. 85).

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A major turning point came with China's conduct of its first Anti-satellite (ASAT) test in 2007. In February 2008, Washington conducted its ASAT test, 'Operation Burnt Frost', viewed by many as a reaction to the Chinese test (Johnson-Freese, 2013; Day, 2021). China's rise as a major space power, particularly advancements in its military space and counterspace capabilities, over the past two decades, has been widely perceived in the US as a challenge to its long-held preponderance in the domain (Tellis, 2007; Harrison, 2019, p. 2; Rose, 2020, p. 5, Stokes et al., 2024; Schaffer & Bingen, 2024). The US has come to increasingly regard Beijing as a key strategic competitor in the domain. The Department of Defense's (DoD) 2020 Defence Space Strategy (DSS) called for building a comprehensive US military advantage in space, highlighting the return of Great Power competition in space, and the transformation of the realm into a war-fighting domain, primarily driven by the China's growing military space and counter-space capabilities (Defense Space Strategy Summary, 2020, p. 7).

For its part, China has accused the US of militarising and weaponising the domain. In a veiled reference to the US, its 2015 Defence White Paper stated that 'Countries Concerned' have been building their space forces and capabilities, and noted the emergence of early signs of space weaponisation. Further, it emphasised that it will monitor the developments in the domain, and take steps to deal with space security threats, secure its space assets, and maintain outer space security (The State Council, The People's Republic of China, 2015). Both countries have been expanding their respective military space and counterspace capabilities, justifying their development as a defensive response to the other's actions, with significant implications for international space security (Smith, 2014; Secure World Foundation, 2025; Burdette, 2025, pp. 116-118). This has led scholars to argue that these developments have given rise to a security dilemma in space between the two powers (Blazejewski, 2008, pp. 33,34; Zhang, 2011; Townsend, 2020, p. 101).

This competition has also extended to the realm of space governance, particularly on the issue of Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS). While China has been advocating for a legally binding treaty to ban space weapons and submitted a joint Sino-Russian draft treaty proposal in 2008 (revised in 2014) to the UN Disarmament Conference (CD), titled Prevention of the Deployment of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects (PPWT), this has been consistently rejected by the US citing lack of a verification mechanism, no prohibitions on development of space-based weapons and development and deployment of ground-based weapons, and running contrary to its national interests (CD 2008, CD 2014). For decades, the US position has been limited to opposing a legally binding treaty to ban space weapons. However, there has been a notable shift in the last few years. The 2020 DSS called for the development of favourable norms (in close cooperation with allies and partners) for appropriate space behaviour. Reflecting this, the US has sought a more active participation, putting its weight behind non-binding voluntary commitments for responsible behaviour (Samson & Weeden, 2023). In 2022, following a unilateral commitment to the effect, it spearheaded a UNGA resolution to voluntarily refrain from destructive, debris-creating kinetic kill ASAT tests. China opposed the resolution, criticising it for lacking legally binding commitments, dismissing it as 'fake arms control' (Liu, 2023). Thus, US-China geopolitical competition in space has not only raised the spectre of space militarisation and weaponisation but also contributed to a deadlock in space governance.

While the implications of U.S.-China geopolitical competition in space for space security and stability have been extensively examined in the existing literature, its impact on space strategies and policies of Middle Powers has received far less attention. The concept of 'Middle Powers' in IR has remained vague and contested. Nonetheless, A baseline consensus criterion has been their significance in international affairs owing to their economic, military, technological, and diplomatic strength and ambitions (Lodhi 2023, Djalal 2024). The paper uses the term in its most basic sense to refer to countries that occupy the position between Great powers and small states within the hierarchy of states. As applied to space, the European Union, India, and Japan constitute 'Middle powers', given their significant space capabilities, as also their active engagement with space governance. While increasing attention has been paid to the role of these powers in shaping the evolving international order (Djalal 2024; Nagy & Ping, 2023; Elliot, 2024; Sweijs & Mazarr, 2023), their role in the emerging international (dis)order in space has remained understudied. The paper attempts to address this gap by examining the evolving space policies of middle powers and their implications for space security and stability. Drawing on official policy documents and secondary literature, the paper contends that the reorientation of their space strategies in response to the dynamics of great power competition has contributed to a further undermining of the space security environment.

Navigating The Great Power Competition in Space: Middle Powers' (Eu, India, And Japan)

Reconfiguration of Space Policy toward militarisation and weaponisation

Shifts in the international strategic environment evoked a policy reassessment and reconfiguration on the part of Middle Powers in space - the EU, India, and Japan. While their respective responses have been shaped by their specific strategic priorities and regional contexts, there has been a clear shift in the direction of greater emphasis on security-related aspects of space.

Over the past decade, the EU has come to regard space as the core of European security and defence, resulting in what Klimburg-Witjes (2021, p. 527) has referred to as an increasing 'securitisation of space', marking a reorientation away from its erstwhile emphasis on developing space capabilities primarily for civilian and scientific purposes. This shift has been majorly driven by concerns over growing risks and challenges to space security emanating from the increasing militarisation and weaponisation of space by major space powers (Kolovos, 2023; González Muñoz and Portela, 2023, p. 3). The Ukraine war marked a major turning point in this regard. Shortly after the outbreak of the conflict, the EU adopted the 'Strategic Compass for Security and Defence' in March 2022, calling for enhanced focus on the security and defence dimensions of space and the development of a dedicated strategy. Consequently, the 'EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence' was released in 2023. Highlighting the contested nature of the domain, it took particular note of Russia's 2021 ASAT test, the PRC's growing presence in space, particularly its counter-space capabilities in pursuit of its geopolitical agenda. This development reflected the EU's shifting approach toward China's space programme, as the geopolitical fallout resulting from the conflict led to a reassessment of existing cooperative engagements (Holden, 2022). The war also resulted in the EU's closer alignment with the US. However, while calling for a deepening of space security cooperation with the United States, the strategy document placed particular emphasis on strengthening strategic autonomy in defence space capabilities. This emphasis has been driven in part by growing US pressure on its allies to boost defence spending and development of capabilities, and doubts over American commitment to European security (Bayer and Siebold, 2025; Giri, 2025).

The US-China military space competition has had particularly significant implications for the space policies of regional space powers in Asia, namely, India and Japan. Central to this shift has been the rapid expansion of China's military space and counterspace capabilities. While the PRC's pursuit of capabilities has been the result of its growing security dilemma with the United States, this has, in turn, resulted in a security dilemma for its Asian rivals owing to their long-standing adversarial relations with Beijing.

Japan passed its 'Basic Space Law' in 2008, marking a departure from its erstwhile policy of using space strictly for 'non-military' purposes to allowing for its military use (Manriquez, 2007; Peoples 2013). Consequently, successive iterations of Japan's space policy document, 'Basic Plan on Space Policy', have progressively placed greater emphasis on the development of space capabilities to serve national security objectives. Some have attributed this development to Japan's efforts at safeguarding its interests in the face of an international trend towards greater space militarisation and weaponisation (Peoples, 2013, p. 140). However, this recalibration has been largely driven by strategic concerns emanating from China's expanding capabilities, especially in the aftermath of its 2007 ASAT test (Manriquez, 2007; Moltz, 2011, p. 63; Yoshimatsu, 2021, p. 305; Bingen and Young, 2024, p. 14). Japan's 2007 Defence White Paper regarded the test as an indication of China's intent to integrate such capabilities into its military operations (Manriquez, 2007). Further, the third iteration of the 'Basic Plan on Space Policy' released in 2015 expressed concerns regarding China's rapidly advancing anti-satellite space capabilities (Yoshimatsu 2021, p. 308). Thus, the growing emphasis on advancing its military space capabilities is primarily aimed at safeguarding its interests amid China's expanding capabilities. The policy shift has also been driven by the emerging demands of its traditional security alliance with the United States. The US has increasingly been calling for greater space security cooperation with its allies (including Japan) to deal with the Chinese challenge in space (National Space Policy, 2020, Yoshimatsu, 2021, pp. 312,313). Given Japan's dependence on the US's security umbrella and extended deterrence, the focus on military space capabilities is also meant to serve as a complementary support to the US capabilities aimed at bolstering the alliance's deterrence against perceived threats from China (Suzuki, 2023; Pekkanen, 2024, p. 387; Yoshimatsu, 2021, p. 313). While Japan has not conducted any ASAT test, its 2023 Space Security initiative called for cooperation with its ally (the US) to acquire an early warning satellite, and capabilities to deal with 'the deployment of

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ballistic missiles and hypersonic gliding vehicles by Neighbouring countries' (The Space Development Strategy Headquarters, Japan 2023, p. 8).

India, too, has been viewing the expansion in China's military space and counter-space capabilities with particular concern. This resulted in a shift in its space policy from its traditional focus on space capabilities for socio-economic development to increasing attention being paid to the development of military space and counter-space capabilities (Rajagopalan & Stroikos, 2024). While analysts locate the shift within broader global trends, they particularly highlight concerns raised by China's 2007 test as the key factor driving New Delhi's growing focus on space militarisation and weaponisation (Pant & Lele, 2010; Aliberti, 2018, pp. 190,195; Stroikos, 2023, p. 193, Rajagopalan & Stroikos, 2024, pp. 5,6). New Delhi has been expanding its dual-use and military space capabilities, but the most notable development has been the successful conduct of its first kinetic kill ASAT test, 'Mission Shakti', in 2019. Despite official opposition to space weaponisation, the Chinese test sparked the domestic debate on the need to develop ASAT capabilities, ultimately culminating in the 2019 test (Rajagopalan, 2011, pp. 354, 368, 369). In the aftermath of the test, Kanwal Sibal, India's former foreign secretary, argued that the test was aimed at 'redressing the India-China strategic balance' (Sibal, 2019).

As evident from the preceding discussion, the reorientation of the space policies of middle powers, spurred by the ongoing Great Power competition, has resulted in a net overall increase in space militarisation and weaponisation, thereby undermining space security and adding further instability to the international space order.

Middle Powers' engagement with Space Governance

Additionally, in responding to growing perceived threats to space security, the middle powers have also sought to engage more actively with the increasingly contested domain of space governance.

In this regard, the EU began early on, proposing voluntary, non-binding TCBMs in the form of an International Code of Conduct (ICoC) for Outer Space Activities in 2008 (revised in 2014), aimed at 'enhancing the safety, security, and sustainability of space activities and environment (European External Action Service, 2014, pp. 3). However, the ICoC faced criticism not only from major space powers but also from other middle powers. China and Russia argued that the code should limit itself to 'peaceful uses of outer space', and objected to the provision of self-defence, arguing that Transparency and confidence-building measures (TCBMs) should not include such references (Irsten, n.d.). The PRC also remained critical of the provision requiring countries to share details on their national space security strategies, and potential limits on the development of military capabilities (Rajagopalan, 2014). After initially rejecting the Code for being too "restrictive", the US ultimately endorsed it, but only as a foundation toward developing a new ICoC for space activities, particularly focused on debris-creating activities (Weisgerber, 2012; Bureau of Public Affairs, 2012). While Japan extended full-fledged support, India remained opposed to it on the grounds that it was not sufficiently consulted during the drafting process, reflecting New Delhi's desire to play an active role in shaping and influencing rules and norms for space governance (Rajagopalan, 2012, p. 143; Stroikos, 2023, p. 196).

While India's space security strategy has been driven by a security dilemma with China and veered in the direction of growing cooperation with the US (and allies), its approach to space governance has more closely resembled the Chinese position. Just like the PRC, it has consistently emphasised its opposition to outer space weaponisation and has been advocating for a legally binding treaty for Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS), viewing TCBMs as complementary to rather than substitutes for such a treaty, as opposed to non-binding behavioural norms favoured by the US and its allies (Rajagopalan, 2012, p. 46; Stroikos, 2025). Reflecting this, it also abstained from voting on a US-led resolution on Direct Ascent ASAT tests at the UNGA (Smith, 2022).

Japan, on the other hand, has consistently supported the position of its ally, the United States. Post the US's announcement of a unilateral ban on the conduct of destructive, debris-generating Direct Ascent ASAT test in April 2022, it followed suit with a similar commitment in September 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2022). Building on this approach, its Space Security initiative document released in 2023 called for a more active role in shaping norms for responsible behaviour in outer space through cooperation with allies and like-minded

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countries to advance the development of international norms and rules for outer space governance, particularly on issues concerning national security (The Space Development Strategy Headquarters, Japan 2023, pp. 11).

These powers' growing engagement with, and divergent positions on space governance have added another layer of complexity to the ongoing great power competition for shaping rules and norms for the governance of outer space, particularly on the issue of outer space weaponisation.

CONCLUSION

The intensifying Great Power Competition in space between the United States and China, marked by a growing militarisation and weaponisation of the domain, and a contest over shaping space governance mechanisms, has had grave consequences for international space security. In response, the Middle powers have reoriented their space strategies to deal with accelerating risks to space security and safeguard their interests. This has taken place along two key dimensions: 1) a growing focus on security-related aspects of space and the development of relevant capabilities, and 2) an increasing emphasis on a more active engagement with space governance. However, their focus on the development of military space and counterspace capabilities is likely to further undermine space security, insofar as it may incentivise more actors to pursue such capabilities. Additionally, their increasing engagement with space governance, marked by divergent positions and competing desires to influence rules and norms for outer space governance, has made achieving consensus increasingly difficult at a time when an effective governance mechanism is urgently needed. This also risks the fragmentation of the international community on the issue of space security into blocs, one supporting legally binding measures (as advocated by China), and the other favouring voluntary norms (as preferred by the US). Taken together, these developments have further compounded the challenges to outer space security and stability.

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