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Cristina Pogoreviov looks at far reaching ramifications of a nightclub fire in Bucharest on Romania’s emergency response and the country’s political atmosphere.
Can liberal principles of the peaceful use of space prevail, despite the trends of militarisation, outsourcing, geopolitical jostling and booming private investment? How do we ensure that those countries that cannot reach into space do not feel excluded?

Johan Eriksson and Giampiero Giacomello investigate

SPACE AND THE NEW IRON CURTAIN

Attitudes, developed mainly for the purpose of global communications, Earth observation and weather forecasting, have been a key factor. From the outset, actors keen on embarking in space investment were operating in one of the most unforgiving domains for human beings and machines alike. This entailed great expense and inordinate care in order to operate under normal conditions. Despite complex challenges, dependency on satellites for a growing range of applications has continued to expand. The potential for further economic exploitation of space, including the possibility of space tourism and the functioning of society, continues to attract entrepreneurs and other affluent non-governmental parties.

At present, critical infrastructure and the functioning of society, government and modern economies would be severely hampered without satellites. Satellite positioning and communications systems are essential for virtually all forms of transportation, as well as for systems that control electricity, water, public protection and relief services (e.g. law enforcement, ambulances, fire brigades and search and rescue), environmental and border surveillance, finance and trade. Even private individuals use satellites in everyday life, particularly navigational and co-ordinating GPS functions in smartphones and smart watches. In addition, with space denoting the ultimate high ground, militaries – from the beginning of the space race – have relied upon space-based military communications, surveillance and missile guidance. Modern agriculture, science and climate mitigation also depend on space-based systems for satellite imagery and communications.

Space exploration is essential both for the scientific discovery of the universe’s unknowns and for early warning of potential extra-terrestrial threats. As with every technology critical to societal function, the more we depend on space, the more vulnerable our societies become to threats and risks affecting satellites and other space infrastructure. With respect to non-antagonistic risks, a serious and growing concern is space junk – debris in the form of dead and uncontrollable satellites, plus the many thousands of smaller fragments from crashes and anti-satellite weapons testing. Space junk risks clogging up orbiting spheres and poses a risk for both manned and unmanned space launches, a development exacerbated by the growing launch capacity of both private space entrepreneurs alongside smaller and cheaper satellites.

There are two main natural risks; solar storms, which could jeopardise electrical systems, and the less likely risk of asteroids entering the Earth’s atmosphere with potentially devastating consequences. Compounding these natural hazards are a range of anti-satellite missiles launched from Earth, to electromagnetic signal-jamming attacks. More recently, cyberattacks have joined the long list of risks. These have become more common, as satellite-hacking facilitates information tapping by governments and other actors, putting satellites out of service or otherwise compromising them. Indeed, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was preceded by an attack to disrupt command and control and communications on Viasat, a ground-based provider of high-speed satellite broadband services also used by the Ukrainian military. Only the growing role of the private sector in space, Elon Musk’s Starlink was called upon to supply satellite-relayed internet communications in Ukraine and Central Europe.

While space has been an arena of military interest since the beginning of the space race between the US and the USSR during the Cold War, militarisation of space activities has become more significant over the last few decades. Satellites previously used only for civilian purposes, such as Earth observation, are increasingly seen as weapons of both civilian and military activities. Major space powers specifically the US, Russia and China – are not only nuclear powers with intercontinental ballistic missiles designed to travel through space, but also have tried and tested anti-satellite weapon systems. In all three countries, military presence in space is strong. This was most recently exemplified by the formation of the US Space Force, which is more a reorganisation of pre-existing military space activity, previously under the auspices of the US Air Force.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine also seems to be leading to the end of peaceful space collaboration between Russia and the US at the International Space Station (ISS), which also partners Canada, the European Space Agency and Japan. The ISS, permanently manned by multinational crews since 2000, was made possible by the detente and a liberal moment following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. While US-Russia collaboration on the ISS has continued uninterrupted, despite several political crises and deteriorating relations on Earth, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is putting a stop to this. The head of Russia’s space agency, Roscosmos, stated in March 2022 that owing to what he claimed were illegal sanctions the US and other western countries launched against Russia in response to the Ukraine invasion, Russia will pull out of the ISS within a year’s time.

As the ISS is currently nearing its expected lifespan, the station would have to be decommissioned irrespective of international politics. Yet, the new iron curtain in international politics, attributable to Russia’s war on Ukraine, from the toping, relations in space. East-West collaboration in space is at least temporarily halted and space powers will likely focus on reinforcing collaboration among their more immediate allies rather than across global fault lines. In the East, China, with a space race that follows the fault line of liberal democracy versus autocracy. Despite the continuing and reinforced militarisation of space and increased tension in space, the 1967 Outer Space Treaty (OST), which predates the primary international legal framework for the governance of space, states fundamentally liberal principles of peaceful use and collaboration. The OST, maintained by UNODA, states that space is to be used for peaceful purposes only and that:

- Weapons of mass destruction are prohibited;
- The Moon and other celestial bodies shall be used exclusively for peaceful purposes;
- On-board systems or means of ‘ensiling mankind’;
- Space belongs to humankind; and
- No celestial body is subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty.

Likewise, a balanced sharing of economic benefits from the exploitation of space should also be considered by state and non-state actors (i.e. commercial companies), so that those countries that cannot reach into space do not feel excluded or disadvantaged (and perhaps resentful).

Can the liberal principles of peaceful use of space prevail despite the trends of space militarisation, outsourcing and the new iron curtain in space? It would seem that UNODA and the other international space community have their work cut out for them.

Sources


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