

Two Years After the ASAT Test Ban: A Realistic Assessment

By

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Introduction

Two years have passed since the United States announced a unilateral ban on the testing of destructive anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons. The ban was [announced on April 12, 2022](#), and hailed as a first step towards establishing a norms of responsible behavior to further the ideal of sustainability in outer space.

Several states, including many that do not possess nor intend to deploy such a capability, made similar proclamations. The People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, and India, however, refused to make the pledge. The US also sponsored a [resolution](#), which was a lead-in to the [Open-Ended Working Group on Reducing Space Threats](#), led by the United Kingdom and supported by the US. With the blinding effect of celebration subsiding, a more reasoned look at the drawbacks and weaknesses of the ban is in order.

Unilateral Arms Control Concession

Lost in the euphoria of the ban is the reality that the ban is a unilateral arms control concession. The US ignored an important tenet of diplomacy and negotiation and frittered away destructive ASAT testing without exacting similar concessions from Russia and China. American idealists believed that by signing the ban, the US would show leadership as a responsible actor and encourage both Russia and China to abandon their threatening counterspace build up. However, the American precedent of unilaterally banning direct-ASAT testing on its own without seeking concessions from either Russia or China signals to both that the US may be convinced to make more concessions without either adversary surrendering any of their own capabilities.

Sacrificing Freedom of Action

The unilateral American concession is not about giving up something vital to national security, but rather forfeiting freedom of action with no tangible benefit—other than creating positive political optics and an illusory norm of behavior. Many of the states pledged to the ban and the resolution lacks the requisite technology, capabilities, or the political desire to develop or acquire such technology. In other words, these states pledged to give up a freedom of action and a capability they neither possess nor plan to acquire. Conversely, Russia, China, and India, who all possess the capability, are not willing to give up their freedom of action to the advantage of the United States.

Demonstration Versus Test

The premise of the destructive test ban is the kinetic actions involving destructive ASATs are tests to determine whether a capability works. What the ban ignores is that these events are demonstrations and not tests.

The distinction between “test” and “demonstration” is not a matter of semantics but rather it is the difference between a state ascertaining whether it has a capability as opposed to showing others that it has a capability and a capacity. Ground-launched ASATs are an ancillary capability to missile defense technology, and the know-how for that capability has existed for decades.

Any state that possesses a missile defense capability is presumed to have a rudimentary ASAT capability that can transition to a break-out capability. Thus, a test ban is nonsensical as the need to test a capability is unneeded and any event involving an ASAT is considered a demonstration, including India’s 2019 satellite intercept and Russia’s 2021 intercept. Thus, the US has unilaterally sacrificed freedom of action for “destructive testing” when the capability is already proven and no longer necessary.

Implications for Missile Defense

An outright ASAT ban implicates the testing and development of mid-course missile defense systems. Direct-ascent ASATs are an ancillary capability to missile defense and destructive mid-course missile defense testing against dummy warheads could open the opportunity for Russia and China to complain that the United States is going back on its commitment and testing ASAT technology. This would fall in line with their narrative of “space weapons” given the impetus for this talking point is to stunt the development of American missile defense technology and capabilities. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics focusing on sustainability would also foster this narrative and create public pressure for the US, both in and out of international organizations, to suspend missile defense testing.

Ceding Space Control

Space control is the unspoken chip on the table, especially since the US does not have an operational destructive counterspace capability and restricts its ability to develop offensive capabilities necessary to achieve deterrence through superiority with Russia and China. According to Dana Johnson, “[Space control in geopolitical terms is the capability of a nation to maintain freedom of action in outer space and to deny the same to an adversary should national interests dictate.](#)” The unilateral concession by the US bargains away kinetic space control for the ideal of sustainability and the anticipation it will create leverage and put international pressure on Russia and China to restrict their counterspace capabilities and thus ensure sustainability.

Conclusion

At its core, the unilateral ASAT test ban is a sacrifice of freedom of action made for political convenience and to check off a bucket list item for NGOs, academics, and civil servants. The US unilaterally forfeited something of major significance for something trivial and of questionable significance without taking into consideration it would not be reciprocated. The



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American attempt to use the ban to create momentum for its effort to create pseudo-norms and the [drafting of a legally binding treaty](#) to the same end is misplaced and is a detriment to American standing in outer space law, policy, national security, and deterrence.

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