A Realist Shift in Western Military Space Posture

By

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In late September 2025, Secretary of the Air Force Troy Meink made history when he suggested the US Space Force is going full "space control" mode. This is the 2025 equivalent of a Sputnik moment, and it ends decades of political correctness by the West. There is no more pretending that adversary weaponization of space is not a real problem. The move ensures that the United Kingdom, Japan, India, France, and Germany will understand space is a warfighting domain.

Secretary Meink's wake-up call deserves restating,

> One area of particular focus for the US Space Force is "space control," the ability to ensure that US satellites can operate without interference while denying adversaries the same freedom. Unfortunately, 10 to 15 years ago, some of our adversaries started to weaponize space, and weaponized space aggressively. We stood on the sideline, probably too long. We didn't want to go down that path, but now we are pushing hard. We didn't start the race to weaponize space, but we have to make sure we can continue to operate in that domain. Going forward, we can't lose that high ground.

This long overdue improvement in strategic communication marks a turning point toward rebuilding a credible American space deterrent. China seized the high ground through a rapid build-up of space deterrence and warfighting forces, while Australia, Japan, and South Korea observed warily this tipping of the strategic balance. The US and Europe pretended it was not a problem at all.

This was part of a broader trend for the West to bury its head in the sand for most of the past 35 years, from nuclear deterrence to space warfare. As adversaries weaponized space, the US Space Force (USSF) acknowledges at long last it must focus on fielding credible and effective deterrence and warfighting forces in space.

The USSF published an *International Partnership Strategy*, where "strength through partnerships" aligns allies with US space efforts. There are challenges, however, for an effective USSF international strategy. These include divisive geopolitics in space and foundational issues surrounding space defense strategy beyond support services. In addition to geopolitical and strategic quandaries, organizational politics stand in the way of a sound strategy. If the US has more robust space capabilities, partnering with the US is more attractive for allies. The ability to go it alone with the prospect of winning is what gains allies.

It turns out allies make similar moves. The US and UK Space Commands conducted their first-ever coordinated satellite maneuver in early September 2025. Among Quad members, Japan's new space domain defense guidelines spearhead rapid battlespace awareness and real-time detection and tracking of threats. This further reinforces the importance of disrupting adversary command, control, communications, computers, and information (C4I) and other expanding threats. India will develop "bodyguard satellites" after an orbital near-miss. France's *National Strategic Review 2025* makes space central to sovereignty and defense, to acquire rapidly deployable ground and space capabilities to deny, disable, or disrupt adversaries. Last, but certainly not least, Germany is ramping up its military space posture.

When Boris Pistorius, Federal Minister of Defense of Germany, announced a $41 billion investment to counter the "fundamental threat" posed by Russia and China, he mentioned their targeting and tracking of Western satellites. While flying over Germany on reconnaissance missions, two Russian Luch-Olymp spy satellites tracked two Intelsat satellites used by the German Bundeswehr.

Pistorius suggested the Bundeswehr could centralize Germany's military space functions to quickly respond in conflict. That requires investment in hardened systems less prone to Russian and Chinese jamming, spoofing, and manipulation. Installing "guardian satellites" to provide defensive and offensive capabilities to boost deterrence is required.

Insufficient yet required functionalities need fixing. This includes resilience of satellite constellations and ground stations, secured launch functions, improved space domain awareness capabilities, and space surveillance satellites.

This does not happen in a capability vacuum and leaves some questions unanswered on how to square that with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Despite Ariane 6 and rocket ventures, Europe does not have the required launching capability and still depends on SpaceX. IRIS², the European security-oriented constellation, will not be operational until the 2030s. Until then, dependency on Starlink remains.

Industry partners, such as Eutelsat, SES Satellites, Airbus Defense and Space, Thales, and OHB SE, will get the contracts for the German and European military space systems, but are they financially fit-for-purpose and able to deliver quickly? It depends. Airbus and Thales have heavy defense order backlogs. Eutelsat must recover from its acquisition of OneWeb, and SES just acquired Intelsat.

The question of military space capacity building for non-US NATO allies further resonates outside NATO. Japan does everything to strengthen its military space industrial base, while India puts in a serious effort from space situational awareness to launchers to warfighting satellites. Allies will get there eventually, but it may not be fast enough vis-à-vis Russia and China.

One thing is clear, the center of gravity in deterrence is shifting to space-enabled, long-range, rapidly replaceable kill webs. With NATO officially calling space a warfighting domain, it is no longer a support area. Non-US NATO leaders need to build military space capacity. They should not wait another decade to adopt an Allied Space Operations Doctrine 1.0.

Indo-Pacific allies should endeavor for a similar effort, all while leveraging NATO's military space experience. That might include some degree of coordination between NATO and Indo-Pacific allies, especially for areas of concern to all, such as the Arctic. Without delegated authorities, codified protect-and-defend protocols, attribution thresholds, tactically responsive launch (less than 96 hours), and common allied space rules of engagement, the good guys' response times will miss the fight as adversaries dominate orbit.

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