

# Military Security in the Indo-Pacific: India's Counter-Space Strategy to China's Expansionary Capabilities

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## Abstract

This article examines how the growing security tensions within the Indo-Pacific region has developed primarily owing to China's pragmatism in space policy. This has resulted in subsequent efforts by India to provide a credible counter-space strategy. It establishes that the accelerated militarisation, under the pretext of defense, is increasingly falling outside the scope of the Outer Space Treaty (OST). Further, the article lists potential policy options through a generic outcome matrix to incorporate the principles of the OST to resolve the increasing tensions in the Indo-Pacific. The most viable option reviewed and presented in this paper to resolve the situation is through the delimitation of destructive ASAT testing within the periphery of the OST.

Keywords: Military Security, Outer Space Treaty (OST), Anti-Satellite Weapon (ASAT), Space Policy

## 1. Introduction

Outer space has emerged as an increasingly popular choice of state power showcase. The ambiguity in differentiating between offensive and defensive intent in space hardware presents a challenging security dilemma.<sup>1</sup> Space assets are now utilised for nearly all aspects of modern military operations. The increasing use of outer space assets for communications and operational objectives of militaries makes them their critical assets and plausible

targets for opponents.<sup>2</sup> Further, in a congested, competitive environment such as that of outer space with more than 90 countries participating in space programmes, it becomes all the more important to classify space as an enabler for defense as well as an offensive area for modern states.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson-Freese, Chunsi, and Dangen, "China's Space Ambitions", 2006.

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<sup>2</sup> Hussain and Shahzad, "India's Quest for 'Global Space and Influence' through the 'Outer Space' Domain.", 2023.

<sup>3</sup> General Secretariat, "Space: The New Battleground of Modern Warfare.", 2025.

This paper advances the thesis that the accelerating militarisation of outer space which is primarily driven by China's integrated counter-space doctrine and India's reactive deterrence position has outpaced the regulatory mechanisms of the Outer Space Treaty, thereby widening a governance gap in the region. It analyses pathways to evaluate practical policy pathways to resolve the instability in the Indo-Pacific. It is guided by the fundamental research question: to what extent China's expansionary counter-space capabilities and India's reactive strategic space policy shape the Indo-Pacific's military security and subsequently reflect on the doctrines of the Indo-Pacific.

This paper employs a qualitative policy-analysis methodology, combining comparative case studies of China and India's counter-space trajectories with analysis of the Outer Space Treaty and related international norms. The analysis is complemented by a generic outcome matrix to assess the feasibility and implications of OST-aligned policy options for reducing strategic instability in the Indo-Pacific. The paper introduces China's development in the space-power domain over the years followed by India's own space story with a link of the two.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 *The dual nature of satellite communication*

One of the US's schools of foreign policy thought includes 'space militarisation realism'. This observes that outer space has already been compromised as a sanctuary and thereby leads to an inevitable need to further its militarisation.<sup>4</sup> This self-declared unique position of the

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<sup>4</sup> Rathgeber and Remuss, "Space Security.", 2009.

US has spilt over to other countries too. Notably, the tension-fueled relationship between the US and China has led to an increasingly complex mix of an expanding set of diverging interests combined with an intensifying security dilemma, especially in the enduring strategically opposing positions on Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> A potential reason for China's accelerated military modernisation is directed towards constraining US power projection.

### 2.2 *Chinese ambitions in the use of space*

The early intentions of Chinese ambitions to dominate the use of space can be traced to its achievement of being the third successful country in the world to send a human into space. At the onset of space warfare advancements by the US and Russia, China pursued an international political position on space weapons ban as displayed at the Conference of Disarmament in Geneva. At the same time, China also developed mechanisms to protect its own satellites. Early political commentators on China's space utilisation believed that Beijing is pursuing space more as a market for commercialisation rather than a military asset.<sup>6</sup> However, this was immediately contradicted by the testing of a direct-ascent Anti-Satellite weapon (ASAT) in 2007.

China's transition from a commercial, exploratory, soft power display-based approach to a militarised, strategic expansionary attitude to outer space has seemingly accelerated in 2013. This was when a newly elected President of the Republic aspired to introduce a new

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<sup>5</sup> Medeiros, "The Changing Fundamentals of US-China Relations.", 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson-Freese, Chunsi, and Dangen, "China's Space Ambitions.", 2006

doctrine onto the landscape of space history: increase space capabilities to prevent detrimental usage of space-based assets.<sup>7</sup> The centralisation of the organisation structure of space programs through the change in the composition of the People Liberation Army's Strategic Support Force furthered its resolve to cement its position as a primary actor in space-power competition.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 *The evolution of ISRO*

The development of Chinese space warfare prowess caused a strategic imbalance in the Southeast Asian sphere of the Indo-Pacific region. The geopolitical landscape warranted an opposition to the unipolarity in space militarisation. A significant middle power that has emerged to seal the Chinese power vacuum in the Indo-Pacific is its immediate geographical neighbour: India.

Similar to the transition of Chinese space strategy, India developed into a space soft power by offering its progressing space program as an alternative economic option for usage by developing countries.<sup>8</sup> The primary objective of India's space programme, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), is to utilise space for communication satellites, satellite navigation. It has, for the longest time, distanced itself from militarisation.

ISRO has allowed itself to differentiate from other global space agency competitors purely through its

cost-efficient, diversified, and self-reliant achievements in the global arena. This includes its success in reliable launch vehicle sales (PSLV and GSLV), Earth observation satellites (IRS), and a full national satellite communications satellite ecosystem (INSAT and GSAT). There is, however, a discernible shift of a deliberative nature in the agency of these missions, such that it is reflective of a rising power in the global space market.<sup>9</sup> Namely, the soft power achieved through its first-mover missions, such as the first country to land on the Moon's south pole and also reach Mars orbit in its maiden interplanetary mission ("India Achieves Nine World Records in Space Missions" 2025).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it is scheduled to launch its first human spaceflight in 2027 through its "Gaganyaan" mission.

Nonetheless, the notion that its ambitions are purely exploratory and for scientific pioneership is counterintuitive to the fact that it is specifically improving its Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance systems and military communications. Following China's ASAT test in 2007, India's push for neutrality in its space missions in international cooperation subtly transitioned into an interest in the usage of space assets for national security considerations. The subtle response of the then ISRO Chairman to this significant development, emphasising the need to protect itself from its adversaries, hinted at the shift in the mindset of the organisation.<sup>11</sup>

India's interests fundamentally then laid in the strategic

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<sup>7</sup> Reuters Staff, "China's President Xi Urges Greater Military Use of Space.", 2014

<sup>8</sup> Hussain and Shahzad, "India's Quest for 'Global Space and Influence' through the 'Outer Space' Domain.", 2023.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> "India Achieves Nine World Records in Space Missions, More to Follow: ISRO Chief.", 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Tellis, "India's ASAT Test: An Incomplete Success.", 2019

signalling to China about its own capability to perform an ASAT test. This was achieved a decade later, in late March 2019, when India became the fourth country to perform the ASAT test under Mission Shakti. It was almost no secret that the intention of the mission was to 'restore India-China strategic balance'.<sup>12</sup> Its outer space policy seemed to then be determined by the domestic influences on its foreign policy. The neo-realist school of thought employed by Beijing seems apparent in New Delhi's projection of power in outer space as well.

### *3.2 A comparative context between Indian and Chinese space-powers*

It is important to understand that despite India's ASAT test success in 2019, it does not imply that the Indian counter-space strategy is able to credibly deter Beijing's capabilities. China's capabilities are superior when it comes to ground and air based jamming, direct ascent interceptors or even co-orbital attack satellites. *Mission Shakti* performs its role as a symbolic demonstration of the emerging capabilities that the Indian space military can project. The 2019 ASAT Test serves not as an establishment of a fully deterrent state but represents the strategic competition that space security shall be facing with the coming of another major counter-space actor.

### *3.3 Relevance of international doctrines in outer-space warfare*

With increasing dependence on satellites as a force in military planning for telecommunications (Tesla's SpaceLink project), border monitoring, and surveillance

arises a requirement for improved scrutiny on the counter-space developments of space-power competing countries. The Outer Space Treaty (OST) 1967 is the foundation of international space law and is the only universally binding acceptance as it includes 115 state parties, including all spacefaring nations. The OST has developed to be one of the only channels that would allow scope for constructive deliberations for deterrence in the development of space weapons.

Contextualising shall explain how OST has emerged as the central regulatory foundation of military space behaviour. China and Russia's proposal for the Prevention of Placements of Weapons in Outer Space (PPWT) has been rejected by several Western states, primarily the USA, over the difficulty in universalising the definition of ground-based assets. The US articulated its concerns over the dual nature of the satellites, making it difficult to establish its intent. Further, Beijing and Moscow would not permit a Western interpretation of the norms allowed with regard to satellite usage.

The flexibility of the OST to accommodate newer norms as well as soft law tools embedded in its articles allows for easier acceptance of the adaptation of the treaty by spacefaring nations.

## **4. Discussion of Findings**

The advantage of using OST to establish its connection includes the fact that it is very relevant to the ASAT tests. For example, Article 1 of the treaty states the freedom of exploration or use of outer space for and by all countries. However, the formation of space debris through the usage

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<sup>12</sup> Sibal, "The A-SAT Test Restores the India-China Strategic Balance.", 2019.

of direct ASAT tests compromises the sustainability of space usage and arrests the liberty to perform other exploratory tests due to the risk of collision/diversion to the intended path of exploratory space missions.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the destructive ASAT tests violate the rights of other states to freely use outer space.

Further, since the UN Charter is enforceable through its application in Article 3 in maintaining international peace and cooperation, ASAT tests naturally fall under the scrutiny of public as well as customary international law as per jus ad bellum. As discussed by notable IHL scholar O'Meara, jus ad bellum regulation of ASAT technologies directly addresses state concerns regarding protecting their space assets and avoiding conflict in space.<sup>14</sup>

The strongest relevance can be drawn between Article 9 of the OST and the ASAT tests which provide the legal basis for advocating the denouncement of destructive (kinetic) ASAT tests and ask the parties of the agreement to “undertake appropriate international consultations before proceeding with any such activity or experiment” before committing any potentially harmful interference to the peaceful explorations of other countries.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Policy Recommendations

Delimiting destructive ASAT testing within the periphery of the Outer Space Treaty (OST) is the most

promising short-term option. UN General Assembly Resolution 77/41 (2022) already frames debris forming direct-ascent ASAT tests as inconsistent with responsible behaviour, furthering OST Article IX's requirement that states conduct activities with “due regard” for the corresponding interests of others (UNOOSA 1966). Since destructive ASAT tests are discernible, even with the limitation of open source data, it would be observable when a nation is crossing the limits of the prescribed space domain. This would therefore be supported by global spacefaring nations that aspire to prevent dual-use of satellites. By constraining debris-creating ASAT tests through an OST-aligned interpretation, this option directly addresses how China's and India's counter-space signalling has become a destabilising driver of Indo-Pacific security.

A regional code of conduct would imply that strategic alliances formed by common geographic and political understanding to enter into mutually beneficial codes, which would prevent ASAT testing to display power (such as between India and China) and avoid the formation of debris-forming space expeditions. The autonomy of regional parties to develop their own code of conduct helps support the viability of such a project. However, this would also imply a greater need for a third-party enforcement to ensure that the code is also universally applicable.

Pursuant to Article IX, enforcing a law already available through OST includes notifying other countries in case of any project harming the ability of others to pursue their

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<sup>13</sup> Stroikos, “Still Lost in Space? Understanding China and India's Anti-Satellite Tests through an Eclectic Approach.”, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> O'Meara, “Self-Defence in Outer Space: Anti-Satellite Weapons and the Jus Ad Bellum.”, 2025

<sup>15</sup> UNOOSA, “Outer Space Treaty.”, 1966.

exploratory projects. This would push China to share more open-source information about its expansionary outer-space missions and help deter any unnecessary escalation between countries. Enhanced transparency under Article IX mitigates the security dilemma created by China’s opaque counter-space activities and India’s strategic reactionary policy.

Finally, the domestic space law amendments, in accordance with the legislature of the OST, would ensure a non-confrontational means to resolve the ongoing tensions in ASAT developments. This would help institutionalise responsible conduct among nations and adhere to global standards of outer-space behaviour through domestic means. Nevertheless, this would also imply poor ability to enforce international standards on a country’s strategic space interests.

The following Generic Outcome Matrix sums up the policy analysis section with the corresponding feasibility, potential benefits, and incurred cost of the policy option.

Policy Option	Feasibility	Benefits	Cost
Delimitation on ASAT tests within the OST	High	High	Low
Regional Code of Conduct (ASEAN & Asia-Pacific)	Medium	High	Medium
Shared Space Situational Awareness (pursuant to Article IX)	Low	High	High
Domestic Law Update	Low	High	Medium

*Table 1: Generic Outcome Matrix*

The solution with the most viable and measurable feasibility would be to especially target and delimit debris producing ASAT tests since it affects all actors regardless of intent within the framework of the Outer Space Treaty. Since kinetic ASAT tests have long-term, irreversible risks on civilians resulting in multilateral harm, the narrative adjustment in order to ensure global compliance is more convenient than banning all kinds of ‘space weapons’ legally.

## 6. Conclusion

Space weaponisation receives lesser attention in international legal lacuna and its long term effect on space

sustainability is understated.<sup>16</sup> This article has reviewed and reaffirms that Indo-Pacific has entered a tense period with two members of the region having tested destructive ASAT weapons and pouring in heavy investments into integrated space forces. US's Department of Defense reports that Beijing will continue accelerating its counter-space capabilities - especially its kinetic and non-kinetic tools. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) will increasingly centralise its space missions instead of standalone experimental operations.<sup>17</sup>

India's overall space budget had almost tripled in ten years, rising from about 623 million USD in 2013–14 to about 1.5 billion USD in 2025–26, and explicitly highlighted space technology's growing role in defence, surveillance, and security.<sup>18</sup> Reports state that it is aiming to match Chinese capabilities by increasing its budget to 3-4 billion USD. The latest affirmation by India's Prime Minister on the emergence of the space sector during the introduction of the first private commercial rocket hints towards the next phase of India's space development: privatisation.<sup>19</sup>

The most viable option concluded by this article is to stabilise the current tension within the Indo-Pacific lies in the operationalisation of the most relevant document

existing today - the Outer Space Treaty - to include the delimitation of the destructive ASAT tests. Limiting ASAT testing does not undermine deterrence postures directly, making it more acceptable to strategic competitors such as China and India.<sup>20</sup> This space rivalry shall always remain a defining characteristic of the Indo-Pacific region. If counter-space risks are not addressed soon, it could lead to an Indo-Pacific space arms competition that becomes harder to undo as military capabilities and reliance on space systems increase.<sup>21</sup> With low-Earth orbit becoming increasingly crowded due to commercial as well as space sponsored activity, restraint is no longer only a security issue but a prerequisite for maintaining sustainable access to space.

The increasing permeability between military and commercial space activities especially after India's expansion of private participation in 2019 has made outer space susceptible to international dissent of regulations such as the OST which have not been designed for such mixed-use systems. While OST continues to offer a useful normative foundation, it falls short in regulating contemporary counter-space activities, making practical application and clarification more necessary than treaty reform. Whether the space arms race grows into a managed competition or escalation is a matter of whether there are incrementable steps taken to the effect of realistically

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<sup>16</sup> Yan, "Anti-weaponisation of Outer Space for Maintaining Long-Term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities.", 2022

<sup>17</sup> Naval, "Pentagon Annual Report on Chinese Military and Security Developments - USNI News.", 2024

<sup>18</sup> ET Telecom, "India's Space Budget Almost Tripled in Last 10 Years: Minister.", 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Bharadwaj, "PM Flags off Skyroot's Infinity Campus in Hyderabad, Unveils India's 1st Private Commercial Rocket Vikram-1.", 2025

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<sup>20</sup> Rajagopalan and Stroikos, "The Transformation of India's Space Policy: From Space for Development to the Pursuit of Security and Prestige."

<sup>21</sup> Moltz, J. (2018). *The Politics of Space Security* | Stanford University Press. Stanford University Press.

resolving the drastic development of modern counter-space technology.

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