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EARTH OBSERVATION AND SURVEILLANCE FROM SPACE: THE URGENCY OF VIGILANCE

Abstract

Space technologies have revolutionised the way mankind sees itself and the planet it inhabits. Human activities first came under scrutiny from Space for purposes of military observation and surveillance with a degree of quantitative and qualitative efficiency that made it seem as though the most extreme predictions of utopian fiction were about to come true; satellites seemed to be in league with computers to bring about the rule of Big Brother. Already today, and increasingly tomorrow, these powers of overview and surveillance are being made available to the population as a whole. Is this something to celebrate, with those web surfers who enjoy using Google Earth and other 'geoportals'? Or must we consider the battle as lost in advance and just sit in a corner and whine? A wide-ranging ethical debate is needed that, by putting these technologies clearly into perspective, can help us look closely at how our society considers the right and duty of vigilance within it. There is nothing utopian about such a question: the International Charter on Space and Major Disasters is already an excellent and very practical example of this. Is it possible to go further?