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LOST IN SPACE? THE CHANGING NATURE OF AUSTRALIA'S SPACE POLICY

Abstract

The past 12 months have seen the beginnings of a significant overhaul of the space policy of Australia, one of the most significant countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Having originally developed its national space laws around a policy based upon the proposed – but now defunct - development of a launch services industry, the Government altered its approach in the aftermath of the September 11 attack, directing that space policy should be closely related to national security. In so doing, however, it failed to expand upon its space laws or provide any incentives or guidance to most sectors of Australia's space industry, with the then revised policy lacking real direction and not facilitating the growth of space related activities.

The Government has, however, more recently actively sought to reassess Australia's role in space, having concluded a Senate Committee Report that makes significant recommendations for a new direction for Australia's space science and industry sectors. Coupled with this, the 2009 Defence White Paper, which sets out the Government's approach to defence planning, emphasises the increasingly significant role of satellite technology in the conduct of Australia's military defence activities. However, the fact remains that Australia still does not have its own space agency or any coherent, up-to-date space policy. Nor do its current national space laws readily allow for such developments. Instead, Australia relies upon a random mixture of local and foreign commercial enterprises and other Governments for access to essential satellite services, leaving the maintenance of space skills and technologies on the ground almost entirely to chance and market forces.

This paper discusses the evolution of Australia's national space laws and policy, focussing particularly on these recent developments, and assesses what tangible steps must now be taken if Australia is to regain lost ground and secure access to vital space resources.