

16th IAA SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE DEBRIS (A6)  
Policy, Legal, Institutional and Economic Aspects of Space Debris Detection, Mitigation and Removal  
(Joint Session with IAF Space Security Committee) (8)

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DEVELOPING ASAT TEST NORMS : ONE SMALL STEP TOWARDS REDUCING GLOBAL  
TENSIONS

**Abstract**

A tenuous balance has existed in space over the last 60 years, one that has resulted in a certain strategic stability in space between geo-political rivals. In the early years of space activities, this stability was owed to the US and USSR not being willing to be the first to strike at the other's space assets. However, given the importance of space capabilities to both nuclear and conventional forces, it has always been understood that the next major clash between nuclear powers would likely involve counter-space technology to some degree.

This strategic stability has, unfortunately, been deteriorating. First, new actors such as China have entered the race for space deterrence, testing Anti-Satellite (ASAT) technology on a number of occasions, including the infamous 2007 incident in which China destroyed one of its own weather satellites. They have since gone on to develop increasingly sophisticated weapons to match both the US and Russian Federation, though China has been careful not to create any long-life debris with their testing.

What is even more worrisome is that the defensive posturing among these three global powers – the US, Russia and China - has increased sharply in the last few years. All three have recently passed defence budgets that call for the on-going development of ASAT weapons systems capable of protecting national space capabilities while denying access to space by adversaries. Most worrisome is that some of the technologies being proposed are kinetic ASAT weapons.

To this end, UNIDIR is presently conducting a study of possible realistic, focussed proposals that could move discussions forward on space disarmament. In particular, UNIDIR is taking account of the ever-increasing investments from the private sector, which provide the three major space powers with stronger incentives to protect stability and sustainability in outer space. UNIDIR, therefore, proposes three core guidelines for the testing of ASAT weapons in order to prevent space debris proliferation and misunderstandings between geopolitical rivals:

No debris; Low debris; Notification.

UNIDIR will demonstrate in its paper that the best option for moving forward with any dialogue on PAROS is agreeing on these three simple guidelines that encapsulate existing best practices on the testing of ASATS. In this way, any future debris mishaps related to this technology can be avoided. Achieving such an agreement would also build trust among supposed adversaries.