Space domain takes shape

THE UNITED STATES' September 2026 confirmation that it has deployed weapons in orbit marks a significant acceleration in the development of space as a warfighting domain. US Air Force Secretary Troy Meink's announcement of American "on-orbit space control weapons" moves the discussion beyond strategic aspiration. Whatever their classified characteristics, these capabilities demonstrate that preparing to fight in space now includes fielded weapons.

The Grim Reaper patch worn by the US Space Force's 75th Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Squadron offers a fitting symbol. Officially unveiled in 2023, it reflects an organisation established to support targeting against adversary space capabilities. Alongside September's announcement, its imagery captures the increasingly explicit military purpose being assigned to the unit's operations in orbit.

Attacking targets on Earth from space could be the next step, although the US announcement does not confirm it has weapons that can do this. Disabling a satellite is a different task from accurately striking a target on the ground. But cheaper launches, more manoeuvrable spacecraft and better guidance systems make further testing increasingly likely. I expect we could see convincing demonstrations of non-nuclear strikes from orbit during the 2030s. Turning those demonstrations into a reliable weapon would still require overcoming high costs, the heat of re-entry, accuracy problems and the risk of the weapon itself being attacked.

China has already demonstrated important elements of this problem. A Pentagon 2024 assessment describes the July 2021 People's Liberation Army fractional-orbital hypersonic test, which travelled approximately 40,000km, as likely demonstrating the technical ability to field a fractional orbital bombardment system. That is evidence of substantial progress in China, although it does not confirm the imminent deployment of a permanently orbiting bombardment constellation capability. Russia's probable orbital anti-satellite prototypes and reported development of a nuclear anti-satellite capability similarly demonstrate its own serious intent.



First the patch, then the realisation. The US has confirmed it has deployed weapons in orbit.

Public evidence therefore supports the conclusion that both Moscow and Beijing can contest space. It does not, however, establish that either already operates a space-to-ground bombardment system. Yet.

For Australia, September's announcement should sharpen an overdue strategic conversation. Within the ANZUS alliance, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) relies heavily on American space assets for communications and other essential services. Australian space operations also integrate with the US-led Operation Olympic Defender (Australia's overarching space operation is codenamed Operation Dyurra). Our sovereign program remains modest relative to the major powers, but our exposure to conflict in space is substantial.

The immediate requirement for our military capability remains 'resilient access', US-led alliance management of the space domain, and an ADF capable of operating through disrupted space services. This includes accelerating capability alternatives to GPS, a plan to manage the 'graceful degradation' of our critical communication networks as adversaries attack them and the ability to maintain access to key advanced capabilities as a space 'partner of choice' within ANZUS as well as Five Eyes intelligence members and regional partners. DTR



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