

We need to protect our satellites

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Analysis: Can Iran alter US space strategy?

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Beverly Hills, CA, Nov. 19 (UPI) — Secretary of State Colin Powell's blockbuster allegation that Iran's mullahs were on the verge of fielding nuclear missiles was a grave warning sign that the days of the United States' military's virtual monopoly on outer space could be numbered.

The American military's technical prowess has given it a dominance in space-based systems, which leads to the logical likelihood that its enemies could look for ways to attack and destroy the satellites that U.S. troops routinely use to monitor enemy forces on the ground and handle the steady flow of communications between units in the field and commanders who are sometimes thousands of miles away.

"We are getting so dependent on them (satellites) that we are creating a target," said Thomas Moorman, a retired Air force general and current vice president of the defense consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton. "We have to worry about protecting those satellites; we have to take away those tempting targets."

The United States has made great strides in establishing a virtual military monopoly on the final frontier since the Air Force Space Command was established 50 years ago in the heyday of the Cold War.

Other countries have military and intelligence-gathering satellites in orbit; however the United States has seemingly been in a league of its own in its utilization of space for tactical purposes.

Moorman and other speakers attending an Air Force Association conference on space in Beverly Hills Friday were bullish on the role the dominance of space has played in the current conflict in Iraq.

"You can't go to war and win without (utilizing) space," said Gen. Lance Lord, the rightfully proud head of Space Command. "And if you

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take space away from us, people will die."

The audience of Air Force personnel and representatives of the big defense contractors that produce the futuristic birds were regaled with war stories from battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan that generally involved the military's various eyes in the sky bringing Pentagon tacticians and far-off command-and-control into the action in real time.

The advantage of good intelligence allows U.S. forces to escape ambushes and locate massing enemy forces that can be struck by air or artillery before they reach their intended target.

And if the need should arise, satellites would likely provide the first warning that an enemy missile was about to be launched. Losing the advantage in space, Lord and other speakers agreed, would result in the United States losing an advantage on the ground.

"Our greatest threat is complacency and taking for granted our place in space," Lord said. "We need to make sure that we maintain our advantage.... We don't want to assume the environment where we operate is benign."

The planners and analysts who look at space from the military point of view don't have to make much of a leap to conclude that an enemy planning a nuclear first strike — or even a conventional attack — against the United States or an ally would likely take some steps to blind the constellation of satellites that serve as the United States' watchful eyes and ears.

While it currently might not be possible to physically shoot down a satellite in orbit far above Earth, it is considered within the realm of possibility to detonate a missile in the general area of a crucial satellite and either disable it or push it out of position so that the only thing the controllers on the ground see is a nice view of deep space.

The same theory of a shove in space is one of the earliest ideas behind the concept of missile defense — an explosion knocking an incoming missile off course.

Waging war against satellites has been a point of contention in recent years among some scientists and policymakers who cringe at the thought of "militarizing" space and others who don't see anything wrong with defending the satellites that have become a cornerstone of U.S. military capabilities.

At the same time, the development of defensive measures for satellites would boost the cost of the military's space program, possibly at the expense of other weapons programs or even the fledgling missile defense system that was spawned by President Reagan's much-maligned

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"Star Wars" program and given new life by the current Bush administration.

The possibility that a Muslim theocracy such as Iran could soon join North Korea as the second of President Bush's "Axis of Evil" nations to crash the once-exclusive nuclear club doesn't necessarily mean that the world is a step closer to doomsday. It does, however, raise the urgency of protecting the satellites that are the best of the United States' limited means of preventing a surprise attack that could pale Pearl Harbor and Sept. 11.

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