

National Institute FOR Deterrence Studies

T H I N K D E T E R R E N C E

COURSE CORRECTIONS: ISSUE #2

SPACE DETERRENCE MESSAGING & POSTURE IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

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Recently, Commander of U.S. Space Command, General Stephen Whiting shared the following statement regarding space deterrence with the Senate Armed Services Committee:

Deterrence in space is consistent with other operational theaters: it requires a keen understanding and clear communication of what we are deterring against; credible acknowledged capabilities to impose unacceptable costs on those who would attack us; and resilient architectures to dissuade attack by denying the adversary the benefit they seek. We need to make clear that cost imposition need not be limited to the domain of the initial action. Achieving this level of deterrence demands not only strategic intent but also the timely development and fielding of new space capabilities.ⁱ

While this is a tremendous improvement over statements by him and other senior Space Force and Department of Defense leaders over the past few years, there are still some issues with how the Department of Defense, and space commanders and policy leaders, speak to space deterrence and warfighting threats and challenges. These issues relate to how the military perceives, understands, communications and most importantly, address the space deterrence and warfighting requirements. Getting the concept of deterrence wrong, confusing it with other concepts and terms, and losing sight of the intent of such concepts and terms, will continue to enable a Space Force that is incapable of doing anything in the mind of an adversary like China, to achieve credible deterrence. This issue will example this statement and provide a brief assessment of where it gets things right, where it doesn't, and what course corrections are needed to ensure that the Space Force specifically and the Department of Defense as a whole, gets it right.

ANALYSIS:

*You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means- Inigo Montoya, **The Princess Bride (1987)***

Recently posited theories of space deterrence misuse the term deterrence, they do not grasp the intent of deterrence, the full range of other security constructs, and, most importantly, what should be done when, not if, deterrence fails. -Peter Marquez, Former Director of Space Policy, National Security Council (2011)

1. ***Deterrence in space is consistent with other operational theaters.***

Partially Correct: A better way of saying this is that deterrence against space attack modes is consistent with deterrence against other modes of attack (nuclear, cyber, air, etc.). It's not the domain itself that is being deterred or contested. It is the actions and offensive intent behind those attacks that are consistent across these other modes of attack. In other words, space deterrence is a real thing and is not to be confused with general deterrence but is clearly a sub-set of it.

2. ***Clear communication of what we are deterring against [to the adversary]***

Correct: This is a very important part of any deterrent threat to attack by an adversary in space or any other mode of attack. Commonly known as “declaratory policy” in deterrence literature and practical doctrines, such communication of the threat, political will to follow through with that threat, is vital to achieve a credible deterrent. A sub-text under this is the importance of communicating what the instrument of the threat would be, such as what type of strike would be taken against what generalized area of importance to an adversary, and what capabilities would be leveraged. In short, what types of attacks on what critical space infrastructure would be seen as an act of aggression that would require a response? Being too general is ineffective.

3. ***Credible, acknowledged capabilities to impose unacceptable costs on those who would attack us.***

Potentially Correct: Related to number 2, if by capabilities he means weapons for attack or active defense in, from or to space, then he is correct. However, if he means only more resilient architecture, then that would be seen as partially correct as resiliency/survivability is important for the damage limitation components of a deterrence-based strategy

4. ***Resilient architectures to dissuade attack by denying the adversary...benefit they seek.***

Not Correct: First, dissuasion and deterrence are not the same thing. So its important to remain consistent with terms in strategic messaging. Second, resilience does not deter by itself as its meant to limit damage (i.e. damage limitation) as part of the defense side of the coin. Given that low threshold modes of space attacks (jamming, spoofing, lasing, etc.) have become the new norm of behavior of our adversaries, there is no indication that resilience has denied benefits to those countries attacking our critical space infrastructure. While there

might be some indications of concern of effectiveness in Chinese writings, the fact operationally that space warfighting continues at low thresholds does not mean that resilience alone is deterring anything. In addition, it's important to note that China has already adapted and is adapting its force posture and doctrines to treat hundred satellite constellations as a system target rather than several.

5. Cost imposition need not be limited to the domain of the initial action.

Not Correct: Still pushing the response in a “time, place, manner and domain of our choosing” nonsense. China does not believe this and if we are to be effective against them, we should not either. US has shown no intent or willingness to conduct retaliation for “every day” frequency low threshold attacks on our critical space infrastructure, so why should the adversary expect anything different for other modes of attack such as debris-generating ASAT missile strikes or other kinetic options?

COURSE CORRECTIONS:

1. **Correction 1:** For deterrence to be credible, strategists and policymakers to understand the strategic culture/worldview of the adversary in question. Without this, it will be difficult to form a proper space deterrent and war-winning force. As such, all Space Force strategy and force designs should begin with an analysis of the “why” in the mind of the enemy.
2. **Correction 2:** DoD space policy must get a handle on the use of space deterrence and warfighting terms so that Space Force and combatant commanders are consistent with their declaratory policy and weapons requirements requests. Using outdated terms like space control, creates confusion, and does not aid in clear, unambiguous declaratory policy.
3. **Correction 3:** Deterrence requires a credible threat (i.e. weapons of various types to provide options to the President against areas of vital concern to the adversary), clear political will to follow through on such a threat, and the messaging of the other two.
4. **Correction 4:** Space weapons systems must be deployed in rapid fashion to ensure that the U.S. does not continue in a position of weakness relative to the adversary's space forces. This can be done through the modification of current programs of record, to avoid the long process of new system.

THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS PAPER ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHOR AND DO NOT REFLECT THOSE OF HIS EMPLOYER OR THE U. S. GOVERNMENT.

ⁱ General Stephen Whiting, Fiscal Year 2026 Priorities and Posture of United States Space Command, March 26, 2025