



AIR SHOW ENNUI: THERE'S MORE GOING ON IN SPACE

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Issue Brief

Jun 19, 2007

This is the week of the Paris Air Show, a glitzy excuse for aerospace executives and their government customers to network far from the prying eyes of politicians. Such contrived venues seldom produce any real news unless an airplane crashes. As one journalistic veteran of past shows puts it, "I've never worked so hard to get so little news." So don't expect any of this week's coverage from Le Bourget to make the cut at the next meeting of the Pulitzer Committee.

If you want to find some real news in the aerospace sector, you might cast your eyes a bit higher in the skies -- like to low-earth orbit. There's a lot going on in space these days, especially military space, that doesn't get noticed in the general media. For example, did you know that the government released a request-for-proposals last week to develop the most capable and secure orbital communications network ever conceived? Did you know that a new sensor carried on a classified satellite is demonstrating unprecedented capacity to detect tactical missiles, bomb blasts and jet-engine exhaust within the atmosphere? Did you know that the intelligence community is scrambling to find alternatives to its low-orbiting spy satellites now that China has demonstrated an anti-satellite capability?

Of course you didn't, because the general media have stopped covering such stories. That's too bad, since the fate of these space programs is likely to have a much bigger impact on national security in the years ahead than whether the U.S. Army can figure out how to suppress insurgents in Diyala Province. Take the case of the Space Tracking and Surveillance System, or STSS. I know, you've never heard of it. Here's why it matters: it's the only option the military currently has for being able to track long-range ballistic missiles during the 80% of their flight time between boost phase and re-entry into the atmosphere - the phase called "midcourse." Without STSS, there's no hope of having a real defense against intercontinental ballistic missiles, because no one will know where warheads are after they boost out of the atmosphere.

STSS was conceived to provide a constellation of satellites in low-earth orbit laden with visible-light and infrared sensors that could continuously track nuclear warheads as they coast through space to their destinations. It works in tandem with early-warning satellites in much higher orbits that detect the initial launch of missiles, and interceptors inside the atmosphere that use the information generated by STSS to destroy warheads before they can reach U.S. territory. The plan is to launch two experimental satellites in the near-term that can demonstrate the technology works, and then move on to an operational system.

Unfortunately, there is no reliable mechanism for shepherding such programs through our baroque budgeting process, so even though military leaders such as the incoming vice chairman of the joint chiefs has stressed the importance of STSS, that doesn't assure funding. Political cycles are so much more compressed than technology cycles that it's a wonder any of the big military systems manage to stay on track as Congress reconciles competing priorities from year to year.

In the case of STSS, some legislators are arguing there shouldn't be a commitment to building production satellites until the technology is proven. Unfortunately, that would result in partially disbanding the development team and then rebuilding it later, a process that would waste time and money. Considering how important the mission is, it makes more sense to fully fund the program unless Congress gets a real reason for slowing down. After all, there isn't much evidence countries like China are slowing development of their missiles.