

Sources: Russian aggression against U.S. intelligence satellites sparks congressional briefing



Military imaging reconnaissance satellite in Earth orbit. (ImageBank/Getty Images)

WASHINGTON — Over recent days, officials from the newly minted U.S. Space Force and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence briefed multiple congressional committees on an “uptick” in Russian military activity in space targeting U.S. defense and intelligence satellites, according to two sources familiar with the matter.

While the sources declined to comment on the specifics of recent incidents, which follow general increases in Chinese and Russian aggression in space, these recent actions were deemed “serious enough” to merit briefings on Capitol Hill, said one of the sources. Officials also briefed committees on plans to counter the Russian aggression, the source said.

The aggressive acts come amid rising concerns about Russian and Chinese activities in space, particularly when it comes to anti-satellite weapons. Earlier this year the Pentagon stood up the Space Force, a new branch of the military authorized by President Trump, which is supposed to help protect U.S. space assets.

Much of the work related to protecting military systems in space is classified, but during a recent virtual conference, Army National Guard Maj. Gen. Tim Lawson hinted at “things coming” that would help combat space-based threats, while emphasizing the importance of creating a large, resilient network of small satellites that are less vulnerable than the large military and intelligence satellites currently operating.

Representatives for the House and Senate Intelligence Committees as well as the

Office of the Director of National Intelligence declined to comment. “ODNI does not discuss intelligence matters or sensitive and classified communication with Congress,” wrote an ODNI spokesperson in an email. Spokespeople for the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, the Pentagon and the Space Force did not immediately respond to a request for comment.



A Yuanwang-class Chinese space tracking ship. (Siyuwj via Wikicommons)

Russian meddling in space has long been a topic of concern for the U.S. government, within the Pentagon and the broader national security apparatus. Space has not been a safe “sanctuary” for several decades, noted Robin Dickey, an analyst at the nonprofit Aerospace Corporation’s Center for Space Policy and Strategy.

“The Russians have been doing this s-t for several years,” explained one former national security official who served during the Trump administration.

Russian military satellites and other spacecraft frequently perform what are called “proximity” operations, explained the former official, which involve getting close to U.S. satellites to search for vulnerabilities or determine capabilities, not unlike adversaries scanning digital networks for virtual flaws in cyberspace. “It’s a dangerous game,” continued the former official. “People need to wake up.”

The U.S. government’s fleet of spy and defense satellites is worth billions of dollars and helps blanket the globe in near constant coverage, helping U.S. officials spot worrisome developments like a new weapon test or locate a terrorist hideout. Satellites are vital for communication, navigation, weather, environmental monitoring, and defense and intelligence more broadly.

The Defense Intelligence Agency, tasked with collecting and analyzing intelligence for the Pentagon, recently published a lengthy report titled “Challenges to Security in Space.” According to the report, both China’s and Russia’s militaries “view space as important to modern warfare” and aim to conduct operations there “as a means to reduce U.S. and allied military effectiveness.”

The DIA authors also noted that both Russia and China are developing “jamming and cyberspace capabilities, directed energy weapons, on-orbit capabilities, and ground-based antisatellite missiles”—technology that could have direct negative or destructive impacts on U.S. satellites. Russia’s space weaponry may be able to disrupt or degrade U.S. communications and navigation through GPS, block the U.S.’s view of satellite imagery or even destroy certain satellites, according to the DIA.



A mockup of the Russian GLONASS-K satellite navigation system. (Kirill Kukhmar/TASS via Getty Images)

On July 23, the U.S. Space Command announced it had evidence that Russia had tested a new “space-based anti-satellite weapon” — technology the Russian Defense Ministry had said was designed to run tests on its own space equipment.

Gen. John Raymond, commander of the U.S. Space Command and the U.S. Space Force chief of space operations, had previously warned about similar activities. “This is further evidence of Russia’s continuing efforts to develop and test space-based systems, and consistent with the Kremlin’s published military doctrine to employ weapons that hold U.S. and allied space assets at risk,” he said in a statement at the time.

Christopher Ford, a senior State Department official, condemned that Russian test as an example of “Russia’s hypocritical advocacy of outer space arms control, with which Moscow aims to restrict the capabilities of the United States while clearly having no intention of halting its own counter space program — both ground-based anti-satellite capabilities and what would appear to be actual in-orbit anti-satellite weaponry.”

Later in July, however, officials from the Departments of State, Defense and Energy as well as the National Security Council met with Russian counterparts for a lengthy discussion about space policy and security, and “expressed interest in continuing these discussions and improving communications.”

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