The Obama administration this summer announced a new space policy that marks a break with the previous administration by being more receptive to arms control efforts.

According to the document, released June 28, that spells out the policy, Washington will “consider proposals and concepts for arms control measures if they are equitable, effectively verifiable, and enhance the national security of the United States and its allies.” The new policy also calls on governmental agencies to “pursue bilateral and multilateral transparency and confidence-building measures.”

In a July 13 speech to the stalled Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Defense Policy and Verification Operations Frank A. Rose noted that greater willingness to pursue arms control measures was a “departure from the 2006 policy.” That policy stated that “the United States will oppose the development of new legal regimes or restrictions that seek to prohibit or limit U.S. access to or use of space.” Christina Rocca, the U.S. ambassador to the CD, said in 2007 that the universalizing of existing space agreements was a “much more practical and effective step towards guaranteeing the peaceful use of outer space.”

It remains unclear what new measures the United States will pursue. Rose highlighted the desire to mitigate orbital debris; share information about observations and activities in space, in part to help avoid collisions; and pursue transparency and confidence-building measures. One possibility for Washington to consider supporting is the EU space code of conduct, according to senior administration officials at a June 28 briefing. The draft code, issued in December 2008, includes a voluntary commitment to refrain from intentionally harming space objects, measures to control and mitigate space debris, and mechanisms for cooperation and consultation. (See ACT, January/February 2009.) A revised draft of the code is expected soon. Rose reiterated U.S. support for discussions at the CD on the prevention of an arms race in outer space, even though the CD has failed to reach agreement on an agenda this year.

The concern for a space arms race differs from Bush administration policy. In June 2006, Department of State official John Mohanco told the CD that “the cold war is over...and there is no—repeat, no problem in outer space for arms control to solve.”

The new policy does not outline limitations on U.S. military uses of space. In supporting the policy, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said, “Our continued presence in space is vital to our national security. Space-based capabilities are critical to our military’s ability to navigate accurately, strike precisely, and gather battle space awareness efficiently.”

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