

Julian Mack Lecture

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Space Security and Missile Defense What is at Stake?

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WISCONSIN

In February, 2008, the United States launched a missile from an Aegis sea-based missile defense cruiser to destroy a failed intelligence satellite.

While framed as a public safety measure, “Operation Burnt Frost” was the first time the United States had intentionally destroyed a satellite since 1985, and announced in a very visible way the intersection of missile defense and space security. It also marked another point in recent escalation of tensions over space weapons and military uses of space.

Interest in new military uses of space has been building in the past decade, driven in part by the important role satellites have played in recent conflicts. New uses of space being considered include basing weapons in space to attack targets on the ground and in space, and developing weapons to attack satellites. This has led to a vigorous international debate about how space should be used and whether such activities are dangerous and should be limited.

The year after Operation Burnt Frost, the U.S. announced ambitious new plans for missile defense, which would rely on and substantially expand and improve the system used in Operation Burnt Frost. This would also expand antisatellite capability to an unprecedented level and raise the stakes in space. However, the new missile defense system, like previous ones, would provide little or no defensive capability, even in principle, but would incur large security, political, and monetary costs.

In this talk, I will detail the technical arguments behind these judgments as well as discuss why the space security and missile defense debates are of increasing importance.