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U.S. Outstripped by Soviets In Space Launches for 1985

Moscow Concentrates on Short-Lived Reconnaissance Satellites

By George C. Wilson
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The Soviet Union outgunned the United States, 96 to 17, in space launches in 1985, largely because Moscow's spy satellites burn out within weeks while the U.S. variety often remain in orbit for years, space specialists said yesterday.

The Soviets' interest in keeping track of events on Earth was reflected in the 33 photo reconnaissance satellites launched by Moscow, amounting to more than one-third of the total Soviet launches from Jan. 1 through Dec. 26.

Nine of the U.S. launches this year involved the space shuttle, including two that placed secret military satellites into orbit. U.S. spy satellites no longer eject packets of film that must be snatched out of the air by planes; instead, they send electronic signals to Earth stations, which translate the impulses into photo images of Soviet shipyards, space centers and other areas of interest.

Other nations, particularly Britain and Israel, have sought U.S. satellite information, according to U.S. officials. Some allies have even sought their own Earth stations for direct access to the satellite signals. How much should be shared is a matter of contention within the government.

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he opposes sharing reconnaissance photos with any foreign nation for fear it would pinpoint U.S. interests at a given moment.

If other nations had noticed a sudden U.S. interest in the back country of Iran in 1980, Leahy said, they could have concluded that some kind of military mission was being planned there. Satellite photos were used for the aborted rescue mission of American hostages in Tehran in April 1980.

The Soviets through espionage have learned an immense amount about U.S. spy satellite capabilities and have taken steps to mask some of their military activities from the eyes in the sky, according to intelligence officials. Space specialists seem to agree that the United States is still well ahead of the Soviets in the art of spying from space, although Moscow's reconnaissance satellites are steadily improving.

The Soviets in 1985 continued to stress the ability to locate U.S. ships on the open oceans with satellites, according to worried Navy officials. One type of Soviet ocean surveillance satellite seeks aircraft carriers and other big ships with radar beams which can penetrate clouds. The radar provides location of ships below the satellite, forcing the Navy to resort to new methods to foil radar detection.

Nicholas L. Johnson, advisory scientist to Teledyne Brown Engineering of Colorado Springs, keeps a widely used log of U.S. and Soviet space launches. He said yesterday that the Soviets launched five ocean surveillance satellites in 1985, two carrying radar and three equipped with electronic eavesdropping gear.

Johnson said the 96 Soviet launches this year also included 19 communication satellites, two of a variety never seen before. Seven other satellites are designed to warn Moscow of a nuclear attack. There was also one mystery launch on June 21 when only fragments of some kind of space vehicle were detected by U.S. sensors.

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The 96-to-17 ratio of Soviet to U.S. launches this year continued a five-year trend, according to Johnson. The difference in 1984 was 97 to 22; in 1983, 98 to 22; in 1982, 101 to 18; in 1981, 98 to 18; in 1980, 89 to 13.

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