

Summary of RUSI's First Episode of 'A Call To Arms': UK Military in Space

Cosmin Timofte

14.03.2021



Key Points:

- The position of Director Space was created in February 2020.
- Efforts are focused on creating a cohesive, central approach to space-related matters and acting as a ‘conduit for defence in space’.
- Collaboration between the military, the public, and the private sector is necessary to maximise UK’s potential in space.
- Educating the public, senior officials and the military on the importance of space is key for ensuring UK’s effectiveness in dealing with threats in space.

The RUSI program called ‘Call to Arms’ is a series of interviews that focuses on asking questions relating to defence topics to senior military leaders in the UK. The series debuted with research fellow Alexandra Stickings interviewing Air Vice Marshal (AVM) Harvey Smyth, who became the first Director Space of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) on February 2020. The interview focused on AVM Smyth’s experience establishing a cohesive space directorate within the MoD, as well as exploring possible emerging threats relating to space and the importance of raising awareness over the importance of space within the military.

Upon being asked about his first year as Director Space, AVM Smyth describes his starting point as having a ‘blank sheet of paper’ due to its novelty and how efforts were made to turn ‘talk’ into ‘action’. **His main objective was to create coherency and a form of centralisation for all elements related to space affairs and act as a ‘conduit for defence on space’.** To this extent, he focused on ‘4 Ps’, which stand for ‘People, Policy, Programs, and Partners’. In terms of people, he created efficient policy and capability teams that would support their aims. On policy, his teams work with various branches of the UK government, and its Space Agency to create the National Space Council, which would be required in the creation of a Space Defence Strategy and solidifying the UK’s Space Command. His unit also cooperates with various branches on developing various programs which he did not disclose, with projects in the research and development phase as he is pushing for space to be a top priority. Finally, he heavily works in close partnership with Whitehall, as well as with the UK Space Agency and Downing Street. In terms of international cooperation, the UK enjoys a close partnership with the US and with Australia, and there is potential to cooperate with NATO over the space domain as well.

AVM Smyth concluded there were three major takeaways. Firstly, establishing a comprehensive approach requires cooperation beyond the military's sole ability. **Various other government departments must be involved and are required to create a comprehensive strategy where it is clearly underlined what the military can do, where collaboration is required and where it requires access into the commercial market which, the Director stated, is making major advancements.** The extent of this cooperation requires extensive cohesion due to its scale, hence why space cannot be tackled effectively by MoD alone. Secondly, AVM Smyth continues by stating that educating people about the importance of space is necessary due to its novelty, and efforts are made to inspire people into getting interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses, as well as ensuring that senior ranking officials are both making the right choices and 'asking the right questions'. Thirdly, he commented on how the UK leads in various space sectors, giving examples of how there are startups offering innovative solutions to NavSat technology and cleaning space debris. He ended his remarks by reinforcing the point that the MoD, government and the commercial sector must work together to ensure the UK has a strong standing on space affairs, and also states that such cooperation is often plagued by issues surrounding budget matters.

In terms of assessing threats, AVM Smyth discusses that threat perception should begin from 'the year 2030 or 2040 and work back from there'. The approach towards a National Space Strategy must involve understanding the domain, as well as the defence of assets, particularly strategic ones. He highlights his '3 Cs' approach: contest, congest, and compete. The 'contest' section focuses on **dealing with actors that operate in space 'nefariously' and in a grey area and which the UK has little intelligence regarding their activities and intents, thus assuming the worst case, mentioning how Russia launched an anti-satellite weapon before Christmas in 2020.** As a result of the lack of intelligence, UK faces a challenge in creating a proportionate response to this threat, something that is aggravated by a lack of communication from both sides, a matter in which cooperation with the Foreign Office continues.

'Congest' involves the commercialisation of space and how the increasing amount of space debris can become a threat in the future through cluttering of the orbit with various debris, and how important is the need to establish space norm regulations as early as possible. This point was picked up on by Ms. Stickings, who highlighted the difficult balance between norm-establishment and military approaches over long term sustainability. **AVM Smyth responded**

that efforts are focused on creating a ‘safe, secure and stable’ approach to space in a similar approach to how the air domain was approached at its inception; concluding that the military is an extension of politics, and its mission is not to militarise space.

For the final point, Ms. Stickings asked how can all military personnel, even those not involved with space, engage better with the theme. AVM Smyth agrees that much work needs to be done on this subject, stating that much of this effort relies on their US colleagues for support. **He continued by saying that education starts with the grassroots, comparing how a soldier’s education over air support must be similar to how one educates them over space.** This effort is currently ‘bottom up’ but it also needs to be ‘top to bottom’, recalling the need to educate seniors over the importance of space; ultimately suggesting that soldiers could participate in classes designed specifically to educate about space assets regardless of their branch.

*The interview summarised in this article can be found [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cosmin Timofte. Graduate student of Politics and Intelligence Studies at Aberystwyth University and International Security at University of Warwick. Former exchange student in the United States. Participant in an analytical project of the media narratives around Brexit in the United Kingdom and Romania. His main research interests are Middle Eastern armed conflicts, disinformation and intelligence.

IF YOU VALUE THE INSTITUTE OF NEW EUROPE'S WORK, BECOME ONE OF ITS DONORS!

Funds received will allow us to finance further publications.

You can contribute by making donations to INE's bank account:

95 2530 0008 2090 1053 7214 0001

with the following payment title: „darowizna na cele statutowe”