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Political Aspects of Disclosure of SpaceReconnaissance Capabilities

1. On June 30, 1962, a "Report on Political and Informational Aspects of Satellite Reconnaissance Policy" prepared pursuant to NSAM 156 was approved for transmittal to the President. Its conclusions were affirmed (with one exception not pertinent to our present purpose) in NSC Action 2454 on July 10, 1962. That Report remains basically valid. The objective of avoiding open challenges to satellite observation activity has been generally met, and the Soviet Union has muted -- though not retracted -- its challenge to the principle of military space reconnaissance. Agreement has been reached on fundamental legal principles which do not ban (though they also do not explicitly sanction) space observation.

2. The general course of action of the NSAM 156 Report continues to be implemented. Developments over the past four years have, however, led to a shift of emphasis from a need for actions that will build world acceptance of space observations, then a generally novel idea, to actions which will preserve the present wide tacit acceptance of such activities. Accordingly, there does not seem to be any imperative to launch disclosure initiatives for the purpose of furthering the principle of space observation. On the other hand, it remains necessary to consider the possibly adverse effects of new public disclosures or other initiatives which could upset the present satisfactory situation.

3. Our chief concern over a challenge to the legitimacy and propriety of satellite reconnaissance has been the Soviet position. Over the past several years, the Russians have withdrawn insistence on branding such activity as

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illegal from international space agreements that they desired, and they do not press such arguments in the UN, but they have not stopped referring to such activities as espionage and as illegal. Moreover, the statements by Khrushchev and his son-in-law, Adzhubei, acknowledging such Soviet activities and acquiescing in American activities have never been printed in the Soviet press or acknowledged as official, and they have not been even informally repeated by the present Soviet leaders. During the past three years the Russians have developed a major operational satellite reconnaissance program of their own, but they have not ceased to attack our program. Accordingly, we see continuing pertinence of the NSAM 156 Report conclusion that: "It is extremely important that the US avoid public statements about our satellite operations that would pose a direct political challenge to the Soviet Union on the sensitive issue of reconnaissance".

4. It is now necessary to give more attention than heretofore to the reactions of other countries. To date, increasing awareness of the existence of US and Soviet military space reconnaissance has not prompted concern in other countries for their own political or military security interests, but such concern is likely to develop as others become more aware of the nature and scope of satellite surveillance. Disclosure of surveillance capabilities even in non-military contexts will awaken new direct interest and concern. Accordingly, any such disclosure should be carefully considered and planned so as to prevent or reduce adverse reactions by other states that would be undesirable in their own right and could also be manipulated by the Soviet Union.

5. The recommendation of the NSAM 156 Report that further studies be

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made "to determine whether there are releasable data...which would help create wider public acceptance of space observation and photography" led to consideration of specific disclosure possibilities, and it was decided that such disclosures should not be made. Negative decisions were also reached on unclassified discussions of the potential role of space surveillance for arms control verification, although other unofficial discussions have since occurred. The parallel NSAM 156 Report recommendation that NASA should study "the possibilities of accelerating bilateral international cooperation to develop non-military space activities involving space observation, perhaps including photography" has not led to concrete proposals for our consideration. Both of these recommendations would appear in general no longer to be necessary in view of the now widespread tacit acceptance of space reconnaissance. The current NASA proposals for consideration of broader earth-sensing programs would appear to supersede both these earlier more narrow and limited study recommendations.

6. In short, systematic disclosure for the purpose of gaining world acceptance of the principle of space surveillance is both unnecessary and subject to provoking adverse consequences from the USSR and other states. At the same time, non-military uses of space which may require surveillance of the earth by various sensors would stimulate wider and deeper awareness of the capabilities of reconnaissance. Generally, such effects should be manageable, but it would be prudent to consider whether particular non-military indirect disclosures would entail overriding risks to our reconnaissance program,

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and to work out ways to mitigate possible adverse effects of programs which were approved.

7. NASA's and other proposals for developing earth-sensing programs which might overlap, be derived in sanitized form from, or stimulate public interest in, classified reconnaissance programs should be judged on the basis of anticipated political impact, as well as on the basis of other criteria such as feasibility, preference to non-space alternatives, cost, problems in protecting classified technology, and risks of security compromise of the classified reconnaissance program. As a general rule, such non-military programs would not be justified on the basis of contribution to legitimizing space observation. On the other hand, it should usually be possible by careful planning to mitigate possible adverse political repercussions of the incidental disclosure of surveillance capabilities and hence to give political and national security clearance to such programs. The best justification for such programs, and the best general basis for calming alarm over their effects, will be valid scientific or economic payoff in which other countries can share.

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