

(Mr. Clarke, Sri Lanka)

It seems to have been forgotten that the first weapons were introduced into space almost 20 years ago by the United States, which exploded several nuclear warheads above the atmosphere in tests of a possible anti-satellite system. This approach was abandoned when it led to the discovery — only recently rediscovered, to the consternation of military planners — that a few nuclear blasts in space could knock out all satellites, simply by the intensity of the radiation pulse.

The fact hovers ominously over all discussions of space weapons systems. A desperate country could blind and cripple all its enemy's satellites — as well as everyone else's — by a few large nuclear explosions above the atmosphere.

Such lack of discrimination has led to a search for precision weapons. Since as far back as 1968, the Soviet Union has made more than 20 tests of a non-nuclear anti-satellite destroyer, or ASAT, which hovers near its victim and explodes in a shower of fragments. In June 1982, it tested this satellite system for the first time in conjunction with large-scale ballistic missile launches from silos and submarines.

The interesting question arises — why are the Russians so concerned with developing an ASAT system, with its obvious destabilizing implications? One can only assume that the Soviet Union, which is able to obtain a great amount of information about the United States military establishment by old-fashioned techniques (such as buying trade magazines on the news-stands), realizes that reconnaissance satellites are much more vital to the Americans than to itself.

Predictably, the United States has not been indifferent to this Russian lead. President Reagan has now announced the development of an ASAT system much more advanced than the Soviet satellite-killers; indeed, it introduces a new dimension into space warfare.

The American weapon is launched, not from the ground but from high-flying aircraft, thus jumping up out of the atmosphere to home on a satellite as it passes overhead. This makes it very flexible and extremely difficult to intercept, as it could be launched from any point on the earth at very short notice.

Doubtless, scientists in the Soviet Union are attempting to find a counter to this system and so the insane escalation of weapons will continue — unless something can be done to check it.

Neither the United States nor the USSR-ASAT systems will be operational for some years, so perhaps there is a last chance to prevent the introduction of offensive (as opposed to defensive) systems into space. The importance of halting this arms race before it gets truly under way will be emphasized when one realizes that these planned ASATs are only the primitive precursors of systems now being contemplated. For a horrifying description of the next phase of space warfare I refer you to the recently published "High Frontier" study directed by General Daniel O. Graham. This envisages building scores of orbital fortresses to intercept oncoming ICBMs before they could reach their targets. Such a system would cost not billions, but hundreds of billions of dollars and of course would only be a stepping stone to something even more expensive, which is the "Star Wars" just mentioned by the distinguished representative of Bulgaria.