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Russian Military May Have Rehearsed Attack on Finnish Satellite, Specialist Warns

By Reuters

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Russia's Cosmos 2612 military satellite **Roscosmos**

A Russian military satellite that approached a Western commercial one last month may have been rehearsing an attack, a military space specialist said, with two related Russian craft now heading in the direction of another Western satellite.

U.S. Under Secretary of State Thomas DiNanno wrote on X following the mid-October incident that Russia's Cosmos 2612 military satellite had been "intentionally maneuvering dangerously close to a commercial satellite" in conduct "consistent with on-orbit weapons operations."

The approached satellite, called X36, is operated by Finnish company ICEYE and provides radar imagery to Western governments and militaries, including Ukraine. Three space

specialists described the incident as one of the closest known approaches by a Russian military spacecraft to a commercial satellite in low-altitude orbit.

The encounter "looks like an attack rehearsal," said Greg Gillinger, a senior space analyst at Integrity ISR, an American company that provides training to U.S. space forces. "This is the most aggressive posture I've seen Russia take in terms of threatening satellites from another nation," he told Reuters.

Russia's Defense Ministry did not respond to a request for comment. Moscow has repeatedly warned that commercial Western satellites helping Ukraine could become legitimate targets for retaliation.

The head of ICEYE's U.S. operations, Ann Stevens, told Reuters that X36 "has been and will continue to be a productive satellite" and that its constellation of radar-imaging satellites is resilient in the event of disruption.

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The episode has fuelled concerns over the vulnerability of commercial satellite networks that have become increasingly important to military operations. It follows months of Russian activity around ICEYE that Western officials warn demonstrates capabilities that could threaten or disrupt commercial constellations, including those operated by Elon Musk's SpaceX.

Gillinger, a former U.S. Air Force intelligence officer who has tracked the Russian satellites, said Cosmos 2612 appeared to be testing kinetic attack-related capability because such a close approach would not be needed for intelligence collection or electronic interference.

Cosmos 2612 is publicly categorized as a servicing inspection satellite, according to U.S. space intelligence firm Slingshot Aerospace. It is one of six military satellites Russia launched in April. In May, Russia positioned four of them close to X36, space analysts have said. ICEYE subsequently moved its satellite, prompting further Russian maneuvers, Chief Executive Rafal Modrzewski told Reuters in September.

In early October, Cosmos 2612 positioned itself hundreds of kilometers behind X36, according to space analysts. It then rapidly closed the distance over several days, coming within a kilometer (half a mile) of X36 around mid-October, with some analysts saying it was within a few hundred meters or less.

Cosmos 2612 subsequently moved about 400 kilometers (250 miles) away, Gillinger said. Two sibling Russian satellites are now drifting toward the orbital path of another ICEYE spacecraft, X37, he said.

U.S. space-tracking firm COMSPOC also said the two siblings were becoming increasingly well positioned to approach X37. Both X36 and X37 are U.S.-registered, according to public space-object catalogs.

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Germany's space commander, Major General Michael Traut, told Reuters that close approaches like Cosmos 2612's could be used for inspection, observation or interference, depending on a spacecraft's technical capabilities.

"We must therefore consider the entire spectrum of possible effects, ranging from temporarily disrupting a satellite's operations to permanently disabling it," he said.

He cautioned that the ability to perform such maneuvers was not in itself evidence that Russia was preparing or rehearsing an attack, and said its purpose could not be determined from publicly available orbital data alone.

Major powers are preparing for the possibility of conflict extending into space. Washington recently acknowledged that it has deployed weapons in orbit, while the head of U.S. Space Command said earlier this year that Russia had deployed a space weapon within reach of critical U.S. national security satellites.

Russia's approach to X36 "really elevates the potential of an attack" from either deliberate or inadvertent interaction, said Andrew Turner, a space consultant and retired senior British air force officer.

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