

# A French eye in the sky

All governments, no matter what kind, hate competition. It is thus no surprise that France's Spot I satellite has caused a lot of grumbling in the corridors of power. The 3,000-lb. French satellite is the world's first high-resolution, commercial "eye in space."

Spot can produce well-defined photos of objects on earth down to the size of a compact car. This is about twice the capability of the U.S. Landsat commercial satellite but only about half that of military imaging satellites. Nevertheless, Spot has many potential military applications that have the Pentagon worried.

For a mere \$217, a customer can get a black and white print of anything he wants to see from space. Color prints cost \$2,500. These super-saver prices mean that any nation or individual may now benefit from space reconnaissance that was formerly the preserve of the superpowers.

Iran, for example, could buy images of its enemy Iraq that would provide vitally important data on troop concentrations, fortifications, airfields and logistics facilities. Libya might be able to buy photos of nations that it intended to destabilize. For \$1,000, Honduras could tell if El Salvador was massing troops along its border.

Washington does not like such competition because it doles out photos from its own spy satellites to U.S. allies — but on a selective basis. Ally Israel, for instance, gets virtually all U.S. imaging data from space dealing with the Mideast. Ally Egypt, by contrast, gets only data on Libya or Syria. Nations that must rely on U.S. satellites, such as Pakistan, may now be able to somewhat lessen their dependence on Washington.

The single Spot I satellite does not, however, supply constant, comprehensive coverage of the

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earth below. Its 26-day orbit means that a specific location can only be filmed once a month. When following Spot satellites are launched, frequency of coverage will improve. In an emergency, a Spot can be redirected to cover a target on earth in 2.5 days.

Though thus somewhat limited, Spot still offers some tantalizing opportunities for the media as well as the military. The *Toronto Sun*, for one, might have been able to use Spot I during the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Instead of wild rumors, the *Sun* could have got actual photos of the damage for \$217 each — provided that Spot had been over the USSR at the time.

When more Spots go up, all sorts of space-based investigative reporting will become possible, particularly in the world's closed-off totalitarian nations. Using Spot's unblinking eye in space, the *Sun* could photograph specific concentration camps in the Soviet Union's vast gulag. Soviet centres for germ and chemical warfare, along with mental institutions used to punish dissidents, could be closely monitored.

Prison camps in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, North Korea and China could be watched. Soviet military field manoeuvres and naval exercises photographed. The *Sun* might even be able to peek into the vacation compounds and posh Xanadus where communist party nabobs frolic and romp.

The idea of roving reporters and cameramen in the sky must give the secretive communists a bad case of stage fright. It is not hard to imagine the Soviets trying to hide everything under canvas — as they now do with their missiles — and attempting to jam Spot's data links with its ground stations. Equally grumpy reactions will come from America's spy agencies who seem to guard Russia's secrets almost as ardently as their own.

No matter the hard feelings in Washington and Moscow, the French have done the world a service by lofting a commercial satellite. It is high time to break the great power monopoly on space and their ability to manipulate news by selective leaks of satellite data. One can even expect that one day soon TV viewers will be able to tune in on direct, live satellite broadcasts from space. They will watch Siberia glide by below, or Chinese missile silos, Iraqi tanks, or even Swedish nudist colonies.

The most significant use of Spot may prove to be by French husbands away from their homes on long business trips. "Anne-Marie, this is Jean-Louis calling from Australia. Whose Citroen is that in our driveway?" Only a French satellite could have the sensitivity to relay such vital information.

## Punch



"No, no—he's not devoted, just stupid."