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Beijing's Intentions in Space

John J. Tkacik, Jr.

At about six o'clock in the morning (Beijing time) on January 12, 2007, a Chinese DF-21 missile launched from the Songlin test facility near Xichang, Sichuan, lifted a "kinetic kill vehicle" (KKV) into a near-space intercept trajectory for the orbit of a Chinese *Fengyun* 1-C weather satellite 500 miles above China.[1] After it maneuvered to within a short distance of the weather satellite, the missile warhead fired the KKV (perhaps guided by illumination from a ground-based targeting laser) and, at 6:28 am, destroyed it. Distressingly, aside from the Pentagon, the U.S. policy establishment has yet to recognize the significance of China's new anti-satellite (ASAT) capability.

The historic Chinese ASAT test shocked the U.S. Air Force and anyone else who recognized how seriously America's space supremacy is now challenged. It was "on a par with the October 1957 Sputnik launch," said Air Force Chief of Staff Michael Moseley, who warned that China's new capability now puts at risk satellites that are "*extremely, extremely* important to us in our national security."[2] The Pentagon estimates that China will have enough satellite interceptors by 2010 to destroy most U.S. low-orbit satellites.[3]

Under some diplomatic restraint, U.S. military commanders apparently are enjoined from ascribing "intentions" to China's military build-up lest it complicate Washington's relations with Beijing. During a trip to China last month, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Peter Pace commented that "it was difficult for the world to understand what China was doing with their anti-satellite test." General Pace still professes, "I don't know what their intent was."[4]

Of course, China's intentions as it deploys a modern ASAT capacity are obvious. Given the American military's highly advertised reliance on space systems, the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) new ASAT systems are targeted exclusively at United States space assets. Beijing's clear message is that the PLA can fight a modern war in the Western Pacific without space sensors, global positioning, and telecommunications, while the United States cannot, and hence China is not constrained from targeting U.S. military satellites regardless of the damage to non-military satellites, American or otherwise.

U.S. space trackers had monitored at least two previous KKV/ASAT tests, the first in July 2005 (in which the KKV was maneuvered into close range of the FY-1C satellite but suddenly veered away) and a second in February 2006, but had not publicized them. On Monday, April 23, *The New York Times* explained that "principals" in the U.S. government had reached their "best judgment" that no amount of exhortation could possibly talk Beijing out of the ASAT tests. Besides, Washington policymakers concluded that there were few good options to "punish" China if Beijing ignored U.S. blandishments. The collective wisdom of the U.S. government, including the intelligence agencies, was that Beijing "was committed to testing the antisatellite weapon."

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Some China-watchers still argue, without evidence, that the PLA's ASAT tests were a plea to the United States to join the so-called "Prevent an Arms Race in Outer Space" (PAROS) convention that China is pushing in the United Nations. Indeed, not even the Chinese foreign ministry makes such a claim. China's PAROS effort is animated partially by a desire to derail U.S. ballistic missile defense, but U.S. negotiators have attempted to engage Beijing's diplomats in a discussion of verification regimes for a possible PAROS statement and have been consistently rebuffed.[5]

In this, the Chinese have learned much from Soviet arms control negotiators who, by the 1980s, realized that they didn't have to put much reliance on verification when dealing with the United States. Once the U.S. signs an arms control agreement, America's democratic processes self-enforce it, while Beijing need not worry that Chinese whistle-blowers might complain about PLA violations. As the Chinese saw when the Soviets built the Krasnoyarsk ABM battle-management radar in direct contravention of the ABM treaty, the Soviets openly cheated without fear that the U.S. would abrogate the treaty. China likewise appears intent on violating PAROS by forming covert ASAT fire units.[6]

These lessons, however, seem lost on most of America's allies. China and Russia managed to isolate the U.S., 166 to 1, in the last meeting of the United Nations "First Committee" (disarmament) on the PAROS statement. Israel abstained, while Japan, Britain, and Australia all voted for it.[7] Certainly the United States must be wary of the disastrous potential for a public relations campaign by Beijing on PAROS designed to drive wedges between America and its allies.

The scales which once prevented the Pentagon from discerning Beijing's ASAT intentions long-ago fell from the eyes of U.S. military planners, but the rest of Washington needs an attitude readjustment to deal with the epochal emergence of China's new space warfare capabilities. American political leaders should follow Vice President Cheney's lead and address forthrightly China's new military power. They must admit that Beijing's "antisatellite tests, and China's continued fast-paced military buildup" are "not consistent with China's stated goal of a 'peaceful rise.'"[8] Washington must come to terms with the emergence of a non-status quo power as a new global peer competitor—a peer competitor whose intentions are not benign. Only then will political leaders be able to make the hard decisions on allocations of resources to and within America's national defense.

—John J. Tkacik, Jr., is Senior Research Fellow in China Policy in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

1. Michael R. Gordon and David S. Cloud, "U.S. Knew of China's Missile Test, but Kept Silent," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2007, p. 1, at *www.nytimes.com/2007/04/23/washington/23satellite.html*; see also Craig Covault, "Chinese Test Anti-Satellite Weapon," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, January 22, 2007, at *www.spaceref.com/news/viewnews.html?id=1188*.
2. Jim Wolf , "China poses risk to key U.S. satellites: top general," Reuters, April 12, 2007.
3. Bill Gertz, "China mum on Pace query on anti-satellite system," *The Washington Times*, April 6, 2007, at *www.washtimes.com/national/20070405-114828-9453r.htm*.
4. *Ibid.*
5. For a comprehensive review of the problems inherent in PAROS negotiations with China, see the Honorable Jon Kyl, "China's Anti-Satellite Weapons and American National Security," *Heritage Lecture* No. 990, February 1, 2007, at *www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl990.cfm*.
6. Michael P. Pillsbury, "Thirty Chinese Recommendations for Space Weapons" in *An Assessment of China's Anti-Satellite and Space Warfare Programs, Policies and Doctrines*, January 19, 2007 at *www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2007/FINAL_REPORT_1-19-2007_REVISED_BY_MPP.pdf*.
7. The U.N. General Assembly statement affirmed that the "existing legal regime applicable to outer space did not guarantee the prevention of such an arms race, and that there was a need to consolidate and reinforce that regime," and recommended that the Conference on Disarmament play the primary role in negotiating a multilateral agreement or agreements on the issue. See U.N. General Assembly "Disarmament Committee Approves Text Reaffirming Urgency Of Preventing Outer Space Arms Race, Need For Reinforcing Existing Legal Regime," Press Release GA/DIS/3334, October 25, 2006, at *www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/gadis3334.doc.htm*.
8. Rohan Sullivan, "Cheney Criticizes China's Arms Buildup," Associated Press, February 23, 2007, at *http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=2897375&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312*.