



# RSIS COMMENTARIES (4/2007)

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## **Why Shoot It Down Now? Understanding China's missile firing into outer space**

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ON 11 January 2007, the Chinese military fired a ballistic missile into outer space to destroy one of its own aging weather satellites. The Chinese action led to a wave of protests from the United States and its regional allies. On 23 January, the Chinese government broke its silence, assuring that its anti-satellite missile test was not an act of war. Many commentators and media outlets had rushed to conclude that the missile firing was nonetheless a clear example of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) flexing its muscles to showcase its growing military might, particularly to the US. Such explanations, while correct to a certain extent, fail to address certain issues that may be far more relevant to understand China's latest behaviour.

### **China's threat perception**

Since the Bush administration took office in 2000, Beijing has been growing increasingly concerned over the White House's policy in relation to the use of outer space. President Bush's announcement that he intended to support the development of the multi-billion dollar theatre missile defence system, abandoned after the end of the Cold War, raised serious concerns among the Chinese military. If operational, the system would allow the US to detect and subsequently intercept incoming missiles anywhere in the world -- well before they could reach US territory. This would severely undermine China's nuclear deterrence which relies on a very small number of missiles capable of reaching US territory. More worrisome for the Chinese is the prospect that the missile shield may be extended to certain American allies such as Japan and possibly Taiwan.

To complicate matters, the Bush administration approved in August 2006 a new space policy, paving the way for a more active utilization of space for intelligence and military purposes. This reinforced the Chinese military's sense of vulnerability. In a 10-page declassified version, the policy states that the US has "the right to deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to U.S. national interests".

As a result of such actions, the Chinese military believes that the US is bent on establishing itself as the sole and dominant power in outer space. In an era where information is the key to the survival of any advanced nation and its military, America's perceived attempts at space domination are seen as a direct threat to China's national survival. "In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whoever controls space controls our world," uttered a senior PLA officer.

### **Fighting back**

As a result of its suspicions towards America's alleged plans to monopolize outer space to the detriment of China's national security, the PLA has embarked on a significant and systematic effort to counter US plans for space domination. From the moment President Bush announced his intentions to restart the missile defence system, Beijing initiated a series of responses. In

June 2002, China tested its first “smart” missile, the CSS-5, armed with hundreds of decoys to elude the US missile defence system. This was followed in early 2003 by the testing of its first multiple warhead missile, the D-21, also aimed at evading US defences.

To further increase the performance and survivability of its missile force, China has made substantial investments in space technology. Apart from the well-publicized manned flight into space, China has made substantial inroads into space technology in the past 5 years. In mid-2003, China launched its most advanced communications satellite, the Dongfanghong-IV, with a lifespan of 15 years. A few months earlier, China tested its first micro-satellite weighing a mere 55 pounds and capable of stereo-mapping, making China one of the four countries ever to deploy such a system after the US, Russia and Britain.

Anti-satellite systems have also been given top priority by the PLA. According to the US Space Command, China has been conducting research on satellites armed with blue and green laser weapons to target other satellites. Western intelligence sources also alleged that research into manoeuvrable or dirigible space vehicles to ram an opponent’s satellites are being conducted. In late 2006 US defence officials claimed that China fired a powerful laser beam from an earth-base station against a US satellite and that similar actions have occurred in the past.

The PLA knows that the US military is more reliant on satellite than any other military. By targeting the American satellite network, China can severely disrupt not only the US missile defence system, but also the smallest of conventional military operations. As noted by General Yao Youzi of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences: “Strike the nodes to destroy the network.”

Another motivation behind China’s latest missile firing may be to force the United States into negotiations over a treaty on Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS). The United Nations treaty that has China and Russia as its leading proponents aims to ban the militarization of space. Washington however, is one of the treaty’s key opponents. China sees the American refusal of PAROS as just an excuse to avoid binding the US into an agreement that may jeopardize its current dominant position in space and constrain future attempts at consolidating such dominance. The latest missile firing may be just an attempt on the part of the Chinese military to tell Washington that they will not seat idly by and that negotiations are a far better and less dangerous option.

### **A security dilemma**

The Bush administration’s decision to move forward with its missile defence plan and its intention to extend it to Japan and Taiwan had contributed to China’s increased sense of insecurity. Having a limited number of missiles capable of reaching US territory, China sees US plans for such a system as severely undermining its deterrence capability and overall security. As a result China has taken a series of measures to counter US plans and reduce its own vulnerabilities. It is in this context that China’s anti-satellite missile firing into space needs to be understood.

While many believe that China is showing off its power potential, the reality is that Beijing is feeling extremely vulnerable. Such a sense of vulnerability should not come as a surprise if one considers the overwhelming superiority of the American position in space or any other realm. But a new dilemma is also emerging: China’s attempts at addressing its vulnerabilities are in turn creating new vulnerabilities for the US. As Washington tries to react to these newly-generated sense of insecurity, it triggers another round of counter-measures from the Chinese, leading to the possible emergence of a very dangerous cycle.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the enormous power disparity between the US and China has led to a heightened sense of vulnerability within the Chinese leadership. This sense of siege has in turn led China to embark on its recent missile firing into space – with all its attendant strategic implications. The emerging security dilemma may have some destabilizing consequences for peace and prosperity in Asia and beyond. To quickly address this disturbing development, urgent confidence-building measures and dialogues are needed between the two countries. During the Cold War, men of great vision on both sides of the Iron Curtain were able to prevent the militarization of outer space. Dialogues, negotiations and confidence-building measures allowed both superpowers to keep the outer space free of weapons for the benefit of all humanity. Perhaps the same kind of vision is now urgently needed.

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