



China's Missile Targets More than a Satellite by Patrick M. Cronin

China hit more than a weather satellite on Jan. 11 when it launched a medium-range ballistic missile into space; it also hit alarms in Washington and elsewhere. Recent media reports highlighting China's growing influence and successful use of "soft power" failed to anticipate this abrupt assertion of "hard power." The missile launch created the largest space debris incident in history and gave new meaning to the phrase "peaceful rise." More importantly, Beijing disturbed the strategic planning circles of its neighbors.

Every country will view the obliteration of a satellite through a different prism. Although perhaps not intended, one major effect of the anti-satellite attack was to signal China's intent to contest American primacy in space, as well as in the Asia-Pacific, should conflict break out. Last October, President George W. Bush authorized a new national space policy, which superseded an earlier policy laid out during the Clinton Administration. President Bush openly asserted America's need to maintain its dominance in space, not least because the U.S. armed forces rely overwhelmingly on space-based assets for command and control and intelligence, and the U.S. military's ability to use space is seen as a competitive advantage that should be preserved. The "hit-to-kill" test with a kinetic interceptor may have been the result of mere organizational programmatics, but the implication left in Washington was that its supremacy in space was not permanent.

China wants a tranquil reemergence, but the ASAT test suggests it is willing to accept the risk of being perceived as a military threat rather than cede future superiority in space to the United States. China's general strategic direction is increasingly a matter of record. On Dec. 29, 2006, just a fortnight before the anti-satellite strike, China published its fifth defense white paper since 1998. The document explained that China's high rate of defense spending was justified given the expansion of China's economy and necessary given Japan's reassertion of military power, Taiwan's intimations of independence, and North Korea's nuclear program.

China's objective, the report continued, was to compete with the United States in what used to be dubbed the "revolution in military affairs." The Chinese report claimed that it would create a high-tech military by laying "a solid foundation" by 2010 and making "major progress" by 2020. Once derided as the world's largest military museum, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fully intends to compete in military might and not just economic power.

In January 2006, China initiated a 15-year "Medium-to-Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology." The plan advances China's goal of becoming an

"innovation-oriented society" by the year 2020 and a world leader in science and technology by 2050. It commits China to developing indigenous capabilities that will allow it to leapfrog into leading positions in new science-based industries by the end of the plan period. Aerospace is listed as a crucial theater, lasers as a frontier technology, and manned space exploration as a critical project.

The anti-satellite attack was not a complete surprise to the Pentagon, which had accurately assessed China's ambitions in space in its 2005 assessment sent to the U.S. Congress. "China seeks to become a world leader in space development and maintain a leading role in space launch activity," the report plainly asserted. But, as some critics have pointed out, the Pentagon reports have said that the only way the PRC could shoot down satellites was with nuclear weapons.

The ASAT test makes it more difficult to ignore China's potential as a peer competitor in space, whether as a producer of satellites or manned space program or advanced space-based command and control targeting capabilities. As Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless pointed out after the ASAT test, there is growing concern about China's rapid military modernization and its expansion into realms beyond traditional air, land and sea domains, and it is not certain whether the end result will be peaceful.

Although the Chinese Foreign Ministry belatedly confirmed what the world already knew, the concern is that the tests suggest there is even less transparency into PRC decision-making than many thought prior to the ASAT test. Others have suggested that concern over a possible space arms race might spur closer dialogue and cooperation between Washington and Beijing. However, the notion of new arms control talks to limit space activity seems challenged by the fact that neither the U.S. nor China appears interested in more international constraints on their freedom in space.

An early indicator of possible Chinese development of anti-satellite weapons was improvement in satellite tracking. At present, and as the January attack intimates, China's ability to destroy or disable satellites remains limited to a kinetic kill by launching a ballistic missile (or perhaps using a space-launch vehicle armed with a nuclear weapon). However, one of China's top research priorities is laser technology, and China has the technical ability to develop a ground-based laser ASAT weapon. China asserts it wants neither weapons in space nor a space arms race; a ground-based laser would appear to fall in neither category.

Perhaps China was driven to the test by a desire to ascertain the vulnerability of its growing number of satellites. The Chinese are launching about 10 satellites into orbit every year and expect to have 100 in orbit by 2010 and 200 by 2020. China has in the past five years launched its first manned spacecraft into Earth orbit, two remote-sensing satellite

programs (Ziyuan-1 and Ziyuan-2), and an oceanographic research satellite, Haiyang-1 (HY-1). Moreover, China is developing micro satellites.

As noted, the ASAT test affects countries differently. The U.S. response is to highlight China's opaque military modernization program while seeking cooperation in a variety of fields – as well as other policy priorities such as dealing with North Korea's nuclear weapons. One area of potential cooperation that has been mentioned is manned space activity; while such cooperation was always likely to be problematic, the ASAT test will make that partnership even more difficult to consummate. Despite considerable cooperation between China and the U.S., space is likely to remain one of the areas of competition.

Taiwan no doubt will view the ASAT test, coupled with the PLA deployment of some 900-1000 missiles opposite Taiwan, as added coercive and deterrent pressure aimed at keeping Taipei from moving further toward independence. Meanwhile, many in Japan might see this ASAT test as a provocation designed to further separate China's military prowess from Japan's; although Japan has a highly professional force, it continues to take cautious steps toward resuming a normal military posture, in particular avoiding offensive weapons and power projection forces.

In short, the test may be seen as an attempt to demonstrate China's comprehensive and growing power when Japan is reconsidering everything from its pacifistic Constitution to what to do in the event of future nuclear proliferation.

We are not likely to find out soon, but even Kim Jong-il may have been discomfited by the ASAT test. The anti-satellite launch came only weeks after China privately chastised North Korean officials for sowing regional friction by testing missiles in July and a nuclear device in October. Of course, an offensive ASAT weapon also would be an issue of concern for all modern states with independent satellite programs, including Australia, India, and others.

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