

## **Statement Following China's January 2007 Anti-Satellite Test**

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February 2007

American policy makers know less than they could about China's anti-satellite (ASAT) research, development, and testing programs. Correcting this situation should be a priority for U.S. policymakers since erroneous and incomplete information about these programs can lead to ineffective or counterproductive policies and responses.

China's leaders did not explain why they decided to conduct an anti-satellite test in January 2007, but over a thousand Chinese-language journal articles containing references to anti-satellite technology were published during the last 35 years. This extensive body of literature demonstrates a long-standing Chinese interest in this technology dating back to the very beginnings of their space program in the early 1970s. It contains a wide range of different Chinese perspectives on the utility and desirability of anti-satellite weapons.

Conflicting American interpretations of Chinese interest in anti-satellite technology reflect biases towards different subsets of the Chinese literature. Some American analysts highlight Chinese writings on international law and international relations that make the case for cooperation on rules of the road in space that may lead to a treaty banning attacks on satellites. Others call attention to Chinese military writings on space warfare. Our engagement with space scientists, engineers and security analysts from many different Chinese institutions indicates there are still vigorous debates within China regarding the wisdom of testing and deploying anti-satellite capabilities. The Chinese leadership's decision to conduct this anti-satellite test is unlikely to settle their differences. To the contrary, in the wake of this test internal Chinese debate is likely to increase.

China follows U.S. deliberations on space issues closely. American statements and decisions are an important part of the Chinese debate on anti-satellite technology. Chinese analysts and intelligence officers read and report testimony from Congressional hearings on China. They follow line items in the defense budget, track changes, and pay attention to every vote from the subcommittee level through final passage. They also follow most China-related commentary in the American media, as well as the activities of U.S. governmental and non-governmental organizations. With few exceptions, Chinese military and security analysts are keen observers of the discussion and evolution of U.S. space policies and programs.

American analysts of Chinese space policies and programs are less informed. China's policy-making and budgetary processes are closed to public input and public scrutiny. Chinese officials and institutions are less accessible. China does not have an independent news media or independent non-governmental organizations. Their government reports lack detail.

Chinese secrecy, however, is only part of the reason American analysts know less about China than Chinese analysts know about America. China may not be as transparent as the United States, but it does publish a considerable amount of technical and non-technical research about its military space programs in open sources. Unfortunately, the United States is not adequately prepared to make use of the information in these sources. Three separate GAO studies<sup>1</sup> conducted since 2002 found that key U.S. government agencies suffer from shortages of translators and interpreters as well as shortages of staff, such as diplomats and intelligence specialists, with Chinese-language skills deemed critical to successful job performance. The 2006 GAO report on the shortfall at the Department of State found that 88 percent of the career management staff and 75 percent of the Foreign Service specialists requiring Chinese “did not meet the language requirements of their position.”

Because of these shortfalls, a lot of useful information about China’s military space programs published in Chinese-language sources is routinely overlooked. Limited language proficiency restricts many American researchers to Chinese materials made available through translation. Citations in U.S. reports on China’s space program show that analysts rely heavily on press accounts, which is not surprising since many newspapers and magazines either provide their own translations or are more likely to be translated by open source services such as the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). The Chinese-language articles on anti-satellite technology selected for translation by FBIS and other U.S. analysts come disproportionately from a small set of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) publications.

My analysis of the content of PLA publications on military space technology indicates they are a small percentage of the relevant literature, and suggests that their content is primarily pedagogical, and in many cases highly polemical. Most of the available Chinese literature on military space systems is published in technical journals affiliated with the research institutes owned by China’s defense industries, which are better informed about foreign technical developments and better able to assess their implications for Chinese national security. The technical assessments published in defense industry journals tend to offer analysis and recommendations aimed at decision makers, while PLA publications tend to contain more rudimentary explanations and analysis intended to provide general information, basic concepts or political orientation on the military use of space for the Chinese armed forces and the general public. Just as Chinese analysts sometimes mistake writings by U.S. military officers as necessarily reflecting U.S. policy, writings by Chinese military officers about space technology are sometimes mistaken for military doctrine by American analysts, who are often not familiar with the larger body of Chinese technical literature.

The shortage of trained U.S. analysts also makes it easier for inadequately vetted information to find its way into official U.S. government documents, which are then cited by outside experts, who in turn cite each other. The broad use of lower quality Chinese-language sources such as newspapers and magazines increases the probability of error. Questionable

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<sup>1</sup> Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Foreign Languages: Five Agencies Could Use Human Capital Strategy to Handle Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls,” GAO-02-237; GAO, “Foreign Languages: Staffing Shortfalls and Related Information for the National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation,” GAO-C-02-258R; GAO, “Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps,” GAO-06-894.

claims can quickly become part the conventional wisdom, misleading American policy-makers and the public.

As an example, several years ago there were reports, deemed credible by many American experts, that China had developed and tested a sophisticated anti-satellite weapon called a “parasitic micro satellite.” The source was an article that appeared in a Hong Kong newspaper in January of 2001. FBIS translated that article and circulated it to government agencies. Eighteen months later, in July of 2002, an American China specialist cited the translation in a research paper on Chinese anti-satellite capabilities. In 2003 the claim appeared in the Pentagon’s Annual Report to Congress on Chinese Military Power. It was repeated in the 2004 Pentagon report.

Despite the importance and high profile of this claim, in four years no one apparently bothered to assess the credibility of the original Hong Kong newspaper article. When we did so in 2004 we were able to identify the original source of the claim:<sup>2</sup> the personal website of a self-described Chinese military buff who claimed to have invented this supposedly secret space weapon. His website contained many other sensational claims about Chinese secret weapons, along with doctored photographs, tongue-in-cheek animations and images of scantily clad women. It was clearly not a credible source, and Pentagon analysts should have vetted the information—as we did—before placing it in two consecutive reports to Congress. We were relieved to see this questionable claim was not included in the Pentagon’s 2005 and 2006 reports to Congress. However, it continues to show up in other publications and in the public debate about China.

Assessing the credibility of sources is central to providing accurate information and should be a top priority. Analysts must look not only at the content of a source but at the source itself. This requires more than proficiency in the language or formal study of Chinese history, Chinese politics or the Chinese military. Knowledge about the qualifications of an author to make authoritative statements on technical or doctrinal issues must be considered when interpreting the content of their work. Understanding the purpose and intended audience of a publication, article or speech is equally important. Analysts need to be able to be as familiar with the differences between Chinese publications as they are with the differences between American publications such as *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, *The Nation* or the *National Enquirer*. Specialists in international education refer to the ability of a foreigner to understand this important culture-dependent information as “cross-cultural competence.” Without it, stereotypes shape one’s perception and understanding, and this can lead to significant analytical errors.

The rapid pace of social and cultural change in China during the past two decades makes cross-culturally competent assessments of a source’s credibility even more difficult for American analysts. For example, because the Chinese government controls the media, many American observers of Chinese affairs assume that all statements or opinions that appear in Chinese newspapers or academic journals reflect official government policy. They presume that every proposal articulated in books written by military personnel or distributed by military publishing houses must reflect the thinking of China’s military leaders. That may have been true twenty years ago but it is no longer true today. The Chinese publishing industry is larger, more diverse,

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Kulacki and David Wright, “A Military Intelligence Failure? The Case of the Parasite Satellite”, August 16, 2004, online at [http://www.ucsus.org/global\\_security/china/page.cfm?pageID-1479](http://www.ucsus.org/global_security/china/page.cfm?pageID-1479)

more independent and more market-driven than it was twenty years ago. Government censorship is exercised through regulation rather than direct control. These regulations are designed to allow as much freedom of expression as possible within limits set by the Ministry of Propaganda—limits that intentionally try to strike a balance between encouraging research, debate and discussion that can be useful to the Party and the government while carefully managing dissent.

One result of this change is that unlike twenty years ago, China now openly publishes an enormous amount of material related to national security and military affairs. The problem for American analysts is assessing its credibility and the relationship of the content of that material to actual Chinese policy. This can be difficult since China's policy-making process is closed, not only to foreign observers, but also to most Chinese, including most of their leading scholars of national security and military affairs. Analysts need to assess this issue very carefully, and make the case why they think certain authors and articles are credible and reflect official thinking, and discuss the uncertainties. Too often American analyses of Chinese policies are based on selected quotations of Chinese authors, with the implication that they are influential but rarely with evidence that they are. Without such evidence, quotations of this kind can help illustrate the viewpoints being discussed within China but are of highly questionable value in determining the policy preferences of the Chinese leadership, especially on sensitive topics such as the deployment of ASAT systems.

Not only do isolated quotations from Chinese authors often tell little about the intentions of China's military and political leaders, they frequently fail to accurately convey the intentions of the Chinese authors themselves. For example, a quote from junior Chinese military officer that appears in a 2005 report by the U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC) was mistranslated in a way that made it appear that the author advocated deployment of ASAT weapons, when the officer's intention was to condition ASAT deployment on the outcome of international space arms control negotiations. In many cases, presenting quotes out of context distorts the meaning and loses information that is important for understanding the author's intent.

Any action taken by the United States to address the threat posed by Chinese interest in anti-satellite technology should be preceded by an assessment of that interest that is as thorough and accurate as possible. For that to occur, policy-makers must recognize the limits of our current knowledge about China's military space programs and take steps to address it. It must adopt measures to create a significantly larger cadre of linguistically proficient and culturally competent analysts who can read Chinese language documents and interpret them correctly. It needs those analysts to look systematically beyond press reports and PLA writings to take advantage of the large amount of relevant Chinese-language literature on anti-satellite technology that is available. And, most importantly, it needs to require that analysts look not only at content but carefully assess the credibility and context of that content, and make that assessment part of their reporting of information.

Regular exchanges between the U.S and Chinese government analysts responsible for collecting and analyzing information about their respective space policies and program could help facilitate the flow of accurate information. Personnel in these positions serve as gatekeepers who decide what information should be passed up the chain of command and how this information should be interpreted. Exchanges can play a critical role in developing the linguistic and cultural competence American analysts need to make accurate judgments, especially if they

include significant periods of time in China. Even in the absence of a formal agreement with China regarding exchanges, the United States can make use of existing academic and professional exchange programs, as well as the funding mechanisms already in place, such as the National Security Education Program (NSEP) grants, to give more analysts more time in country.

Unfortunately, military tensions between the United States and China are likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Both sides recognize the dangers of an armed conflict between nuclear weapon states. In order to avoid conflict while preserving vital interests, the United States must do more to engage China in a serious discussion about how to manage the use of military space technologies in ways that increase stability and mutual security. The effectiveness of this discussion will depend on the credibility of the information that participants bring to the table, and the cross-cultural and linguistic skills American analysts bring to bear when interacting with their Chinese counterparts. Increasing the quantity and quality of U.S. information about Chinese military space programs is an essential step in managing an increasingly tense, complex and troublesome security relationship with a space-faring China.