A tabloid newspaper? An amateur space enthusiast? U.S. government assessments of China's military prowess are sometimes based upon shaky sources.

# LOST *in* TRANSLATION

**By Gregory Kulacki**

For President Bill Clinton, a high point of his 1998 state visit to China was a speech at Peking University. His remarks were broadcast live and uncensored, using a simultaneous translation supplied by the United States—the first time in history a sitting U.S. president would speak directly to the Chinese people in their own country.

American commentators who watched the speech on U.S. television thought it was an astonishing success, but as soon as it was over the Chinese news anchor covering the live broadcast for Chinese Central Television felt compelled to apologize to his audience, noting that Americans "translate Chinese differently." While technically correct, the U.S. translation of the president's remarks was a dull and confusing failure. Tens of millions of Chinese viewers walked away from their televisions disappointed.

Nearly a decade later, the United States and China still struggle to understand one another—their mutual suspicion and misperceptions are frequently manifested in official documents and policy statements. The Pentagon's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) warned that of all the major and emerging powers, "China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies."[1] In response, Beijing registered a formal protest and chided the United States to "review China's peaceful development from an objective perspective and stop its random and irresponsible remarks on China's normal defense construction."[2]

The QDR is just the latest in a series of U.S. government reports (including intelligence analyses and reports commissioned by Congress) expressing alarm over China's growing economic and technological prowess in the development of aggressive military capabilities. Some of these reports, however, contain mistakes that call into question the reliability of the information presented to Congress and to the American public. The analysts who produce the reports include information based on poorly translated documents and unreliable Chinese press accounts. They often fail to include information from more reliable Chinese open sources. Their selections of information often appear biased toward confirming the prevailing view of China.

Chinese analysts read these reports, as well as the recommendations of U.S. military planners on how to respond to the threats from China they describe. Those Chinese analysts then write their own reports and publish them in Chinese military journals that are in turn read by U.S. analysts. Like compound interest on a savings account, the consequences of erroneous intelligence grow larger over time. Small mistakes can mushroom into major misperceptions that become increasingly difficult to correct. The end result is increased suspicions among both parties that the other side is not genuinely interested in a cooperative approach to the security problems that divide them.

## SPACE PEARL HARBOR

The most serious security issue confronting the United States and China is a shared concern of being drawn into a military conflict over Taiwan. The prospect of this scenario escalating into a nuclear exchange has prompted some commentators to liken the situation to the brinkmanship of the Cold War.

---

*Gregory Kulacki is a senior analyst and the China Project manager for the Global Security Program of the Union of Concerned Scientists. He has lived and worked in China for more than 12 years, facilitating scholarly exchanges between the United States and China.*

CORBIS/JASON LEE

Captive audience: Thanks to deficient translators, President Bill Clinton's 1998 address at Peking University was a dull and confusing failure.

But this comparison obscures more than it reveals. Unlike the Soviet Union, or even contemporary Russia, China does not have a large nuclear arsenal on hair-trigger alert; nor does it possess a conventional force that could threaten the United States or easily overrun its allies in the region. The imagined future conflict is what Chinese military writers call "high-tech regional warfare."[3] Concerned that Beijing might seek to prevail over U.S. high-tech forces through asymmetric attacks on command, control, communications, and information systems, U.S. analysts have scoured articles and reports for evidence of Chinese efforts to develop these capabilities.

In January 2001, the Commission to Assess U.S. National Security Space Management and Organization (the "Space Commission") published a report that claimed to have found such evidence, stating that "China's military is developing methods and strategies for defeating the U.S. military in a high-tech and space-based future war." The commission, chaired by Donald Rumsfeld (until he was nominated as defense secretary), warned of a "space Pearl Harbor" and cited a conflict in the Taiwan Strait as one of several possible crises where "the potential vulnerability of national security space systems would be worrisome."[4]

While these concerns may be valid, the commission misrepresented and misinterpreted the information it cited to support this claim. Citing "warning signs of U.S. vulnerability," the commission quoted a Xinhua news agency report that noted, "for countries that could never win a war by using the method of tanks and planes, attacking the U.S. space system may be an irresistible and most tempting choice."[5]

By using this source, the commission created the impression it was an official announcement from the Chinese government. But although Xinhua is directly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and does often serve as a conduit for official government statements, it is also a huge commercial enterprise that owns hundreds of publications from fashion magazines to journals on current affairs. The source cited by the commission is an essay in one of those publications, a magazine named *Liaowang*, which is sometimes translated as "outlook" in English. The magazine is well-known in China for publishing opinion pieces and for an editorial policy that favors highly nationalistic and anti-American viewpoints. The essay in question, however, was not an official policy statement, but instead was written by a junior military officer named Wang Hucheng.[6]

Contrary to the assertions made by the commission, the essay, which was titled "The Soft Underbelly and Strategic Weaknesses of the American Military," did not contain any reference to Chinese "methods and strategies for defeating the United States in a high-tech and space-based future war." Most of the *Liaowang* article discusses supposed vulnerabilities that have nothing to do with space warfare, such as recruiting problems and whether the U.S. Air Force has enough planes and pilots to fight two wars at once. The only specific references in Wang's article to space "methods and strategies" are a few sentences discussing how India monitored U.S. spy satellites to avoid detection of preparations for their 1998 nuclear tests, and a brief description of Russian-made hand-held GPS jamming devices that were later used (ineffectively) in Iraq.

What's more, all of the "strategic weaknesses" Wang identifies are based on assessments from U.S. sources, including the Quadrennial Defense Reviews of 1997 and 2001; statements by former National Security Agency Director John McConnell and former Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jay Johnson; an unnamed 1998 U.S. Air Force report; and the 1998 U.S. Space Command Long-Term Plan. Wang never used the phrase "space Pearl Harbor,"

CORBIS/WALLY MCNAMEE

although he did directly quote a passage in the 1996 Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Information Warfare, which coined the term "electronic Pearl Harbor."[7]

Like a game of telephone gone horribly wrong, the space commission quoted a low-ranking Chinese military officer who had been quoting U.S. sources. In doing so, the commission's report misrepresented America's own estimates of its military weaknesses as original Chinese observations and intentions.

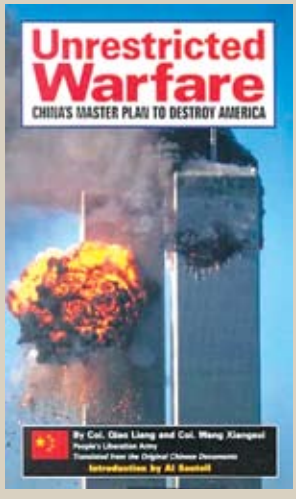
## TABLOID INTELLIGENCE

Ironically, during the same month that the United States was sounding the alarm about a space Pearl Harbor, two Hong Kong newspapers (*Sing Tao Jih Pao* and *Xing Dao Daily)* published articles describing a secret weapon that China was supposedly developing to carry out a surprise attack against enemy space assets.[8] They called it a "parasite satellite"—a small, sophisticated device that could attach itself to an enemy satellite and disrupt or destroy it on command. References to these Hong Kong newspaper articles subsequently appeared in the 2003 and 2004 editions of the Pentagon's Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China.[9]

An extensive web search traced the origin of the newspaper articles (and others that later appeared) to an online posting by a self-described "military enthusiast" named Hong Chaofei who resides in a small Chinese town in Anhui province.[10] He posted a description of the supposedly secret antisatellite (ASAT) weapon, along with fanciful descriptions of other "secret" Chinese weapons, on his personal website in October 2000. (One such secret weapon described on Hong's website is the "scaring bow," a device that allegedly sends false images to fighter aircraft to fool their systems into believing an enemy has locked on. According to Hong, because they are not "real radar" they can be mass manufactured and distributed to every soldier and even the general population.)[11] The Hong Kong newspaper articles are virtual copies of his website post. The Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a U.S. government agency that monitors foreign media, translated the two newspaper accounts and made them available to the U.S. intelligence community.

However, the poor quality of Hong's technical descriptions, his use of extremely provocative language, and the nature of the other materials on his website raise very serious doubts about his credibility. (Hong, for instance, took personal credit for sending the Chinese government these purported plans for parasite satellites in the 1990s. He also claimed to reveal a new Chinese nuclear posture that calls for a full-scale nuclear attack on Britain, France, and Russia in the event Beijing detects a U.S. nuclear launch against China.)[12] In writing his online article, Hong appears to have simply used publicly available information about Chinese civilian satellites and added his own speculative comments. Additional web articles from Hong about his alleged parasite satellite continued to appear on Chinese news websites in 2003 and 2004. In the circular pattern that often seems to haunt this issue, Hong added introductions to his updates that cite U.S. concerns about Chinese killer satellites as proof that his original post should be believed.

Pentagon analysts should have been able to trace the story to Hong despite the common practice in Chinese newspapers of sharing stories without attribution, since the article appearing in *Xing Dao Daily* presents the relevant information in the same sequence as Hong's original internet posting with several passages copied verbatim (character for character in the Chinese). In considering the credibility of the information, the Pentagon should also have noted changes in the *Xing Dao Daily* that could have affected the quality of the newspaper's reporting. In particular, the March 1999 sale of the staid but unprofitable newspaper led to editorial


COURTESY GREGORY KULACKI

### Artistic license

Published in 1999, the Chinese book *Unrestricted Warfare: Deciding War and Warfare in the Age of Globalization* (top) has been widely portrayed in the United States as a Chinese military manual for a dirty war against the West. Case in point is a 2002 U.S. edition of the book (bottom) that opted for a sensationalist cover linking it to the threat of terrorism.

But as Harvard University's Alastair Johnston noted in the 2004 book, *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency,* the authors of *Unrestricted Warfare* were "not strategists, but political officers," whose primary responsibility was "to write reportage about life in the military." The book, he adds, "was highly controversial inside China" and was "criticized in internal meetings in the military." Yet, "none of this contextual information was part of the U.S. discourse."

changes designed to increase circulation and target a younger audience. As a result, by the time the article appeared, the *Xing Dao Daily* had been converted into a tabloid-style newspaper.

## WORD GAMES

Poor selection, misrepresentation, and misinterpretation are not the only problems evident in the U.S. intelligence community's handling of Chinese sources. In a March 2005 report entitled "Challenges to U.S. Space Superiority," published by the National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC), a quote from a Chinese source about Chinese antisatellite development is translated in ways that significantly alter its meaning.[13]

The quote in the NASIC report, attributed to a "Liying Zhan" of the Langfang Army Missile Academy, clearly states that China is actively developing antisatellite weapons: "China will monitor closely foreign developments in advanced satellite technology, paying close attention to progress made in military use of space while actively developing ASAT systems."[14]

Tracking down this statement in the original Chinese revealed that it was taken from the final sentence of an article published in a 2004 Chinese aerospace journal and written by three instructors at Langfang—Zhang Liying, Zhang Qixin, and Wang Hui.[15] A more accurate translation is: "While properly following foreign satellite advanced technology, [China] also should actively develop antisatellite weapons and pay close attention to the progress of international space arms control, in order to facilitate the timely determination of a response."[16]

The NASIC translation makes several important errors. The first is rendering the Chinese word *ying* as "will" instead of "should." The actual text makes clear that the authors believe China has not yet made a decision about proceeding with antisatellite weapons, and they therefore offer a recommendation about China's course of action.

The second translation error is more disturbing. NASIC translates the phrase *junbei kongzhi* as "military use of space" when it should be translated as "arms control." The result completely obscures the Chinese authors' intention, which is to recommend that China should factor developments in international arms control into its decision on how to respond to the escalating competition in military space technology that is described in the body of their article. NASIC compounds this error by omitting the final phrase "to facilitate the timely determination of a response," which makes clear that the Chinese authors are saying that China has not yet made a decision about whether to respond by fielding antisatellite weapons. More importantly, it reveals that the Chinese authors believe that China's policy toward antisatellite weapons should depend on the state of international arms control negotiations. The authors are advocating a hedging strategy, recommending that China should have antisatellite weapons ready if the diplomatic effort to protect its space assets fails.

## UNREPRESENTATIVE SAMPLING

From intelligence gathered from the public domain, it is unclear whether China is preparing to engage in an intense security competition with the United States, whether it is aggressively acquiring asymmetric military capabilities, or whether it is serious about its diplomatic efforts to control antisatellite weapons. And while the public is not privy to analysts' potential use of classified U.S. sources on Beijing's intentions and capabilities, the errors in these reports cannot help but raise concerns about the overall quality of U.S. intelligence gathering on China.

**China's government is far less open than the U.S. government.**

Yet, while Americans often blame their lack of knowledge about China on secrecy and deception, a fair share of the fault lies with Americans themselves.

To be sure, China's government is far less transparent than the U.S. government. It was only a few months ago that Beijing finally decided that information about natural disasters should no longer be considered a state secret. Yet, while Americans often blame their lack of knowledge about China on secrecy and deception, a fair share of the fault lies with Americans themselves. U.S. intelligence reports available in the public domain, like those from NASIC and the nonclassified versions of the Pentagon's annual reports to Congress, rely on a surprisingly small set of Chinese sources—often press reports. Such a practice is inexcusable given the ease with which properly trained U.S. analysts could go beyond news accounts and access Chinese open source material on topics of concern. China is building an enormous digital archive of mainland Chinese language publications it calls the China National Knowledge Infrastructure. It currently contains more than 10 million books, articles, doctoral dissertations, conference proceedings, and government documents published in China. Many of these are technical articles. Researchers can conduct full-text searches of the entire database online and download complete articles (in Chinese) for a small fee.[17]

A recent search of the archive for the Chinese word for "antisatellite" returned more than 1,500 articles published in China since 1994. Like Wang's article on "strategic weaknesses,"

many of these articles are summaries or commentaries based on information taken from U.S. reports. Other articles on different topics mention antisatellite weapons in passing. Some of the articles, however, contain technical details about actual Chinese capabilities that U.S. analysts apparently failed to discover because of their focus on military journals and newspapers.

For example, the 2000 edition of the Pentagon report to Congress states, "Although specific Chinese programs for laser ASAT have not been identified, press articles indicate an interest in developing this capability, and Beijing may be working on appropriate technologies."[18] Looking beyond press reports, a search of the Chinese digital archive returned 50 articles containing the Chinese terms for "laser" and "ASAT" that were published during the one-year period covered by the Pentagon report. One article from a technician at the 53rd Research Institute of the Ministry of Electronics in Jinzhou contains an analysis of the 1997 U.S. antisatellite test using the high-power laser known as MIRACL. In commenting on the test, the author includes a rather detailed technical discussion of beam steering and adaptive optics that includes comparisons to Chinese capabilities that suggest China had already researched, developed, and tested comparable technology by April 1999.

The U.S. intelligence community could learn a lot more about Chinese military capabilities and intentions by simply examining such sources more carefully. Policy makers could feel more confident in their assessments of possible Chinese threats if their analysts made the effort to investigate whether the information these sources contain is both credible and, in the case of determining intentions, broadly representative of the Chinese government or the opinion of a minority or a single individual.

Unfortunately, bringing about these simple changes may be difficult. Many of the people gathering the intelligence and producing the analysis that informs U.S. policy on China are not proficient in the Chinese language.[19] Moreover, they have not spent an appreciable amount of time studying, living, or working in the country they are being asked to analyze, and therefore do not really understand the culture—which can be important, for example, in assessing the credibility of sources. They apparently lack the basic ability to distinguish an editorial by a junior officer from an official policy statement, or the good sense to distinguish tabloid journalism from credible news reports. Training in social sciences, politics, history, economics, area studies, and international relations cannot alone make up for this deficiency.

Responsible agencies are slowly awakening to these shortcomings. Recent reports published by the Government Accountability Office point to continued deficiencies in the language and cultural training of government personnel, including diplomats and intelligence specialists working on China.[20] A January 2005 Defense Department report admits that "language skills and regional proficiencies are not valued as Defense core competencies."[21] Until they are, policy makers should be aware that some of the assessments they read on Chinese military capabilities and intentions may be, literally, lost in translation.

1. Defense Department, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 2006, p. 29.

2. "China Firmly Opposes U.S. Report Playing Up 'China Military Threat,'" *People's Daily Online*, February 13, 2006.

3. *Gao jishu jubu zhanzheng* or "high-tech regional warfare" is a commonly used term that appears in the titles of 129 journal articles, and as a keyword in 1,063 journal articles, published in China between April 1993 and February 2006. A detailed definition of the term's history and meaning is contained in a textbook by Guo Meichu, Yang Fenghua, and Huang Fang, *Gao Jishu Jubu Zhanzheng Lun* (*The Theory of High-Tech Regional Warfare*), (Junshi Kexue Chubanshe [Military Science Publishing House]: Beijing, 2003).

4. Report of the Commission to Assess U.S. National Security Space Management and Organization, January 11, 2001, p. xiv and p. 22.

5. Ibid, pp. 22–23.

6. Wang Hucheng, "Meiguo de Junshi 'Ruan Lei' yu Zhanlüe Ruodian," ("The Soft Underbelly and Strategic Weaknesses of the American Military"), *Liaowang*, vol. 27, July 3, 2000, pp. 32–34.

7. Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Information Warfare, November 1996, p. A9.

8. Tung Yi, "China Completes Ground Test of Antisatellite Weapon," *Hong Kong Sing Tao Jih Pao* (online version), January 5, 2001, in FBIS-CPP20010105000026; "China is Developing Antisatellite Weapons as a Counter Measure," *Hong Kong Ming Pao* (online version), January 30, 2001, in FBIS-CPP20010130000049.

9. Defense Department, Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China, July 28, 2003, p. 36; Defense Department, Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China, May 29, 2004, p. 42.

10. Gregory Kulacki and David Wright, "A Military Intelligence Failure? The Case of the Parasite Satellite," August 16, 2004 (www.ucsusa.org/global_security/china/page.cfm?pageID=1479).

11. See www.milchina.com/bbs/wdbread.php?forumid=27&filename=f_14&s=73bac7ffd91b8576900a1997bf4cedf8.

12. See www.redfox88.com/z595.htm.

13. NASIC is the air force's center for "integrated intelligence on aerospace systems forces and threats," NASIC, "Mission and Vision" (www.wpafb.af.mil/nasic/mission.html).

14. NASIC, "Challenges to U.S. Space Superiority," NASIC-1441-3894-05, March 2005, p. 21 (www.armscontrolwonk.com/Challenges_to_Space_Superiority.pdf).

15. Zhang Liying, Zhang Qixin, and Wang Hui, "Fanweixing Wuqi Jishu ji Fangyu Cuoshi Qianxi" ("A Cursory Analysis of Antisatellite Weapons Technology and Defensive Measures"), *Feihang Daodan*, vol. 3, 2004, pp. 28–30.

16. The subject in Chinese sentences is often not explicitly stated. As is common practice in translating Chinese to English, this is indicated by including the word "China" since it is implied but not stated in the original Chinese.

17. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (www.cnki.com.cn).

18. Defense Department, Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China, July 28, 2000, p. 36.

19. 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; and Douglas Jehl, "CIA is Reviewing its Security Policy for Recruitment," *New York Times*, June 8, 2005.

20. GAO, "Foreign Languages: Workforce Planning Could Help Address Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls," GAO-02-514T; GAO, "Military Training: Strategic Planning and Distributive Learning Could Benefit the Special Operations Forces Foreign Language Program," GAO-03-1026.

21. Defense Department, "Defense Language Transformation Roadmap," January 2005, p. 3.