

China's anti-satellite missile test points to developing space weapons race

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After a lengthy silence, the Chinese government finally admitted last week to having tested an anti-satellite missile by destroying one of its aging weather satellites on January 11. While insisting that it still opposed the militarisation of space, China's move is clearly a step in the opposite direction. The anti-satellite test was the first since both the former Soviet Union and the US carried out similar experiments in 1980s.

News of the test, which was leaked to the media by US authorities, provoked a chorus of criticism from Washington and its allies, accusing China of initiating a space arms race. Such comments are completely hypocritical. Rather than starting an arms race, Beijing is responding to the Bush administration's efforts to establish and maintain US military supremacy in space.

The Chinese test was first reported by the website of the American magazine *Aviation Week & Space Technology* on January 17. A ballistic KT-2 missile launched from Sichuan province's Xichang space centre struck and destroyed a Chinese Feng Yun-1C weather satellite orbiting 865 kilometres above the earth. The US air force missile warning system detected the launch, and its space command monitored the Feng Yun-1C during and after the collision.

The following day, US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe confirmed that the US had detected the test. "The US believes China's development and testing of such weapons is inconsistent with the spirit of cooperation that both countries aspire to in the civil space area," he declared. Britain, Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea quickly condemned China's "militarisation of space".

Joseph Biden, chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, described the test as "provocative", but urged the US administration not to

start a space arms race. A *New York Times* editorial on January 20 also called for moderation, stating: "The United States, with many more satellites in orbit than any other power and a military that has become increasingly dependent on satellites, has the most to lose from an unbridled space arms race."

There is no doubt, however, that the Bush administration exploited the Chinese test to justify its own extensive preparations for space warfare. In a congressional hearing on January 11, Defence Intelligence Agency director Michael Maples named China and Russia as "primary states of concern" over their military space programs. "Several countries continue to develop capabilities that have the potential to threaten US space assets, and some have already deployed systems with inherent anti-satellite capabilities, such as satellite-tracking laser range-finding devices and nuclear-armed ballistic missiles," he said.

The US military space and nuclear weapons programs are far more advanced than those of China or Russia. In 1983, the Reagan administration intensified strategic pressure on the Soviet Union by calling for the building space-based weapon platforms designed to block Soviet nuclear missiles—the so-called "Star Wars" program. Both the US and the Soviet Union tested anti-satellite weapons but discontinued the tests, fearing that the debris would damage their own satellites and affect the functioning of missile warning systems.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US continued to develop space military programs, which were accelerated under the Bush administration. In 2001, Washington withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) with Russia and initiated a program to build a missile shield. While insisting that the anti-ballistic missile system was purely defensive,

an effective shield greatly strengthens America's ability to launch a first strike without fear of reprisal.

Former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld actively pushed for an expanded space warfare program. In 2004, the US Air Force published a paper that outlined long- and short-term US strategies not only for anti-satellite missiles, but ground-based lasers and hunter-killer satellites. It also proposed the development of space-based weapon systems that could attack ground targets by firing very high-velocity metal rod bundles.

In 2005, the US voted against a UN resolution calling for negotiations on a ban on space weapons. Last October, Bush signed a new National Space Policy—the first full revision in a decade—that rejected any arms control agreements that might limit US flexibility in space. It also asserted the right to deny states “hostile to US interests” access to outer space.

Undersecretary of State Robert Joseph told the *Washington Post* in December: “We reserve the right to defend ourselves against hostile attacks and interference with our space assets. We will, therefore, oppose others who wish to use their military capabilities to impede or deny our access to and use of space. We will seek to protect our space assets by active or passive means.”

The US military is heavily dependent on space technology for communication, spying, navigation, targetting and other functions and therefore vulnerable to any attack on its satellites. But while US policy is couched in terms of “defence,” the military systems being developed have obvious offensive capabilities aimed at destroying similar enemy capacities. According to estimates by the US-based Centre for Defence Information, the Pentagon requested nearly a billion dollars for space weapon programs for the current year.

China, which is treated as a potential enemy by Washington, has reacted to the Pentagon's dominance in space. Alarmed by the effectiveness of US hi-tech weapons in the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Chinese military began intensively studying the American military's use of space and initiated an anti-satellite weapon program. Such a capacity is obviously a component of Chinese preparations to counter the US in both conventional and nuclear warfare.

To catch up to the US, China has been expanding its space programs, with the assistance of Russia. Beijing

has now sent three astronauts into space—one in 2003 and two in 2005. It is only the third country to do so after Russia and the US. According to a retired Russian general Leonid Ivashov, China's anti-satellite missile is based on a model (IS-1) developed by the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

A *Financial Times* editorial on January 19 noted that two events last year might have rattled Beijing. “First, the US nuclear cooperation agreement with nuclear-armed India is the clearest indication yet of Washington's wish to build up a counterweight to China in Asia and the Pacific. But second, last summer the Bush administration came out with a new policy asserting that the US regarded space as important a dimension for the nation's security as air or sea power.”

Within China, the state-run media have barely mentioned the country's successful testing of its anti-satellite capabilities—a sharp contrast to the nationalist propaganda surrounding its recent deployment of new J-10 fighter jets. The low-key approach tends to indicate that Beijing wanted to warn Washington against the militarisation of space, rather than announce an aggressive space weapons program.

Whatever Beijing's intentions, however, the test could easily accelerate a weapons race involving not only the US but other countries as well. Regional rival Japan, which has demanded a “thorough explanation” of the Chinese launch, has been rapidly expanding its own space program. In 2003, Japan began launching reconnaissance satellites, which clearly have military uses, and are part of the US anti-ballistic missile program.



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