

WikiLeaks documents show...

US threatens “military option” against China over space arms race

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US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks and published by the British *Telegraph* reveal that Washington has threatened military action against China’s anti-satellite and anti-ballistic missile systems. Moreover, the threat, first formally issued in 2008, has recently been reinforced by a new 10-year US National Security Space Strategy, released on February 4.

The secret cables demonstrate deep concern within both the Bush and Obama administrations about China’s capacity to destroy the satellites upon which the US military depends heavily for navigation, surveillance and precision-guidance weapons. The documents reveal aggressive messages from Washington to Beijing over the past three years.

The cables relate to three sets of missile tests. On January 11, 2007, China launched a SC-19 missile to destroy an old weather satellite 850 kilometres above the earth. On February 18, 2008, the Bush administration ordered a cruiser USS Lake Erie to fire a SM-3 interceptor missile to destroy USA 193, a spy satellite 240 kilometres above the earth. In January 2010, China launched another SC-19 missile to intercept a Chinese medium-range ballistic missile flying 250 kilometres above the earth—a sophisticated test of a type only previously carried out by the US.

Leaked files from the US embassy in China dated January 6, 2008, disclosed that the US had requested its major allies, such as the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea, to join a coordinated diplomatic campaign against China’s January 2007 test. The diplomatic offensive constituted the “international opinion” at the time, accusing China of “militarising” outer space.

Just a month before its own February 2008 satellite interception, the US delivered a démarche to the Chinese foreign ministry, while asking US allies, such as Germany, Italy, Israel and Japan, to do likewise. “The United States requests your government’s assistance in applying diplomatic pressure to the Chinese government,” the cable stated. The

State Department issued “talking points” for these allies. One was that “China is now responsible for more breakup debris in low earth orbit than any other spacefaring nation,” alleging that this could damage other satellites.

In public, the Bush administration insisted its February 2008 interception—the first since the US stopped conducting such tests in 1985—was a necessary safety measure to prevent a malfunctioning spy satellite’s toxic fuel tank from causing harm when falling to the earth. In fact, the \$30 million operation aimed to send a message to China.

The January 2008 démarche to China, sent by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, contained an explicit threat that “any purposeful interference with US space systems will be interpreted by the United States as an infringement of its rights and considered an escalation in a crisis or conflict.” It declared that the US reserved the right “to defend and protect its space systems with a wide range of options, from diplomatic to military”.

The threat extended to any alleged Chinese “interference with the space systems of other nations which are used by the United States”. This would “be considered as contrary to the interest of maintaining international peace and security”.

The démarche ended with a series of provocative questions: “What analysis did China perform to estimate the debris that would be caused by the intentional destruction of your satellite in the January 11, 2007, test?” and “What are China’s future intentions for its direct-ascent ASAT development and testing program?”

The next cable shows that the US decision to destroy the USA 193 spy satellite in February 2008 angered Chinese leaders. A secret memo sent from the US embassy on February 22, 2008, noted that senior Chinese figures “repeatedly emphasized that the United States should provide information on the planned satellite interception prior to releasing the

information to CNN. The Bush administration had instructed the Beijing embassy to notify the Chinese foreign ministry only after the US Pacific Command had executed the strike.

Another Beijing embassy cable, dated June 13, 2008, recorded a dialogue between US Acting Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security John Rood and China's Assistant Foreign Minister He Yefei over the 2007 Chinese test, nuclear forces, space programs and the US "missile defence" program, which features SM-3 and other interceptor missiles.

China refused to accept the US position that its National Missile Defence (NMD) program was "defensive" and posed no threat to Russia and China. Minister He argued that the US program would "break the global balance" because the US already had the greatest offensive military capabilities and the NMD would undercut the deterrence abilities of other states. The Chinese minister also warned that US-Japan cooperation on the NMD had "greatest relevance to China" because missile defence radar in Japan would cover all of China. The NMD would "force China to rethink its nuclear strategy".

The Chinese minister rebuffed a request from Rood to make China's nuclear arsenal "transparent" because that "would eliminate its deterrent value". The assistant foreign minister assured Rood that China would never seek nuclear superiority by "following the footsteps of the Soviet Union". On space technology, Rood was told that China had not "crossed any thresholds" that threatened the US leadership, but China "cannot accept others setting limits on our capabilities".

This exchange took place against a definite background. Russia and China regarded the NMD as an aggressive rather than a defensive program. An article in the prominent US journal *Foreign Affairs* in 2006 had argued that the era of a US "nuclear primacy" had arrived because the numerical and technological superiorities of the American nuclear arsenal far exceeded those of Russia and China. The article insisted the US was now in a position to carry out a nuclear "first strike" to annihilate Russian and Chinese nuclear forces, with the NMD tasked with intercepting any surviving nuclear missiles from Russia or China.

These tensions have been exacerbated since Obama took office. The White House embarked on an even more aggressive course toward China, signalling a full-scale campaign on strategic, diplomatic and currency fronts by announcing \$6.4 billion arms sales to Taiwan. In January 2010, Beijing responded with an anti-ballistic missile test, designed to show Washington that Beijing was also developing a missile defence system.

The Obama administration reacted by reiterating the line of the former Bush presidency. A cable sent by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton instructed US diplomats to demand that Australia, Japan and South Korea once again join "in demarching China in a fashion similar to the US approach". Clinton sharply asked in the démarche: "Which foreign ballistic missile threats are China's BMD development and testing program intended to defend against?"

Clinton instructed embassy officials that if they were asked about the Obama administration's position on China's anti-missile test, they must restate the US objections to China's 2007 test. She stated that the January 2008 US démarches threatening China with a "military option" were "still valid and reflect the policy of the United States".

The threat against China was underscored by this month's US National Security Space Strategy (NSSS) report. It calls for the establishment of a network of "partnering nations", such as Japan and Australia, for the "collaborative sharing of space capabilities in crisis and conflict". In an indirect warning to China, the Pentagon declares: "We believe it is in the interests of all space-faring nations to avoid hostility in space. In spite of this, some actors may still believe counterspace actions could provide military advantage." The report said the US military "must deny and defeat an adversary's ability to achieve its objectives".

In other words, the US may carry out pre-emptive strikes on Chinese anti-satellite systems as a means to deny China the capacity to attack the US space arsenal. US Deputy Defence Secretary Gregory Schulte told reporters that the US "retains the option to respond in self-defence to attacks in space, and the response may not be in space, either".

From sharp but secret exchanges between the two governments, the US belligerence to China's satellite and missile programs has been made public via the NSSS report, itself an indicator of the emerging danger of war between the US and China.



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