

Abstract

China's successful test of a direct ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon last year marks a highly significant development in the strategic use of outer space and represents a milestone achievement in China's quest to develop asymmetrical anti-access and area denial strategies to counter the ability of the United States military to operate effectively in the Western Pacific. However, the reckless manner in which the test was conducted, producing as it did a historic amount of dangerous space debris, and the unresponsive and duplicitous manner in which the Beijing government dealt with (or failed to deal with) the diplomatic fallout produced by the test have led scholars to speculate that the test was the result of one of the following: 1) a desire to challenge the U.S. dominance in space, 2) an effort to force the issue of space weapons arms control to the diplomatic forefront, or 3) a diplomatic blunder resulting from bureaucratic "stovepiping" and miscommunication. However, these three viewpoints, while all providing valuable insights into Chinese decision-making, fail to fully develop the topic and leave key questions unanswered. The purpose of this study is to link the questions raised by the aforementioned typologies and achieve a deeper level of analysis vis-à-vis the application of the theoretical prism of offensive realism. Ultimately this study finds that the ASAT test represents a top-level decision made by the Chinese leadership, and was informed by a number of strategic and domestic-political factors, none of which bode particularly well for the future of U.S.-Chinese relations.

Keywords: Military space, ASAT, China, United States, Offensive realism