

4.1 Strategic Motivations: Anti-access and Area Denial

Behind the Chinese ASAT test is not just an offensive realist, strategic desire on the part of the PRC to increase its power and replace the U.S. as the preeminent military power in Asia, but also, at the domestic level, the need to secure the PLA's ability to defend the nation. On the strategic side, the PRC government recognizes that counter-space weapons provide them with a potentially scale-tipping advantage over the U.S., a proverbial "assassin's mace" (*shashoujian*) with which they could level the playing field in any conflict with the United States. China has for years been trying to gain the strategic advantage over the U.S. in the event that there should be a conflict in the Taiwan Straits, and Chinese planners have been searching for ways to counter the overwhelming power of the world's greatest military. Their conclusion: asymmetric warfare. As one Chinese defense analyst noted: "for countries that can never win a war with the United States by using the method of tanks and planes, attacking the U.S. space system may be an irresistible and most tempting choice."¹⁵⁷ This strategic thinking is confirmed by a 2007 RAND study, which explored the possibility of a Chinese anti-access strategy to gain the advantage over the United States in a conflict. The

¹⁵⁷ Saunders, September 20, 2005.

strategy is based on exploiting relative American weaknesses such as an over-reliance upon technology, satellites and vulnerable sea-lanes. It calls for “seizing the initiative at the outset of a conflict as imperative to defeating a technologically superior opponent” and targeting “space-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and communication assets.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, engaging in a potentially decisive sneak attack designed to strategically blind the U.S. leadership and severely degrade the U.S. military’s ability to operate in the region.

The study also stated the Chinese belief that American aircraft carriers can be defeated using mass attacks of cruise missiles and possibly advanced, satellite-guided ballistic missiles that could hit moving carrier battle groups; although it should be noted that this technology, while far from impossible to develop and arguably within the eventual reach of PRC engineers, has been reportedly difficult to develop to date.¹⁵⁹ The PRC focus upon the value of preemptive missile attacks has caused Pentagon officials to worry that “China could use GPS to guide weapons directed against the U.S. in the event of a conflict over Taiwan,” and has compelled U.S. planners to seek the development of a new signal GPS signal that would give “the Pentagon the option of maintaining use of its own military signal while jamming the commercial signal potentially being used by enemy forces.” However, other reports suggest that China could use the European *Galileo* navigation system and an

¹⁵⁸ Roger Cliff et al. *Entering the Dragon’s Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007), 51-60.

¹⁵⁹ From conversation with Wendell Minnick, March 14, 2008, and an interview with Mark Stokes, April 28, 2008.

expanded version of its own rudimentary *Beidou* satellite navigation system to negate the new U.S. code.¹⁶⁰ The RAND study concludes that the result of a PRC strategy of attacking U.S. space assets in a surprise attack, while exploiting their own use of space “could be that the United States would actually be defeated in a conflict with China-not in the sense that the U.S. military would be destroyed but in the sense that China would accomplish its military and political objectives,” and even if the “Chinese antiaccess measures did not result in outright defeat of the United States, they would likely make it significantly more costly for the United States to operate in the region.”¹⁶¹ And while this strategy risks escalating any potential conflict, it appears-given the tremendous asymmetry that exists between U.S. and PRC forces and capabilities-to be the PRC’s best option until Beijing can further modernize its rapidly expanding navy and air force. In the interim, China’s development and testing of counter-space weapons, may also serve to weaken its adversaries psychologically.

4.2 Strategic Motivations: Balance of Power

It is reported that Chinese President Hu Jintao believes that the relatively unrestrained projection of China’s military might (evident in the ASAT test) will serve the dual purpose of “elevating China’s global

¹⁶⁰ Joan Johnson-Freese and Andrew S. Erickson, “The emerging China-EU space partnership: A geotechnological balancer,” *Space Policy*, 2006.

¹⁶¹ Cliff et al., 71-76.

status” and “enhancing its psychological warfare capabilities against Taiwan and other potential adversaries.”¹⁶² If such reports (which must be considered speculative in nature due to the scarcity of detailed, reliable information on Chinese government figures and their thinking) are true, then President Hu may be correct considering Taiwan’s recent political trends have shifted notably against the pro-independence DPP party. And while economic factors are also certainly driving the political shifts seen in Taiwan, to some in China the DPP’s losses seem to indicate that Beijing is breaking the will of the Taiwanese to oppose it.¹⁶³ This may also help explain “various PLA generals’ conspicuous reference to their ability to inflict heavy casualties on U.S. soil” which are said to be “geared toward persuading the U.S. public and Congress that it would be imprudent for the U.S. to intervene in a possible China-Taiwan conflagration.”¹⁶⁴ Chinese scholars are also reported to “have concluded that the problems the United States is facing as the conflict in Iraq drags on will have benefits for China’s national security and standing in the world.”¹⁶⁵ In Washington, D.C. the attention of the major power-brokers has not been focused on China, but rather the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Referring to China’s space weapons tests, Senator Kyl said: “There is so much on our plates right now, and we are just so

¹⁶² Willy Lam, “Hu’s Tightening Grip: CMC Personnel Shifts and Increasing the PLA’s Budget,” *China Brief*, May 30, 2007. available online at:

http://www.jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373437

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Michael S. Chase, “China’s Assessment of the War in Iraq: America’s ‘Deepest Quagmire’ and the Implications for Chinese National Security,” *China Brief*, September 19, 2007. available online at:

http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373663

consumed with the discussion of Iraq and the war against the terrorists, that important issues like this are not receiving the attention publicly that they deserve.”¹⁶⁶ This appears to be part of a deliberate offensive realist-style policy on part of the PRC government to seize upon the U.S. weaknesses in the Middle East and South Asia to increase its own relative power.

The U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in his November 2007 trip to Beijing expressed his concern that Chinese-made weapons, from small arms to anti-aircraft missiles to armor-penetrating explosives—which China admits to shipping to Iran, are being increasingly used against U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁶⁷ One senior research fellow stated, “Gates is pretending that he believes the Chinese government doesn’t know what’s going on, or more disturbing, can do nothing about it...But his intelligence analysts believe that these arms transfers are part of China’s national policy, and that the Chinese leadership is perfectly happy that they are being transferred to Iraqi and Taliban insurgents.”¹⁶⁸ He went on to express his belief that the PLA’s support for insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with its close military-to-military relations with Iran, are intended to keep the U.S. preoccupied in the Middle East and less focused on Asia, which allows China to increase its influence and power in the region free of U.S. interference.¹⁶⁹ This is a cogent argument, given that it logically follows

¹⁶⁶ Kyl, February 1, 2007.

¹⁶⁷ Wendell Minnick, “China Watcher’s See Few Gains for Gates in Beijing,” *Defense News*, November 12, 2007, 6.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

the offensive realist thinking evident in a number of other Chinese strategic actions, as before mentioned, including the PRC's exploitation of U.S. vulnerabilities in space to increase its own relative power. Moreover, statements made by Chinese analysts confirm this. It is reported that the PRC's top U.S. expert said in 2004 "that it is beneficial for our international environment to have the United States militarily and diplomatically deeply sunk in the Mideast to the extent that it can hardly extricate itself."¹⁷⁰ However, the PRC's ASAT test of last year was not just the result of cold, offensive realist, geo-strategic calculations, there were also genuine, domestic-political variables that factored into the equation.

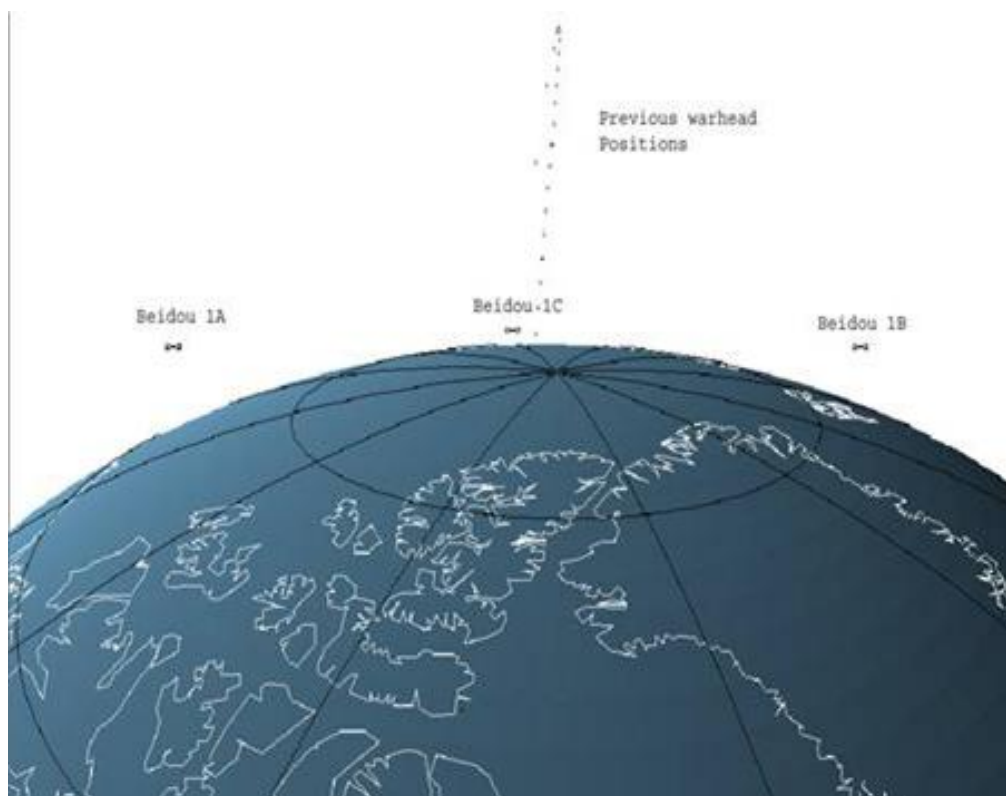


Figure 11: Image of Chinese warhead being guided by *Beidou* Navigation Satellites

Source: www.web.mit.edu

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

4.3 Domestic Motivations: PLA

On the domestic side of the equation, the PLA has, for numerous reasons, a voice within the communist party leadership that resonates far deeper than that of any other branch of the government. And, while the PLA sometimes embarrasses China's leadership and arguably even threatens China's future prosperity at times a la SARS, it does keep the ideologically bankrupt, and therefore vulnerable, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in power. Minxin Pei of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace writes of the "inherent instability in China's authoritarian politics" arguing that because "China's government is one that rests on fragile political foundations, little rule of law, and corrupt governance" the PRC's increasingly at risk of political upheaval.¹⁷¹ For that reason President Hu in his capacity as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's top military authority, has sought to develop close ties with the PLA because come what may, the army is the ultimate guarantor of regime survival. According to Doctor Lam of the Jamestown Foundation, President Hu has been "placing a priority on strengthening his grip over the generals" by adopting his "predecessor's strategy toward winning-or rather buying-the support of the military" and as a result "the armed forces have continued to revel in their status as a 'state within a state.'" Dr. Lam also points out that "as in the days of Mao, Deng Xiao Ping and Jiang, the PLA remains a pillar of support for the CCP in general, and more consequentially, its most seminal

¹⁷¹ Pei Minxin, "Dangerous Denials," *Foreign Policy* (January/February 2005): 56.

faction.”¹⁷² As the Chinese proverb goes: *Qi hu-nan xia* “when you’re riding a tiger, its dangerous to get off.” A study of the history of the modern Chinese army confirms that insight.

As the PLA military historian Xiaobing Li points out, in China “the importance of the civil-military relationship cannot be overstated. When the PRC was founded, the army, rather than the party, was the major vehicle of state expansion.” And he goes on to describe how “when, in 1949-50 the civil administration proved ineffectual as an instrument for nation-building and policy implementation, the country tended toward militarization of policies and administration. The central and local governments came to be largely controlled by the military, and resources were allocated according to military priorities.”¹⁷³ In essence, the PLA built the PRC and saved the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that rules China to this day. And because “the first generation of Chinese Communist military leaders became the founders of the PRC,”¹⁷⁴ and ruled China until Deng Xiao Ping’s death in 1997, one can easily see why the party-military relationship crucial to the rule of Mao and Deng, continues to impact and inform (if not dictate outright) China’s geo-strategic decision making process today at a fundamental level.

It appears that as the result of this situation, and the extreme secrecy that permeates the PRC government, the PLA has such influence that it can take significant actions without notifying other government organs, such as the foreign ministry. This indicates that the PLA may be its own

¹⁷² Lam, May 30, 2007.

¹⁷³ Li, 77.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 79.

powerbase free of intrusive civilian oversight, with a high level of autonomy to conduct its own affairs, and even the ability to dictate policy to a much wider degree than seen in Western nations.¹⁷⁵ But there is a personal side to the story as well, which may shed further light on the PLA's ASAT testing.



Figure 12: PLA soldiers on parade

Source: www.defensetech.org

4.4 Domestic Motivations: Personal and Bureaucratic

It is reported that President Hu has a very close relationship with a PLA General Chen Bingde, and it is likely that this relationship is influencing the direction of China's space policy. General Chen, who was the first military officer President Hu promoted when he ascended to the top of the CMC in 2004,¹⁷⁶ received another big promotion last October at the 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress, becoming the PLA's new General Chief of Staff.¹⁷⁷ According to reports, General

¹⁷⁵ Pollpeter, January 25, 2007.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Lin Cheng-yi, "U.S.-China Hotline a Model for Cross-Strait CBM," *China Brief*, November 29,

Chen, who was almost certainly intimately involved in the ASAT test,¹⁷⁸ is “renowned for his role as the head of China’s manned space flight program, an essential aspect of the CCP leadership’s strategy of prolonging its ‘mandate of heaven’ through the boosting of national pride in the country’s world-class achievements.” He is also “responsible for the country’s ambitious ‘space warfare’ establishment” and “oversaw the development of the Chinese military’s anti-satellite capabilities.”¹⁷⁹ It is not surprising at one level, then, that the PRC would authorize space weapons testing, considering that it came at a time when President Hu was seeking to strengthen his position within the military (and thus the party), and one of his main PLA allies is the commander of the space warfare establishment.¹⁸⁰ Chen Bingde’s promotion is also indicative of the level of satisfaction the PRC’s top civilian leadership took from the PLA’s successful ASAT test. Far from disapproving the diplomatically problematic ASAT test as some have suggested, President Hu’s actions suggest he advocated or at the very least approved of China’s ASAT testing and counter-space weapons developments. However, as Mark Stokes points out, China’s counter space “program has been a national priority” since “at least 1991.”¹⁸¹ Mr. Stokes also pointed out that from a technical/operational perspective, “if the senior military leadership is serious about the operational requirement, then testing was needed.”¹⁸²

2007. available online at: http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373829

¹⁷⁸ Email exchange with Mark Stokes, March 20, 2008.

¹⁷⁹ Lam, May 30, 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Stokes, March 20, 2008 email exchange.

¹⁸² Ibid.

In that sense, then, there were other factors at play in China's decision to test its ASAT weapons, such as bureaucratic momentum.

Looking long-term, it is important to note that making General Chen Bingde the new PLA General Chief of Staff will drastically raise the status and influence of the space warfare community in the Chinese military as General Chen brings up his protégées with him, and places them in positions of power traditionally unobtainable for space professionals. Already a space professional, Zhang Qingwei, has been appointed to the head position at the Commission on Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND); and career space professionals now occupy four out of the eight top positions at the General Armaments Department (GAD), the main pillar of the Chinese defense-industrial complex. Three out of these five space professionals have also become members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, one of the most important communist party organizations in China.¹⁸³ One report states that while, "China's space program has received increasing attention in both budgetary allocations and technological accomplishments" since 2001, more recent "appointments of career space professionals to positions of importance in China's weapons development bureaucracy" indicate "the increasing influence of the program in Chinese decision-making on weapons development. Such influence could help explain China's decision to develop

¹⁸³ Kevin Pollpeter, "The Stars of China's Space Program: The Rise of a 'Space Gang'?" *China Brief*, September 19, 2007. available online at:

http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373661

counterspace capabilities.”¹⁸⁴

It seems clear then that the motivation behind China’s successful ASAT test last year (and three previous covert direct-assent ASAT tests) stemmed not just from an offensive realist, macro-viewed assessments of China’s grand strategy; the decision was also just as influenced by factors pertaining to party-military relations, interpersonal relationships and the Machiavellian approach President Hu is said to take towards domestic political infighting. With a good portion of the top brass reported to have been unhappy with former President Jiang Zemin’s diplomatic approach to Taiwan and Washington,¹⁸⁵ it appears that in order to secure his political helmsmanship, Hu Jintao has leaned ever closer to the PLA in making foreign policy.¹⁸⁶ The testing of a variety of ASAT weapons (including counter-space cyber assaults, ground-based lasers “paintings” and, most obviously, the direct-assent missile that destroyed FY-1C) have not taken place in a vacuum, but rather, represents a larger trend towards the militarization of not just outer space, but also, perhaps, foreign policy in China. Having discussed the multi-faceted motivations driving China’s counter-space efforts in an attempt to answer the question of why China conducted its successful, and precipitous, ASAT test last year, let us now discuss the U.S. response.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Willy Lam, “Hu Jintao’s Move to Consolidate Power,” *China Brief*, September 30, 2004. available online at: http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2372916

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.



Figure 13: PLA Generals at military exercise

Source: www.defensetech.org



Figure 14: CCP propaganda linking party with scientific advances

Source: www.defensetech.org