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- Home Page
 - [«Mirror of the World»](#)
 - [Support the Site](#)
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 - [Iraq-War board rules](#)

- Articles
 - [Iraq News](#)
 - [Around the World](#)
 - [Historical analysis &](#)



- facts
 - [Current analysis](#)
 - [Economics](#)
 - [Hot News](#)
 - [Rankings](#)

- [Forums](#)

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Calendar-Filter

< Jun > < 2008 >

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

Today

China takes on the US - in space

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China takes on the US - in space

By Alan Boyd

SYDNEY - Chinese military experts believe a confrontation in space, probably with the United States, is inevitable. What they haven't said is whether they expect to win.

Two disarmament officials with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) this week accused Washington in an assessment of the global weapons buildup of fueling an arms race aimed at controlling "the commanding heights".

"In the not too distant future, outer space will certainly become a stage for struggle between countries," charged Xu Nengwu, of China's National Defense Science and Technology University.

Simialry, Lieutenant General Ma Xiaotian, deputy chief of staff of the PLA, speaking at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore at the weekend, was less than subtle. He did not mention the US at all (other than including Hurricane Katrina in the list of recent natural disasters), but did identify "expansion of military alliance" and "development and expansion of missile defense system" among the major security challenges the region faces.

The PLA has issued similar gloomy predictions before, usually accompanied by demands for a negotiated disarmament treaty, that were seen as an admission China lacked the ability to compete - and might be using as a cover for its own lagging research efforts.

But since they successfully shot down an obsolete weather satellite with a missile in an outer orbit in January 2007, the Chinese armed forces have been operating from a position of relative strength.

So powerful was the impact from the four-stage rocket, which was traveling at nearly 29,000 kilometers an hour when it struck the satellite, that it scattered debris halfway around the globe. A definite footprint of strategic intent.

No surprise then, that the Pentagon responded in February this year by shooting down one of its own wayward satellites over the Pacific Ocean with a rocket, thus shattering a 1980s undertaking not to conduct antisatellite (ASAT) tests.

Thirty-two countries are known to have a missile capability, including Asian foes India and Pakistan, South and North Korea, Israel, Syria, Taiwan, Iran, Vietnam, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as Russia, China and the US. Any could technically wage a military campaign in space, even if it were limited to ground-to-air strikes.

Most of these countries are signatories to the Outer Space Treaty, an agreement approved by the United Nations in 1967 after tortuous negotiations between the US and the Soviet Union - though China is one of the few nations to fully accede to its provisions.

The Chinese have noted, with support from some peace organizations, that the treaty is a Cold War relic fashioned in an era when the concept of futuristic Star Wars armed orbiters was the preserve of science fiction writers.

Core commitments are that signatories will not place "nuclear or any other weapons of mass destruction", military installations or fortifications in orbit around the Earth or on any celestial body, undertake testing of weapons there or conduct military maneuvers.

Conventional weapons based in space are totally legal. And there is no prohibition on the firing of ground-based missiles into space, as both the US and Soviet Union were developing intercontinental missiles and peaceful space programs when the treaty was signed.

Similarly, there is wide scope for interpreting "weapons of mass destruction"; as US defense officials have pointed out, practically anything that could be propelled into space could be used to ram a satellite without violating the treaty.

China has been at the forefront of efforts to expand the accord; yet even its version,

introduced in the UN as a draft treaty in 2002, falls far short of the moratorium being sought by disarmament groups.

Backed by an eclectic group that included Russia (which superseded the Soviet Union as a treaty signatory), Zimbabwe, Syria, Belarus and Vietnam, the draft proposed the deployment of all space-based weapons. Again, the ground missiles were overlooked.

Perhaps Beijing is only being realistic: there is a legitimate argument for developing missiles for satellite launches and wider space programs. But the powerful conservative bloc in the US sees a more sinister motivation at work.

"Even as it tries to rally multinational coalitions and public opinion to oppose 'the weaponization of space', Beijing quietly continues to develop its own space-based weapons and tactics to destroy American military assets," Heritage Foundation vice president for foreign policy and defense studies, Larry M Wortzel, railed in a commentary.

"China's strategy here is to blunt American military superiority by limiting and ultimately neutralizing its existing space-based defense assets, and to forestall deployment of new technology that many experts believe would provide the best protection from ballistic missile attack."

Last month, Chinese President Hu Jintao sided with Russia in its long-running campaign to block the deployment of a US missile defense system covering much of East Asia that would partly operate from bases in Eastern Europe.

Some analysts believe Beijing is worried the deployment of American space-based interceptors would block missiles the PLA has been upgrading to target what it calls the renegade island of Taiwan and US Pacific bases.

Certainly, the Chinese military apparatus hasn't been sitting on its haunches while its diplomats have been getting all worked up over the Americans. Security analysts say it has poured cash into an electronic warfare capability designed to jam satellite transmissions, developed laser-based weapons and improved its heavy-lift rockets.

The Technology Research Academy has been working on an advanced ASAT weapon called a "piggyback satellite" that would attach itself to an enemy satellite, space station or space-based laser and jam communications or blow up the target.

A generation of mini satellites is being developed that would be so small they would be difficult to detect from the ground. They are said to be defensive, but would still be capable of surveillance, reconnaissance, communications and - theoretically - the destruction of other satellites.

Three mobile space launch vehicles, the KT-1, KT-2 and KT-2A, have been designed to launch the "nano-sats". Pentagon officials say the KT-2 and KT-2A will also be capable of targeting geosynchronous and polar orbits used by US military satellites.

American strategists seized on 2003 comments by Captain Shen Zhongchang of the Chinese Navy Research Institute that he envisioned a weaker military force - presumably China - being able to defeat a superior one by attacking its space-based communications and surveillance systems.

"The mastery of outer space will be a requisite for military victory, with outer space becoming the new commanding heights for combat," Shen is quoted as saying in the US Defense Department's annual report to Congress on the Chinese military capability.

China's antisatellite test last year was probably designed more for political effect than military gain: after all, it has already sent astronauts into space and has a robust intercontinental ballistic missile program. It is likely Beijing was sending a signal to Washington that it could cripple low-level satellites if the US overstepped the mark on the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty, for instance.

There is no doubting the technical gap that still exists between the US and all other potential space combatants, and the Americans do their best to make sure the others about know it.

A 2004 report titled "Transformation Flight Plan" pulled the curtain right back on a bewildering high-tech research strategy that left little doubt the Pentagon wanted complete superiority in space - treaty or no treaty - and was ready to turn it into a battlefield if necessary.

Crucially, the program proposes a shift from protecting satellites from hostile attack to developing an offensive capability, including the tracking and neutralizing of enemy orbiters, and weapons with the ability "to strike ground targets anywhere in the world from space".

Like much that originates from the Pentagon's research boffins,

the report lapses into fantasy at times. There is something called a Hypervelocity Rod Bundles project, widely discredited by scientists, that would fire metal poles from space to targets on Earth. Then there is the sci-fi plan to dangle giant mirrors below airships to deflect laser beams that could be used to cripple satellites or block out communications, if they could be steered to the right location in time.

The US Air Force, which is leading the research thrust, expects to be able to disrupt space-based communications and early warning systems by 2010 and to have air-launched missiles that could intercept satellites in low orbit after 2015.

But these targets were drawn up under a strongly pro-ASAT George W Bush administration that took its inspiration from the strategic vision of defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld. It will be leaving office in November.

As he was taking up his post in 2001, Rumsfeld laid out his intentions to escalate the ASAT race while chairing a commission on space and national security, warning that to do otherwise would risk a "space Pearl Harbor". Rumsfeld argued that the US needed to "vigorously pursue the capabilities ... to ensure that the president will have the option to deploy weapons in space".

Congressmen, sitting on both sides of the political spectrum, have been less enthusiastic. Reluctant to commit money to fantastic weapons that might never work, they have joined forces in the House Armed Services Committee to slash hundreds of millions of dollars from missile defense and ASAT research in the past two years.

Among the scuttled programs was an additional interceptor site in Europe, research into lasers that would target satellites and funding for a space-based missile defense interceptor. Allocations for the high-altitude airships were sharply reduced.

Officially at least, no American president has yet crossed the line and authorized the deployment of a space weapon, but the day is fast coming when it may be unavoidable.

Republican presidential candidate John McCain was cast from the same mold as Rumsfeld on defense issues and will probably keep the cash pot boiling; his Democratic opponent Barack Obama would need a lot more convincing.

Both may be left with little choice if the Chinese stage any more ASAT tests, which many security analysts believe simply harden US public opinion and hand the initiative back to the hawks at the Pentagon.

"Whatever their motivation, there is little doubt it the 2007 test was a miscalculation," said an Australian diplomat. "They miscalculated the US response and of course forfeited the moral high ground after successfully portraying themselves as the voice of the disarmament movement.

"It's also a little hard to ignore China's shipments of missile technology that impinges upon US strategic interests and might even be adapted for future ASAT deployment," he said.

The pro-ASAT lobby contends the US cannot sit on its hands while countries like Syria, Libya, North Korea and Iran, all hostile to American geopolitical influences, are getting missiles capable of threatening US satellites from China and Russia. In Asia, feuding neighbors Pakistan and India have also benefited.

China shipped components for the Fateh-110 missile developed by Iran and also sold it the Tondar-69, which the PLA had designed as the CSS-8. Pakistan purchased parts for its Shaheen and Hatf series from the Chinese, as well as the Ghauri-3.

Beijing has also sanctioned the PLA's defense technology arm to help Iran, Pakistan and North Korea - and reportedly Syria - establish military targeting satellites or space launch programs.

Russia supplied components for Iran's Shahab series, shipped the SS-21s used by both Syria and North Korea, the Scud B used by Libya and the Agri series deployed by India. The Indians also bought parts for their Prithv series and Sagarika from Russia.

In addition, the Russians have their Kondor-E military satellite, designed to guide high-speed supersonic cruise missiles with space-targeting sensors, on sale on the open market.

India, North Korea, Iran and Pakistan, as well as China, have already produced or flight-tested missiles with ranges exceeding 2,600 kilometers, easily within the range of low-orbit satellites.

America satellite defenses have been tested by what Washington terms "unstable regimes", pointing to the increased vulnerability of orbiters that are vital to military communications - not to mention the word economy.

The most extreme confirmed attack took place during the second war with Iraq, when signals transmitted from that country's embassy in Cuba jammed American commercial communications satellite traffic.

According to defense officials, there have also been sporadic attacks on US military satellites from ground-based laser systems. Several versions of these lasers are being exported by both China and Russia.

Citing the incidents, ASAT supporters said these had shifted the space war debate from the futuristic to the present. The issue had now become one of vital national security for the Americans.

"The US cannot allow our space assets to be threatened," the commander of the US Strategic Command, Admiral James O Ellis, warned after the Iraqi attacks.

"We must continue to develop and field space control assets that provide us the ability to use our space systems when and where we need, while denying that capability - when necessary - to our adversaries. To avoid significant 21st century consequences, we must act now to protect and defend America's interests in space."

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