

Rogue Warriors? A Puzzled Look at the Chinese ASAT Test

James Mulvenon

The disturbing period of bureaucratic silence following China's recent anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons test is but the latest in a string of incidents raising questions about civilian control or oversight over the Chinese military. Though little data exists about the internal machinations of the Beijing authorities, this article attempts to posit possible explanations for the apparent lack of bureaucratic coordination on the issue and assess the potential implications for Chinese civil-military relations.

ASAT? What ASAT? Oh, You Meant *That* ASAT!

On 11 January, a Chinese medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) armed with a direct-ascent kinetic kill vehicle (KKV) destroyed a defunct PRC weather satellite, the *Fengyun-1C* (FY-1C). According to open sources, the Bush administration confronted Beijing about the test soon afterward, but received no substantive reply.¹ The White House went public with details of the ASAT hit on 18 January. At the same time, the U.S. government also publicly complained about a 2006 incident in which a Chinese ground-based laser “painted” an American satellite.² At first, the Chinese Foreign Ministry continued to bob and weave, reasserting China's longstanding opposition to weaponization of space but refusing to confirm or deny the test.³ The Chinese Defense Ministry also claimed to be unaware of a test, calling foreign newspaper accounts “hearsay.”⁴ While the Beijing authorities dithered, a senior military academic speaking on 19 January in a newspaper sponsored by the Party flagship propaganda organ tried to downplay the furor, but instead conveyed (inadvertently or not) a sense of military cockiness to the outside world by describing anti-satellite weapons as “ordinary.”⁵

Despite international outcry and non-stop pointed questions from both media and foreign governments, the Foreign Ministry waited another five days to confirm the test,⁶ tepidly telling the world on 23 January: “This test was not directed at any country and does not constitute a threat to any country . . . What needs to be stressed is that China has always advocated the peaceful use of space, opposes the weaponization of space and arms races in space.” When asked about the delay in confirming the test, the Foreign Ministry spokesman responded: “China has nothing to hide. After various parties expressed concern, we explained this test in outer space to them.”⁷ On 8 February 2007, the Foreign Ministry added one more lawyerly element to their stock answer, asserting that the test did not “violate any international treaty.”⁸

To its credit, the PLA gave the world warning of what was to come, but communicated the message through a sin of omission, not a forthright public statement of

policy change. China's latest defense white paper, released in December 2006, did not repeat Beijing's standard mantras opposing the weaponization of space, as had previous volumes. In its 2004 defense white paper, China stated, "Outer space is the common property of mankind. China hopes that the international community would take action as soon as possible to conclude an international legal instrument on preventing the weaponization of an arms race in outer space through negotiations, to ensure the peaceful use of outer space." In its 2002 defense white paper, China was even more strident in its call for a ban on space weapons, stating: "the international community should negotiate and conclude the necessary legal instrument as soon as possible to prohibit the deployment of weapons in outer space and the use or the threat of use of force against objects in outer space." The 2000 and 1998 white papers also included similar language.⁹ A possible reflection of the PLA's new attitude about space weaponization was provided at a World Economy Forum dinner on 25 January by the Academy of Military Sciences' Senior Colonel Yao Yunzhu, a polished English-speaker and well-known "barbarian handler" who often attends foreign security conferences as an official PLA representative. Yao told her dinner companions: "My wish is we really want to keep space as a peaceful place for human beings. . . . But personally, I'm pessimistic about it. . . . My prediction: Outer space is going to be weaponized in our lifetime."¹⁰ Given the high-profile nature of the forum, the extreme sensitivity of the subject (especially so soon after the Foreign Ministry's admission), and the speaker's long and trusted track record of communicating official messages to foreign audiences, these frank comments take on more significance.

The 12 days of silence from the Chinese bureaucracy sparked intense speculation among outside observers that part or all of the civilian leadership and bureaucracy may not have known about the test ahead of time. Indeed, the very leak of the information by the White House was explicitly linked to eliciting further information about the civil-military dynamic surrounding the ASAT test. Sensing that key parts of the Chinese bureaucracy may not have known about the test,¹¹ which was almost certainly conducted by the space-related components of the PLA's General Armaments Department, administration officials informed the *New York Times* that the United States "kept mum about the anti-satellite test in hopes that China would come forth with an explanation." The article quoted National Security Advisor Steve Hadley musing about whether the civilian leadership was aware of the military test: "The question on something like this is, at what level in the Chinese government are people witting, and have they approved?" Hadley further suggested that the diplomatic protests were intended, in part, to force Mr. Hu to give some clue about China's intentions: "It will ensure that the issue will now get ventilated at the highest levels in China . . . and it will be interesting to see how it comes out."

While no public information is yet available about the inner bureaucratic coordination (or lack thereof) preceding or following the test, we can advance at least three analytical hypotheses for testing future data. These hypotheses are not exhaustive, but permit us to structure our thinking about intentions and process, as well as work through the possible implications for civil-military relations.

Speculation 1: The civilian leadership, including Hu Jintao, was completely unaware of the testing program or the specific test.

As chairman of the Central Military Commission, Hu Jintao is the only civilian official with ex officio access to information about military testing programs, but his position alone does not guarantee knowledge about the test. In addition, it is possible that even a civilian-dominated military could hide information from its party overlords, either for pure, impure, or mixed motives. The pure military (but subversive) motive for testing an ASAT in this scenario would be to establish the credibility of the capability for both deterrence and offensive operations, with the goal of convincing skeptics both domestic and international. A mixed or impure motive would be to force the hand of the civilian leadership to approve more aggressive operations like ASAT warfare against high-tech adversaries like the United States in a crisis, such as a Taiwan contingency. Having tested it, military proponents might even believe a successful ASAT capability would likely force satellite-dependent powers like the U.S. to respond with the development of offensive and/or defensive ASAT capabilities, and thereupon secure internal support for continued testing and deployment of new Chinese ASAT systems.¹² In this scenario, the 12 days of silence can be easily explained, as the civilian leadership would no doubt require time to conduct a thorough investigation of military actions, interrogate the key players, and then strategize an internal strategy for reassertion of civilian control and an external strategy for international diplomacy.

The civil-military implications of this scenario are potentially serious, with the strong possibility of senior military officers at multiple levels of the system being cashiered. The personnel moves could be interpreted as a signal to other serving officers in the military, reminding them of civilian control of the military and deterring them from participating in rogue activities. It could also be interpreted as a message to foreign governments, especially if the punishments are publicized, assuring them that civilian control over the military has been restored. If, however, the civilian leadership found out about the program after the test and yet no punishments are forthcoming, one must come to the difficult conclusion that the civilian leadership cannot or does not want to effectively respond, because of concerns for the potential loss of institutional prestige, the possible nationalist blowback from the military and civilian population, or a strategic decision to accept the new strategic reality and move forward.

Speculation 2: As Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Hu Jintao was generally aware of the testing program, but did not know the specific date of the test.

It is not necessary or realistic for the civilian oversight authority of a large, complex military to be aware of every detail of every program. The United States has one of the longest traditions of civilian control of the military, and its senior civilian leaders often have only top-level or at best incomplete cognizance of major R&D efforts. If the R&D program was approved by the civilian leadership, then the motive for the specific successful test was likely pure in terms of military and strategic benefit, but the civilians should be faulted for not maintaining closer oversight of the program and not calculating

the possible negative international diplomatic repercussions of a successful test. In this scenario, the 12 days of silence is less easily explained, since the civilian leadership would not be uncovering a previously unknown program, but simply obtaining more details about a known program. Indeed, the silence strongly suggests genuine breakdowns in internal coordination or even leadership paralysis, exacerbated by the desire to maintain a difficult balance between the perceptions and interests of both domestic and international audiences.

The civil-military implications of this scenario are less serious than the first, but the resulting bureaucratic decisions will also be an effective indicator of civilian leadership attitudes. If military officials are quietly punished, it may only be an internal signal meant to punish specific individuals (such as General Armaments Director Chen Bingde, for instance) for not keeping the top leadership “in the loop” about the test, while retaining the appearance of nationalist unity abroad. If military officials are publicly punished, it might indicate a desire to communicate reassertion of civilian control to foreign audiences and repair some of the damage to the country’s international relations, though this move would contain the high risk of internal nationalist blowback, especially from within the military itself. If, however, no military officials are punished, then it is more likely that the civilian leadership has accepted the existence of the new capability, though they will likely seek more intrusive oversight of similarly significant programs to avoid future crises of this sort.

Speculation 3: Hu Jintao and/or the rest of the senior civilian leadership were aware of the test, but did not anticipate a strong international reaction, either because they had not fully prepared for the possibility that the test would succeed, or because they did not foresee that American intelligence on it would be shared with allies, or leaked.

American silence about the reported three previous failed tests¹³ might have led Beijing to believe that the White House would also remain quiet about a successful test, since publicity would only draw attention to U.S. vulnerabilities. Yet such a decision would be a staggering case of mirror-imaging, with Beijing projecting its own fear of transparency onto another country. Instead, the Chinese authorities should have known that the United States could not have kept the test a secret, even if it wanted to, given the intense attentions of the international space and astronomy community. Moreover, Washington had multiple incentives for going public, not the least of which was a chance to hoist Beijing by the petard of its own stated “principles.” In this scenario, the 12 days of silence is the hardest to explain, since the civilian leadership had plenty of advance notice to prepare contingency plans for various levels of international response to the test. Again, the silence would strongly suggest genuine breakdowns in internal coordination or even leadership paralysis, exacerbated not only by the balancing act described in the second scenario but also a deeply shaken confidence in the leadership’s ability to predict the reactions of international players.

Yet why would a witting civilian leadership approve the test, given the possible negative implications of success? One theory offered by both Chinese¹⁴ and Western¹⁵

observers alike is that China tested an ASAT in order to force the United States to change its previous opposition to negotiating a treaty banning weapons in space. If true, this is a startling misperception on Beijing's part, since it assumes that Washington would reverse its published National Space Policy¹⁶ and decades of public opposition to space arms control. Instead, a better-informed and culturally nuanced analysis of possible American responses would come to the opposite conclusion, arguing that a successful ASAT test would likely strengthen the hands of those within the U.S. system lobbying for more aggressive offensive and defensive ASAT programs. Indeed, the Chinese test has been an early Christmas for these advocates, as it has removed the significant barrier of the informal international moratorium in place since the last known test in 1986.

Yet the 12 days of silence after the test argues against a premeditated desire on Beijing's part to force negotiations of an international treaty banning space weapons. If arms control had been the goal, then the test should have been accompanied by a clear government statement to that effect, not denials and thin rhetoric. By contrast, the Beijing authorities had a presumably coordinated public statement ready on the day of China's first nuclear test in 1964: "The Chinese Government hereby solemnly proposes to the governments of the world that a summit conference of all the countries of the world be convened to discuss the questions of the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons, and that as the first step, the summit conference conclude an agreement to the effect that the nuclear powers and those countries which may soon become nuclear powers undertake not to use nuclear weapons either against non-nuclear countries and nuclear-free zones or against each other."¹⁷ A calculated, coordinated effort to coerce the United States to the negotiating table would have likely have included a similar statement of principles about opposition to weaponization of space.

Conclusion

Of the three scenarios listed above, the second one seems the most plausible and corresponds most closely with the limited external evidence available thus far, but we may never know for sure. Yet even given a scenario where the leadership began with incomplete information, the 12 days of silence from Beijing reinforces the long-held external impression that the Chinese government suffers from a remarkably sluggish and ineffective crisis-management system, despite the negative forcing functions of recent management debacles and years of rumored studies and reforms.¹⁸ Indeed, the Foreign Ministry's continued hewing to its weak line suggests that the system still lacks a coordinated response strategy more than one month after the test. This continuing problem represents one of the gravest challenges to China's management of its "peaceful rise" and more pro-active international diplomacy, suggesting that forthright assertions of Beijing's more "sophisticated" and "nimble" foreign policy may be premature.¹⁹

The lack of comment from the military media about the ASAT test is especially noteworthy. Two weeks after the Foreign Ministry's admission that China did conduct a test, the military media finally published what looked like an authoritative commentary on 2 February, but then it made no mention of the 11 January KKV hit.²⁰ In an article

entitled “PLA ‘Not Involved in Arms Race’,” Deputy Chief of the General Staff (Intelligence) Lieutenant-General Zhang Qinsheng repeated the standard platitudes and tried to push back against international criticism, though in an indirect way: (1) “The PLA’s modernization is open and based on cooperation”; (2) “We do not conceal our intention to build a strong and modern national defense. But we also tell the world candidly that the Chinese defense policy is always defensive in nature”; (3) “The modernization of the Chinese armed forces aims to achieve the ability to defend national sovereignty, security and reunification of the country”; (4) “China has never joined any military alliance, never sought military expansion, nor built overseas military bases”; and so on. General Zhang blamed “a lack of understanding and communication” for “misunderstanding,” “suspicions,” “concerns,” and “even strong criticism of China’s military development.” To correct these mistaken views, General Zhang “welcomed more foreign friends to visit the Chinese armed forces themselves,” and cited the five defense white papers as “pro-active and pragmatic” measures to improve transparency of national defense. Yet the 2006 defense white paper did not pro-actively or pragmatically announce China’s intention to test space weapons for the purposes of greater transparency. While a sin of omission (deletion of mention of opposition to the weaponization of space) is slightly closer to a spirit of transparency than sins of commission (continuing to defend the principle while testing a weapon that renders the principle meaningless), the case of the ASAT test highlights Beijing’s significant challenges in managing international perceptions of “China’s rise,” especially if that rise is coupled with a perception (correct or not) that the military dimension of that rise may not be completely under civilian control.

Notes

¹ On 18 January, National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe confirmed to reporters that the United States Government had confronted Beijing about the test: “The U.S. 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. We and other countries have expressed our concern regarding this action to the Chinese.” On 18 January, the Australian Government also reported little progress in getting answers. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, traveling in New York, told reporters: “So far, the answer from the foreign affairs people in China, including the ambassador in Canberra, is that they are not aware of the incident and they are getting back to us.” See Jim Wolf, “U.S. tells China concerned by satellite-killer test,” Reuters, 18 January 2007.

² National Reconnaissance Office director Donald M. Kerr told reporters that a U.S. satellite had been “painted,” or illuminated, by a ground-based laser in China in late 2006.

³ In an interview with Reuters, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao declined to confirm or deny the incident, but said Beijing wanted no arms race in space: “I can’t say anything about the reports. I really don’t know; I’ve only seen the foreign reports. What I can say is that, as a matter of principle, China advocates the peaceful use of space and opposes the weaponisation of space, and also opposes any form of arms race.” See Chris Buckley, “Concern grows over China’s satellite-killing missile test,” Reuters, 19 January 2007.

⁴ The representative of the Defense Ministry’s foreign affairs office reportedly told AFP: “We are not aware of that test. Usually the media writes stories on hearsay evidence, we don’t have time to verify such stories.” See “PRC Defense Official Spokesman Says PRC Not Aware of Satellite Killer Test,” *AFP*, 19 January 2007.

⁵ Li Wenming, Chang Zhe, Zhang Xuefeng, Duan Congcong, and Shi Hua, “Rash US Conjectures on China’s Antisatellite Weapon,” *Huanqiu shibao*, 19 January 2005. Here is the entirety of the relevant quote

from Major General Peng Guangqian of the Strategic Studies Department of the Chinese Military Science Academy: “The United States has slight neurosis. China already has the capability to send astronauts into space and bring them back; with capability in such precision control of spacecraft, technically speaking, destroying a satellite in space is just ordinary technology. What must be emphasized, however, is that all of China’s space exploration is peaceful and completely responsible, and it is also activity that creates happiness for mankind. China has always advocated the non-militarization of space. So far, China has not carried out any military activities in space.”

⁶ On 19 January, the White House told reporters that it had still not received a reply from Beijing. Deputy White House press secretary Dana Perino said Chinese officials had not yet responded to the concerns expressed by the United States. See Chisaki Watanabe, “Three Nations Join China Test Protest,” Associated Press, 19 January 2007. On 22 January, the Associated Press reported that the Chinese Foreign Ministry had confirmed the test in their 20–21 January meetings with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill. See George Gedda, “U.S. Wants Info on China Missile Test,” Associated Press, 22 January 2007.

⁷ Chris Buckley, “China confirms satellite test, says no threat,” Reuters, 23 January 2007.

⁸ “PRC FM Spokesman: ‘Satellite-Related Test’ Violates No International Treaty,” Xinhua, 8 February 2007.

⁹ All of China’s published white papers can be found here: <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/>.

¹⁰ Edith Lederer, “China Colonel Predicts Arms in Outer Space,” Associated Press, 27 January 2007.

¹¹ See David E. Sanger and Joseph Kahn, “U.S. Tries to Interpret Silence Over China Test,” *New York Times*, 21 January 2007.

¹² This scenario is reminiscent of the plot of the movie *Dr. Strangelove*.

¹³ The first public mention of three previous tests came from CNN Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre. See <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/070118/ldt.01.html>.

¹⁴ For example, a “quasi-official” interview on 25 January 2007 with Teng Jianqun, director of the research department under the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, appeared in the “quasi-official” *Ta Kung Pao*, a PRC-owned newspaper in Hong Kong. In the interview, Teng calls for the United States to abandon its space policy and negotiate a treaty banning weapons in space. See “Chinese Expert Urges the Enactment of ‘Rules for Outer Space’,” *Ta Kung Pao*, 25 January 2007.

¹⁵ While criticizing the Chinese test as “irresponsible,” Michael Krepon and Michael Katz-Hyman also encourage the U.S. government to drop its resistance to negotiating space-related arms control. See “Irresponsible in Space,” *Defense News*, 5 February 2007. Theresa Hitchens of the Center for Defense Information outlines the parallel criticism of what she terms the Bush administration’s “head-in-the-sand position” on space arms control in even stronger terms here:

<http://www.cdi.org/friendlyversion/printversion.cfm?documentID=3800>.

¹⁶ The White House National Space Policy, promulgated in August 2006, is summarized here: http://www.globalsecurity.org/space/library/policy/national/us-space-policy_060831.htm.

¹⁷ Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China,” 16 October 1964, quoted in John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 241–243.

¹⁸ See Michael Swaine, Zhang Tuosheng, Danielle Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007. The book is available here: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=18899&prog=zch>.

¹⁹ Evan Medeiros and Taylor Fravel, “China’s New Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 2003, pp. 22,23.

²⁰ “PLA ‘not involved in arms race’,” *People’s Daily*, 2 February 2007. The article can be found here: http://english.people.com.cn/200702/02/eng20070202_346971.html.