



China and space security: How to bridge the gap between its stated and perceived intentions



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ABSTRACT

There is an obvious gap between China's express intention to be a responsible space actor and the perception of its being a possible or imminent threat to space security. This article identifies the elements leading to the false perception held by some States based on an evaluation of China's space-related controversial events: the ideological and military considerations; the misunderstanding and obscurity surrounding China's space policies and activities; the inaccurate contention of China's non-compliance with its international legal obligations and its lack of expertise and experience in international negotiations. Based on the historical opportunities that the China's current government is facing, the conclusion will be reached at how to bridge this gap through transparency improvement and the establishment of confidence-building measures, including the elimination of military involvement and encouraging commercial exploration and utilization of outer space through national legislation; the improvement of the space governance mechanisms; more effective, targeted and meaningful information exchange and policy dialogue to enlarge cooperation and forge strategic military trust.

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1. Introduction

The danger of weaponization and militarization of outer space has lingered on since the very beginning of space era. Recent years, as a result decades of evolution in the way that humans view and utilize the fragile space environment, there is a growing concern of how to ensure and preserve space security.¹ Meanwhile, after nearly sixty years of pursuing space programs, China has become a tier-one space-faring nation with a wide array of space capabilities. Logically, the international community has becoming increasingly sensitive to China's space policies with military implications and the potential military aspects of its space activities. Remarkably, there exists some serious suspicion about whether China is or will be a responsible space actor with the expanding and deepening development of its space activities.

Beijing consistently emphasizes the peaceful intention of its space program and claims to honor its obligations under the Outer Space Treaty. Its White Papers on Space Activities repeatedly declares that

one of the purposes and principles of its space activities is to utilize outer space for peaceful purposes.² It continuously insists that maintaining a peaceful outer space is the cardinal principle that all space activities must abide by and it is the unshakable responsibility of States to effectively prevent militarization and weaponization of, and an arms race in, outer space.³ Although it is exploring the range of military space capabilities, the primary goal of China's space activities is not to gain asymmetric military advantages.⁴ China has the least intention to start an arms race and every interest to avoid

² The First Section of the 2000, 2006 and 2011 White Paper on China's Space Activities issued by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. See <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps>, 25 February 2015.

³ See the related Statements given by the Chinese Ambassador in the UN framework regarding arms control in outer space, for instance http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t869579.shtml, 25 February 2015.

⁴ China is expanding its space-based surveillance, reconnaissance, navigation and meteorological and communications satellite constellations. The chart on the Satellite launched by China until the end of 1998, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/ztbd/2002-03/25/content_330818.htm, 25 February 2015. Another source of statistics is more updated but less official, see http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_launch_vehicle_list, 15 November 2014. However, the distribution of China's satellites launches does not differ greatly from that found in the US or Soviet/Russian military programs. In fact, China invests more on navigation and communication satellites than reconnaissance and signals intelligence satellites and microsatellites, although the former types pose less of a challenge to space assets and create less of an advantage for Chinese military forces. J. A. Lewis, "China as a Military Space Competitor", in J. M. Logsdon, A. M. Schaffer (eds.), *Perspectives on Space Security*, Space Policy Institute of the George Washington University, 2005, p. 94.

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¹ There are two dimensions in the definition of space security: environmental and military, which overlap to a certain degree. According to the former, outer space, especially the earth orbits are a limited resource and their sustainable use should be secured. The danger posed by orbital debris and the distribution of scarce resources such as orbital debris and radio frequencies are key environmental aspects of space security. The latter mainly concerns how to preserve outer space for peaceful purposes, particularly the prevention of weaponization of space and an arm race in space.

triggering a confrontation in outer space because the top priority in its current grand strategy is economic development. However, the Chinese government's assertions of its peaceful aims carry little weight with some national governments, and there constantly exists concern and criticism about China's purposes and motives for advancing its space capabilities and serious suspicion about whether China is or will be a responsible space actor with the expanding and deepening development of its space activities. According to some, China's diplomatic assurances of its commitments to the peaceful use of space ring somewhat hollow in the face of the steady development of its space program: its space equipment hid military aims and its dual-use space technologies can be adapted to pose military threats to world peace.⁵ In consideration of China's recent advancement in manned space flights and lunar exploration, the international community is more eager than ever to identify its motives and capacities.

The discrepancies between a State's stated intention and others' perceptions regarding its military motivation and capabilities are normal in international relations. But there is an unusually and disturbingly huge gap between China's intended role in preserving space security and the evaluation of the impact of its related space policies and activities. These partially, at least, inaccurate perceptions have dramatically undermined China's reputation and role as a responsible space actor in international community. As a result, international pressure has accumulated with substantial outcomes. For instance, the major space powers strictly control export of space-related technologies and products to China in attempt to thwart Chinese space development. Some countries, mainly the Western ones, adopt a series of technical blockade, isolation or suppression measures against China, including through international mechanisms. Moreover, despite sufficient capabilities, China is not being considered as a key member of the international space society and is facing a bottleneck in expanding its international space cooperation. China collaborates with limited countries in finite fields of space exploration and utilization, such as Russia, the European Union (with whom the cooperation has been slow and restricted), Nigeria and some other developing countries mainly by providing assistance. China is absent from major international space projects, for instance, the International Space Station (ISS), though it clearly expressed interest especially after achieving manned space flights.⁶

Previously, this gap primarily existed between China and the Western world. But it has gone beyond that in recent years because of the expansion of space-faring nations and the exponentially increasing importance of space assets to the daily lives and global economic development. This paper will primarily discuss instances involving the U.S. to illustrate this phenomenon for the following reasons. First, the Sino-American relation is undoubtedly the most important bilateral one in the 21st century, and China's military intentions and capabilities in outer space have emerged as one of the central security issues between these two powers. Secondly, the primary obstacle for China to developing its military strategic trust and expanding cooperation is the United States. The U.S. perceives China's space activities as being a possible or imminent threat to space security. The U.S. military is facing challenges and threats from the development of China's space capabilities and there is an urgent

need to protect space assets and ensure that China will not endanger U.S. national security.⁷ Since 2002, in accordance with the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act, the U.S. Secretary of Defense has published annual reports on military and security development involving the People's Republic of China, and of which China's space capabilities form an important section.⁸ The U.S. Congress passed a bill in April 2011 stipulating that no appropriated funds may be used by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) or the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy "to develop, design, plan, promulgate, implement, or execute a bilateral policy, program, order or contract of any kind to participate, collaborate, or coordinate bilaterally in any way with China". The 2013 National Defense Authorization Act, the result of American export control system reformation since 2009, continued the prohibition on satellite sales or launches by China.

2. The elements contributing to the gap between China's intentions and perceptions

The elements contributing to the gap between China's intention to conduct itself as a responsible space actor and the perception of it being a threat to space security are diverse and include political, military, legal and cultural factors.

2.1. The ideological and military considerations

The end of the Cold War does not signify an end of the ideological considerations. Due to the differences in social regimes, the conservative politicians in the Western world and some other States still hold a prejudiced and suspicious attitude towards China as a socialist country and considered it as a rival. As a consequence of this Cold-War paradigm, there is no strategic confidence between China and the majority of the space-faring nations. The absence of trust and the prevailing suspicion have led to the trend of exaggerating China's real or conceivable space war-fighting capabilities and spurred false speculation of a supposed military space doctrine.

Partially based on perception that China is a black sheep or even a wolf, there is a common view of China as a law-breaker in international matters. Only if China complies with international law to a higher standard than the Western nations, can it ameliorate this suspicion.⁹ The silver lining of this phenomenon is that China's expansion of its participation in the international legal regime reflects to a certain degree China's increasing prominence as an emerging power and willingness to engage other States according to established rules. However, it is highly demanding for a country that has just started its modernhood with its long history and large

⁵ E. Hagt, "Mutually Assured Vulnerabilities", in E. Hagt, Y. Chen (eds.), *China Security-China's Space Ambitions*, 2006(2), p. 93.

⁶ For instance, in 2007, when responding to an American report's question whether China in the future would be more likely to compete or cooperate with the United States of America in outer space, the vice Minister of Science and Technology, Li Xueyong indicated that China wanted to cooperate with the United States and hoped to take part in activities related to the International Space Station, especially as a partner. See http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2007-10/16/content_6890833.htm, 15 November 2014.

⁷ Among others, see J. C. Moltz (ed.), *New Challenges in Missile Proliferation, Missile Defense and Space Security*, Special Joint Series on Missile/Space Issues, Monterey Institute of International Studies, California, 2003. Some American governmental and military officers progressively advocate that China is aggressively pursuing a space program that has military applications; its advances would result in an increased challenge to the U.S. military assets, thereby increasing its cost of any future conflict with China and changing the balance of power in the Asia Pacific and the world more generally by denying others access to outer space. See Statement of Robert C. Byrd, President Pro Tempore of the US Senate and speaker of the US House of Representatives; Statement of Dr. Ashley J. Tellis, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Statement of Mr. William B. Scott, Former Bureau Chief, Aviation Week & Space Technology, in *China's Proliferation Practices, and the Development of Its Cyber and Space Warfare Capabilities*, U.S. – China Economic and Security Review Commission, 20 May 2008, p. v, p. 18 and p. 20; L. M. Wortzel, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Space Warfare: Emerging United States–China Military Competition*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2007, pp. 7–8.

⁸ See <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/china.html>, 15 November 2014.

⁹ B. Saul, "China, National Resources, Sovereignty and International Law", in 37(2) *Asian Studies Review*, 2013, pp. 196–214.

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