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Answering China's space challenge

2007/1/30

By Greg Autry Special to The Baltimore Sun

China recently shot down an aging Chinese [weather satellite](#) -- a signal that China will not abide by the doctrine of U.S. space superiority outlined in the new National Space Policy released in October by the White House [Office of Science and Technology Policy](#).

The policy states that "freedom of action in space is as important to the United States as air power and sea power." Further, it declares that the United States reserves the right to "deny such freedom of action to adversaries." That was a very large bet, and it appears that Chinese President Hu Jintao has quickly called our hand. Which raises the question: What cards are we holding?

The aggressive U.S. position rests on what the National Space Policy calls a "solid civil, commercial and national security space foundation." This foundation was established by a consortium of the military and aerospace giants and is increasingly maintained by a flock of entrepreneurial start-ups. The policy further states, "In this new century, those who effectively utilize space will enjoy added prosperity and security and will hold a substantial advantage over those who do not."

Clearly, China intends to grab that added prosperity. After successful manned launches, it (as well as India) has announced plans to land on the [moon](#) in the same time frame as a scheduled U.S. return. That return is in question as a new Congress looking for easy budget cuts faces a nation apathetic about space achievements. Recent surveys show the U.S. public generally uninterested in the new agenda of the [National Aeronautics and Space Administration](#). My experience suggests they are mostly unaware of recent private manned space efforts conducted by those aforementioned start-ups.

Why should we care about missiles threatening low Earth orbit? When the Chinese get on with re-absorbing Taiwan -- the most likely trigger for a U.S.-China confrontation -- U.S. drivers may find that the [navigation systems](#) in their SUVs (not to mention their ambulances) aren't working. Low-flying U.S. military spy [satellites](#) are the first target of the new weapon, but the slightly higher GPS ([global positioning system](#)) satellites that guide our weapons systems are also attractive to Chinese war planners.

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Or, what about when the censorship-savvy Chinese government decides it has had enough of Howard Stern corrupting the youth and takes out [Sirius satellite radio](#)?



Could we respond to such hostile actions? Certainly, we could file a diplomatic protest, as we did with this month's test and as we do when the Chinese blatantly steal U.S. intellectual property. Beyond that, there's not a lot to be done short of a military assault on Chinese space-launch facilities. Satellites are expensive to launch and nearly impossible to defend. Because they are ultra-lightweight, any sort of physical shielding or anti-missile system is impractical. Orbital mechanics prevent acrobatic maneuvers, and GPS must maintain reliable positions. Don't expect to see concrete enforcement of the National Space Policy.

Congress and the American people must recognize the strategic truth in the policy's warning about prosperity. Prosperity always has been directly related to a nation's level of exploration and innovation. Shakespeare has Brutus remind us that "there is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallow and miseries."

It is not lost on China's leaders that their great nation forfeited world leadership by suddenly abandoning an ambitious program of naval exploration in the 15th century. This withdrawal was followed by a period of painful national humiliation at the hands of foreign barbarians.

That error will not be repeated. China has made it clear that it will aggressively assert its space policy at every turn. The United States must be prepared to compete in space if we intend to remain prosperous and relevant in the 21st century.

Supporting exploration and investing in the new generation of space technology companies are critical to our national security. In the long run, the sands of the moon are far more important than the sands of Iraq.

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