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Satellite Shootdown Was a Necessary Operation

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Earlier this week, over the Pacific Ocean, somewhere off the coast of Hawaii during questionable weather, the Aegis-class Cruiser *USS Lake Erie* successfully shot down the damaged U.S. 193 military spy satellite with an SM-3 missile. Intercepting the tumbling, 5,000-pound, bus-sized satellite was a great achievement for the *Lake Erie* command and crew, the U.S. military, the missile defense community, and the Bush Administration, who announced the real-world operation only days earlier.

Skeptics are wrong to suggest that the operation was in response to China's successful—but unannounced—anti-satellite (ASAT) test on January 11, 2007, in which Beijing destroyed one of its own aging weather satellites in low-Earth orbit. The Bush Administration made the appropriate executive decision after it was determined that the satellite was uncontrollable, unrecoverable, and—due to technical malfunctions—was going to re-enter Earth's atmosphere on March 7, posing a potential threat to human life, property, and the environment.

China's Concerns. In the past week, the Chinese government has repeatedly questioned President Bush's decision. In light of the pending shootdown, representatives from both China and Russia have again cited the necessity of an outer space arms control treaty to prevent what they claim is the unnecessary "weaponization" of space.

Beijing's commitment to a space treaty is suspect considering the circumstances surrounding its own ASAT test, carried out in January 2007. China launched its operation in secret and followed it with two weeks of steadfast denial. The

operation littered outer space with an inordinate amount of debris that may orbit Earth for centuries, endangering peaceful space operations. Make no mistake: China's ASAT operation was a clandestine test of the Second Artillery Corps's evolving *asymmetric* military capability against space assets of potential opponents.

China clearly recognizes they will not be a "peer competitor" of the United States; its military will not match U.S. conventional military capabilities for several decades. As a result, Beijing has undertaken an effort to acquire weapons that will enable its military to challenge the U.S. military by targeting its weaknesses.

In addition to developing cyberwarfare capabilities, China wants to exploit America's architecture of satellites, which it sees as a potential Achilles' heel. Beijing believes that having the capacity to target U.S. space assets will make American leaders more reluctant and less capable of challenging China on the battlefield, if necessary. Further, the strategy behind the Chinese asymmetric capability is both aggressive and indiscriminant. It would permit the use of ASAT weapons that would contaminate important orbits for all nations in order to counter the U.S. advantage in space systems.

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China's power ambitions cast further doubt on the sincerity of its commitment to a space treaty. There would also be serious difficulties in defining "space weapons" and verifying compliance in any arms control agreement.

For the Common Good. By contrast, the U.S. strategy is defensive. The Bush Administration is putting into place a damage limitation strategy designed to protect the American people, U.S. friends and allies, and people around the world against attacks and other threats that pose risks to their lives and well-being. Given the aggressive and indiscriminate Chinese strategy and the defensive nature of the U.S. counterpart, there is no moral equivalency between the Chinese ASAT test of a year ago and the shutdown of the U.S. 193 satellite.

Arms control advocates would prefer to ascribe justification for the fielding and employment of weapons on the basis of the capabilities of the weapons themselves. By this way of thinking, all weapons capable of shooting down satellites are bad. The more appropriate way to address the question of justification is on the basis of the overarching strategic purpose of the weapon in question. The defensive purpose of the SM-3 and its use to destroy the 193 satellite provides more than sufficient justification, both morally and in terms of arms control.

The care the U.S. took in conducting this operation, which was carried out with meticulous planning and execution and included landing the Space Shuttle Atlantis and declaring closure areas, reflects the fundamentally defensive and non-aggressive purpose of a damage limitation strategy. The operation mitigated, if not eliminated, the potential effects of hazardous chemical fuel onboard the satellite, and any long-term space debris is believed to have been destroyed.

Conclusion. The decision to intercept the U.S. 193 satellite will be debated in the months to come by arms control advocates, opponents and proponents of missile defense, and space experts in the U.S. and abroad. Critics will portray the operation as a staged event that was undertaken just to test missile defense or ASAT technologies under the guise of a humanitarian exercise. They will likely accuse the United States of starting a space arms race and will portray the two ASAT tests as moral equivalents.

However, these arguments fail to recognize the vast discrepancies between the two strategies that stand behind the corresponding events. China's ASAT test was a military exercise to demonstrate its ability to execute an aggressive strategy of asymmetric warfare. As such, it does not compare to the transparent and necessary actions taken by the United States in the face of pending humanitarian danger. The U.S. operation demonstrated the defensive and protective features of a damage limitation strategy.

No matter how small the chances that hazardous materials would have reached the Earth's surface without the shutdown, the United States was fully justified and possibly obligated to pursue its chosen course of action. As such, this operation marks an important point in the transition from a Cold War strategy focused on retaliatory deterrence and vulnerability to a damage limitation strategy based on protecting and defending people in the U.S. and elsewhere. Other nations, including China, would do well to consider the merits of the damage limitation strategy. The world will be a better place if they do.

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