

China's Rapid Space Militarization Raises Concerns

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A Long March 7Y4 rocket carrying the Tianzhou 3 cargo ship to deliver supplies to Tiangong space station is launched from the Wenchang Space Launch Center in Hainan Province, China, on Sept. 20, 2021. STR/AFP via Getty Images



By John Mills

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Commentary

Gen. Chance Saltzman, chief of the U.S. Space Force, has given urgent warnings of a rapid Chinese space capabilities buildup.

“The number of different categories of space weapons that [China has] created and ... the speed with which they’re doing it is very threatening,” [said Saltzman](#) during a recent visit to NATO and U.S. forces in Europe.

Using the term “space weapons” is very significant. The [Outer Space Treaty](#), which went into effect in 1967, is one of the remaining grand treaties from the Cold War that remains in force. The treaty states, “States shall not place nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit or on celestial bodies or station them in outer space in any other manner.”

For years, the treaty was often interpreted as meaning that space was to be de-militarized and neutral. However, like the debate over Taiwan, the Chinese regime may be interpreting the treaty in a way that is advantageous to its position. If the regime has a pervasive and effective anti-satellite capability, it may not consider that a “nuclear weapon” or a “weapon of mass destruction.”

‘Mind-Boggling’ Growth in Chinese Space Capabilities

Going further, Saltzman has given statements that China is putting military capabilities into space at a “mind-boggling” pace, which belies an intent to “militarize” space. While some of China’s space development is clearly military in nature, much of it remains ambiguous. Space capabilities are often dual-use, meaning they may be civil but can be used for military purposes. Smartphones would not work without the precision timing given by space-based satellites. At the same time, tactical precision bombs, long-range precision strike missiles, and hypersonic glide vehicles launched from aircraft or intercontinental ballistic missiles also need space-based, precision timing and navigation to hit their targets.



A seminal point in the development of Chinese space weapons was the 2007 anti-satellite weapons test that spooked the world. Saltzman [has identified this event](#) as the pivotal moment on China's pathway to the weaponization of space, regardless of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. This event was a "Sputnik" moment of weapons in space, and prompted the United States to hurriedly match the Chinese test [with the use of an SM-3 missile](#) to destroy a U.S. satellite that Defense Daily described as "out of control."

Other weapons that China may have in space include grappling hooks, lasers, kinetic kill missiles, and secretive space planes that can use other capabilities to destroy, degrade, or snatch satellites. In May 2024, a Department of Defense official referenced an "indiscriminate" nuclear space weapon the Russians have been developing. Still, Saltzman has made it clear that China is the [bigger challenge and concern](#).

"The volume of threats, the diversity of threats that [China] is presenting is a particular challenge," the general told Politico in an October interview.

China may very well be pushing the envelope on the spirit and intent of the Outer Space Treaty by justifying their space weapons as "non-nuclear" or that they are not "weapons of mass destruction."

China Reorganizes Its Space Forces

China immersed its space activities into a unified command called the Strategic Support Force in 2015. This strategic force had a broad scope of oversight, which included space, cyber, electronic warfare, and psychological operations. However, in early 2024, [this command-and-control arrangement was undone](#), apparently due to dissatisfaction with its effectiveness.

Out of this reorganization, four new forces were created: the Aerospace Force (which is the equivalent of the U.S. Space Command), the Cyberspace Force, the Information Support Force, and the Joint Logistics Support Force. These four new "forces" are of lesser stature

than the four Services of the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Rocket Force—but they do report directly to the Central Military Commission, the rough equivalent of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Although China places space as one of its highest priorities, it is interesting that perhaps it has gone backward from the U.S. Command and Service arrangement. U.S. Space Command, the 11th U.S. Combatant Command, was established in 2019 and is led by Gen. Stephen Whiting. This is the “Joint Force” in U.S. terms. The U.S. Space Command is separate from the U.S. Space Force, led by Saltzman, who was cited earlier in this article. The U.S. Space Force trains, organizes, and equips the Guardians who do their operational work in the U.S. Space Command. The former commander of the Chinese Strategic Support Force, Gen. Ju Qiansheng, was one of at least [nine senior general officers](#) who disappeared or were replaced by Chinese leader Xi Jinping between late 2023 and early 2024. The Chinese Aerospace Force now reports directly to Xi, who also heads the Central Military Commission. Under the previous arrangement, the Chinese Space elements reported to the Central Military Commission through the Strategic Support Force.

China’s Lunar Ambitions

Another critical element of the Outer Space Treaty is the peaceful, non-militarized, non-nationalized status of the moon. The treaty states, “The Moon and other celestial bodies shall be used exclusively for peaceful purposes.” It is clear from this language that there are to be no military-related activities on the moon. However, Bill Nelson, the outgoing administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and a former astronaut, expressed concerns about China’s ambitions during an interview with Politico. He warned, “[We better watch out](#),” referring to China’s plans for a crewed landing on the moon by 2030 and its goal of establishing a permanent presence there.

China has already established the [Tiangong permanently manned space station](#), which is roughly one-third the pressurized size of the International Space Station. The Tiangong is a major step on the Chinese pathway to landing on the moon. If the Belt and Road Initiative or the ongoing disputes over territorial waters involving the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and others are any indicator, then China's interests in space will likely conflict with the principles, language, and intended safeguards of the Outer Space Treaty.

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