



Parsing Chinese Perspectives on the U.S. Space Force

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On 20 December 2019, President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2020 and established a sixth branch of the armed forces – the United States Space Force (USSF). On 14 January 2020, General Jay Raymond was formally sworn in as the inaugural Chief of Space Operations at a White House ceremony led by Vice President Mike Pence.¹ Soon after the December announcement, multiple U.S. media outlets reported that the Chinese government openly voiced its opposition to this development through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson, accusing the USSF as a “direct threat to peace and security in outer space.”² It perhaps comes as no surprise that China is not particularly enthusiastic about the USSF against the backdrop of intensified rhetoric and measures taken by the U.S. military to deter and counter expanding Chinese military power in recent years. But more nuanced assessment of what is behind the stern objection from Beijing is needed to help inform the U.S. military planners about the PRC’s perspectives and possible policy responses to the ongoing transformation of the U.S. military.

This article relies on publicly-available Chinese-language materials, from both the official discourse and quasi-official sources such as government-affiliated scholars and analysts, to understand and provide preliminary assessment on the Chinese perspectives of the USSF and the U.S. space activities in general. Two key takeaways can be summarized as follows:

First, the Chinese discourse surveyed by this article is highly coherent on its criticism of the USSF, demonstrating Beijing’s clear intent to discredit and de-legitimize the U.S. military power as a whole through its external military propaganda (军事对外宣传)ⁱ. There are at least four narratives constructed by the Chinese discourse:

ⁱ The PLA sees military publicity/propaganda as a key component of the publicity work of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the state (党和国家对外宣传工作). The Bureau of Publicity of the Political Work Department of the CMC (军委政治工作部宣传局) serves as the leading institution within the PLA to manage the overall military

- Associating the creation of the USSF with the U.S. hegemonic power (霸权);
- Arguing that the U.S. actions will “force (迫使)” other powers (Russia, Japan, NATO, and France, but not China) to employ countermeasures;
- Reiterating that China takes the moral high ground and upholds the 1967 Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies (“outer space treaty”)-whereby implying that the U.S. is violating “the spirit” of the treaty;
- Drawing attention to the negative effects of the USSF over the U.S. military and the society as a whole, such as bloated military budget and the risk of draining resources from other science and technology (S&T) fields.

Second, despite the widely-expressed negative opinions about the USSF, Beijing and its military analysts appear clear-eyed about the significant role space plays in military operations.³ As a matter of fact, almost exactly four years prior to the creation of the USSF, the PLA drastically reorganized its military force structure and established the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Strategic Support Force (SSF/战略支援部队).⁴ The Space Systems Department (航天系统部), under the PLASSF, is widely believed to be China’s own independent force in charge of its key military space programs.⁵ Most recently, the PLASSF had its official debut in China’s grand military parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2019.⁶ Furthermore, Chinese scholars appear to have particularly focused on the development of the U.S. space-based systems, and one key area of the Chinese concern remains to be the space-based missile tracking capabilities and space-based hypersonic defense systems.⁷

Official Discourse

During his regular press conference held in Beijing on 23 December 2019, Geng Shuang (耿爽), a spokesperson of the Chinese MFA, pointedly criticized the establishment of the USSF and the “U.S. space domination strategy (主导外空战略),” and stated that:

“Such moves are a serious breach of the consensus on peaceful use of outer space. They undermine global strategic balance and stability and pose a direct

publicity work. Essentially, external military propaganda serves as an instrument to advancing China’s national security and military strategies. See: Wang Bo (王波), *Military External Propaganda Studies (军事对外宣传研究)*, Beijing: National Defense University Press (国防大学出版社), 2015.

threat to peace and security in outer space. China is deeply concerned about and firmly opposed to this.”⁸

On 26 December, Senior Colonel Wu Qian (吴谦), a spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense (MND), echoed the MFA’s statements, and continued to argue that the USSF will “easily lead to arms races,” and it “seriously threatens the peace and security of the outer space.”⁹ Wu noted:

“The US is citing so-called military threats from other nations as an excuse to build its Space Force. Its intention is to pursue an absolute military advantage in space.”¹⁰

Interestingly, when asked about if the PLA intends to establish a similar independent military service, Wu did not directly reference the newly established PLASSF, which is widely believed to be an independent force providing integrated space, cyber, and electronic warfare (EW) support for the PLA.¹¹ He reiterated China’s official position on supporting the peaceful use of the outer space, while implicitly acknowledged that:

“We pay close attention to the development in space, and we strive to build an air-space defense system (空天防御力量体系) to meet the needs of information-based operations.”¹²

In its report of the creation of the USSF, entitled “The U.S. has embarked on a dangerous journey of space militarization (美国迈出太空军事化危险步伐),” Xinhua News Agency (新华社), the official Chinese government mouthpiece, highlighted that the major challenge faced by the U.S. government after establishing the space force is its military budget.¹³ It also pointed out that the USSF has only received limited funding, which is “far from being enough for creating an independent military service,” more specifically, it wrote:

“Despite that the Department of Defense (DOD) budget of \$738 million has seen a 2.8% increase from its 2019 number, it only appropriated \$40 million to stand up the USSF headquarters. Based on a previous estimateⁱⁱ, the first year of standing up the space force will cost 3.3 million, and it will need almost \$13 billion in its first five years.”¹⁴

ⁱⁱ Although the article did not provide a specific reference for this estimate, it is likely taken from the memo of the U.S. Air Force proposal in September 2018, which was widely reported by the U.S. media.

The same report also included discussions about the U.S. Orbit Test Vehicle (OTV) X-37B, the potential militarization of SpaceX’s “Starlink,” and the U.S. Space Development Agency’s (SDA) next-generation space architecture development plan that was published in July 2019. It noted that the U.S. military’s needs in space will “be geared towards missile defense and offensive space activities (太空对抗).¹⁵

Scholarly Perspectives

Besides official statements, Chinese-language analyses of the creation of the USSF also focus on the challenges and obstacles that the force is facing.



Figure 1: The Chinese caption on the screen reads: “16,000 men, far from being an independent military service” Credit: CCTV Defense Review (防务新观察), 24 December 2019.

Liu Weidong (刘卫东),¹⁶ a research fellow with the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the premier Chinese government think tank focusing on the study of the U.S., penned an op-ed piece for *Global Times* online soon after the USSF creation was announced. While acknowledging that the U.S. will be the first countryⁱⁱⁱ with a space force and it will enhance the U.S. advantage in the military field, he also brought up the issue of budget constraints as one key hindrance for the future development of the USSF. Liu wrote:

“Cultivating a new service will undoubtedly lead to the budget shooting up, but there is only limited room for increase. Besides, Trump’s wall construction along the US-Mexico border, soldiers’ rising wages and the appropriation to the new

ⁱⁱⁱ Technically speaking, Liu’ statement is incorrect. PLASSF aside, the Russian Space Force was originally created in 1992, and in 2015, Russia actually combined its Space Force with its Air Force and aerospace and missile defense force to create what is now known as the Russian Aerospace Forces. See: <https://eng.mil.ru/en/structure/forces/type/vks.htm>

military service will easily result in a higher deficit and will affect US investment in other defense systems.”¹⁷

Coincidentally, in a 2014 interview with *New Culture Daily* (新文化报), a widely circulated provincial newspaper in Jilin, Liu gave an assessment of China’s so-called “asymmetric strategies (不对称战略),” noting that:

“We [China] cannot directly engage the U.S. in an arms race, which will consume significant manpower and resources. Comparatively speaking, the U.S. has obvious advantage in its military power. Hence, we should focus on identifying the U.S. ‘soft belly (软肋)’ ... to ‘achieve large gains through a small investment (以小博大)’ so as to ‘avoid what is strong and strike at what is weak (避实击虚)’”¹⁸

When asked to name specific examples of China’s “asymmetric strategies,” Liu specifically pointed out that anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) can be used as a key military capability (军事能力) to win localized wars under informatized conditions (信息化条件下局部战争), because “space is providing pivotal intelligence, communications, and navigation support for conventional military actions.”^{iv}

The narratives about budget constraints and the “unjust” nature of the USSF are sometimes intertwined. Using colorful languages, a commentary published by the *Science and Technology Daily* (科技日报), the official newspaper of the Chinese Ministry of S&T (科技部), equated the creation of USSF with the declaration of space war, and noted that space warfare, in nature, is “not only about installing robotic arms on satellites or launching laser weapons into space, it is a high-technology, system-of-systems force-on-force [exercise] (高科技体系对抗) that brought together all of mankind's wisdom and achievements.”¹⁹ It then depicted space warfare as a “bottomless black hole” which will “drain valuable S&T resources, disrupt and delay S&T development in other fields, and even adversely impact the destiny of the entire humankind.”²⁰ The author wrote:

“Space belongs to the entire mankind; it does not belong to any particular country. No country should be ‘above’ world security, nor should it ‘open the

^{iv} The other two examples that Liu identified were: anti-ship ballistic missiles that are capable of hitting U.S. aircraft carrier deployed in the Pacific, advanced conventional attack submarines, as well as Russian-made destroyers equipped with advanced anti-ship cruise missiles.

Pandora's box of war.' Such acts will disrupt the balance among major powers, pose a threat to other countries' satellites, and diminish other country's capability to deter and prevent (遏制) wars, and it will lead to new rounds of arms races."²¹

Senior Colonel Fang Bing (房兵), a military instructor at the PLA's National Defense University (NDU/国防大学) and popular military commentator known for his polemic style, went even further and claimed that the USSF will be used to carry out offensive operations in space and "it is set up to provide platforms for integrated reconnaissance and strike (察打一体)."²² Another PLA strategist, Fang Xiaozhi (方晓志), from the PLA's National University of Defense Technology (NUDT/国防科技大学), also noted that the U.S. military has been strengthening its space operational capabilities for years, and it has invested heavily in offensive space weapon systems, including a number of key weapon platforms such as unmanned space aircraft, ASAT and space-based strike weapon systems (天基攻击武器系统).²³ In the long run, Fang claims that the U.S. will most likely deploy nuclear weapons into space and seeks to use its space power as a complement to nuclear and cyber deterrence, and he also believes that creating USSF is one of President Trump's military reform objectives, and it is conducive to "freeing the development of U.S. space activities from stovepiping of different military services" so as to achieve its "space dominance," and it is an important measure for the U.S. to grasp space hegemony (太空霸权).²⁴ However, this "will almost certainly accelerate space militarization and extend military competition from within the earth atmosphere to the outer space" and "provoke other countries, particularly Russia, to follow suit and lead to a new round of space arms race."²⁵



Figure 2 SCOL Fang Bing discusses USSF (Credit: js7tv.cn)

China's Key Concerns

Almost all of the official Chinese discussions about the USSF avoid the topic of its direct implications for China or how Chinese military should respond to the U.S. military transformation. Pundits in China also remain tight-lipped about China's own military space capabilities. A brief survey of Chinese writings on the specific U.S. proposals with regard to strengthening its space-based capabilities, however, shows that Chinese scholars and the think tank community remain specifically concerned about the ongoing U.S. policy debates pertaining to the space-based missile defense systems.²⁶ To be sure, China's concern about U.S. missile defense is not new. In fact, Chinese analysts carefully studied the implications of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, or "Star Wars") in the early 1980s. The defense R&D establishment began internal analyses in the early to mid-1990s, focusing on missile defense and its impact on China's security interests.²⁷ Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the publication of the *2019 U.S. Missile Defense Review (MDR)* drawing attention to China's offensive missile capabilities²⁸, and the official U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty, that Chinese military planners have come to the conclusion that the creation of the USSF – and possibly the kinds of space-based systems the MDR explicitly discusses - is an extension of the U.S. expansive missile defense strategy against Beijing.²⁹

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other US government agency.

Endnotes

- ¹ Rachel Cohn, "Raymond Sworn in as First Space Force Chief," <https://www.airforcemag.com/raymond-sworn-in-as-first-space-force-chief/>
- ² Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on December 23 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/t1727079.shtml
- ³ See, for example, Shou Xiaosong (壽晓松) ed. *Textbook on Strategic Studies* (战略学教程), Beijing: Military Science Press. 2013. P.266. *Science of Military Strategy* (战略学), Beijing: National Defense University Press. 2017. P.144.
- ⁴ For more information about the PLASSF and its possible warfighting functions, see: Marcus Clay, *Supporting the Infinite Battlefield*, CASI, February 2019; John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, INSS, National Defense University, September 2018. Kevin L. Pollpeter, Michael S. Chase, and Eric Heginbotham, *The Creation of the PLA Strategic Support Force and Its Implications for Chinese Military Space Operations*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2058.html. Also available in print form.
- ⁵ Kevin L. Pollpeter, et al., *The Creation of the PLA Strategic Support Force and Its Implications for Chinese Military Space Operations*.
- ⁶ Chen Gang (陈刚), Zhe Mingjia (者鸣佳), Han Fuye (韩阜业), "Strategic Support Force formation: fusion and stride, gathering the new forces (战略支援部队方队:融合跨越,凝聚新力量)," *PLA Daily*, Accessed at: http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2019-10/02/content_4852073.htm
- ⁷ See, for example, Fang Yong (方勇), "The U.S. space-based missile early warning and tracking system (美国天基导弹预警跟踪系统发展动向)," *Space International* (国际航天), August 2017, pp.35-41. Fang is affiliated with Beijing-based Chinese National Defense Science and Technology Information Center (中国国防科技信息中心), which is under the reformed CMC Science and Technology Commission. Zhang Qiang (张强), "Space-based infrared early warning satellite, tireless space 'sentinels' (天基红外预警卫星, 永不疲惫的太空“哨兵”)," February 2018, *Science and Technology Daily* (科技日报), accessed at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-02/07/c_129808061.htm
- ⁸ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on December 23, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/t1727079.shtml
- ⁹ MND Regular Press Conference on December 26, 2019, http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2019-12/26/content_4857590.htm
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Qiu Yue (邱越), "What kind of military power is our Strategic Support Force (我军战略支援部队是一支什么样的军事力量)?" *Renmin Net*, January 6, 2016. Accessed at: http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2016-01/06/content_4641635.htm
- ¹² Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on Dec. 26, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-12/27/content_4857662.htm
- ¹³ Zhou Zhou (周舟), "News Analysis: The U.S. has embarked on a dangerous journey of space militarization (美国迈出太空军事化危险步伐)," http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2019-12/21/c_1125372996.htm; See also: Liu Weidong, "Will US Space Force take hegemony to cosmos?" December 31, 2019. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1175302.shtml>
- ¹⁴ Zhou Zhou, "News Analysis: The U.S. has embarked on a dangerous journey of space militarization."
- ¹⁵ Ibid. See also: "The U.S. Space Force is about to come, risks of frictions in outer space have increased (美国“太空军”呼之欲出 天外摩擦风险加剧)," *S&T Daily*, September 03, 2019. Accessed at: <http://news.cctv.com/2019/09/03/ARTIKU3EZqdITFV8rPmCfFgH190903.shtml>
- ¹⁶ According to the cached page of Liu's profile on the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Liu Weidong (b. 1968) was also a visiting scholar at American University in Washington D.C. and Aoyama Gakuin University. His research covers U.S. domestic politics, China-U.S.-Japan relations, Korean nuclear issues and Xinjiang issues. http://news.ifeng.com/opinion/special/kuaiping/xinjiangkongbu.shtml?_newshao123 https://baike.baidu.com/reference/23321719/86b4K_g8UbRpTY--eEm1FACb1Th1qdEnS7ZUGSUCFvNc4k_O8OdIRhzC2rFPui5-CeWFnegj082uC6mNw9ANrF3xm6lL_W8q
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²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “USSF is set up for defense? Fang Bing: Integrated Offence and Defense (美国太空军为了防御? 房兵: 攻防一体化),” CCTV9, “Military Vintage Point (军事制高点),” 20191229, Accessed at: http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202001_203124.html

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²⁵ Ibid

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