RESEARCH SUMMARY

China's Growing Risk Tolerance in Space

People's Liberation Army Perspectives and Escalation Dynamics

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ISSUE

Chinese leaders see themselves in competition with the United States to build military power in space. The ongoing development of U.S. and Chinese capabilities could lead to unstable competition in space, raising the risk of rapid, and perhaps unintended, military escalation.

APPROACH

This report surveys open-source literature across the Chinese defense enterprise to present a composite image of People's Liberation Army (PLA) perspectives and key factors for U.S.-China crisis stability in space. It draws on authoritative Chinese writings to understand Chinese perceptions of threats from the United States by reviewing Chinese publications on U.S. intent and capabilities in space. The report additionally traces the evolution of PLA thinking on escalation dynamics in space over the past two decades. The authors assess the challenges facing U.S. officials looking to manage U.S.-China crisis dynamics in space.

KEY FINDINGS

The analysis in this report yielded the following findings:

- Chinese leaders perceive a global trend in which China is in the process of replacing the United States as the world's dominant power. In this perspective, the United States is a dominant but declining power that is likely to lash out against rising powers and implement strategies to extend its status by undermining Chinese development, including by inflating the threat of China as a pretext for militarization across domains, including in space.
- Authoritative PLA literature makes clear that space deterrence, like all PLA deterrence, contains both deterrent and compellent elements, ultimately meant to coerce an enemy into submission to Beijing's political objectives. The literature informs the PLA's established escalation ladder, up to and including the use of lethal force. The PLA's approach to deterrence and escalation in space prioritizes securing political objectives over avoiding conflict. Beijing could initiate conflict activities if it judged the political risk of inaction to be greater than the military risk.
- Chinese leaders harbor deep suspicions of the United States and begin with an assumption of both great malice and great capability when assessing threats posed by the United States in space. As a result of these

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suspicions, Chinese leaders have inflated perceptions of U.S. threats and adopted a policy approach that resists cooperating with the United States to arrest unintended crisis escalation.

- Contemporary PLA research is significantly more risk tolerant than authoritative PLA professional military education published in 2013, which was likely generated prior to Xi Jinping's term as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary. Research published since 2013 emphasizes Xi's guidance to be more proactive in shaping the international environment, including by accepting higher but carefully calibrated levels of risk of unintended escalation.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this report suggest key implications for the U.S. government, the joint force, and the U.S. Space Force (USSF):

- PLA researchers see crisis communications mechanisms as leverage-bearing tools. Because Chinese leaders view the United States as prosecuting hegemony-maintaining strategies against China, Chinese leaders tend to interpret U.S.-led efforts to establish crisis communications mechanisms or broader space norms as tools to control China's behavior. Therefore, Chinese leaders claim that it is not in China's interest to engage in such efforts with the United States.
- Without the direct means for arresting unintended crisis escalation in space, U.S. officials responsible for managing U.S.-China crises in space will likely need to adapt to compressed decision cycles with little communication to achieve a version of stability that Chinese leaders will tolerate. Moreover, U.S. officials will likely need to do so without expectations of cooperation with the PLA.
- U.S. officials should avoid investing costly efforts or making significant policy concessions to establish crisis communications mechanisms with the PLA. Given the CCP's history of aversion to crisis communications with the United States, PLA overtures to discuss such mechanisms might not be made in good faith. Nor are communications mechanisms focusing on safety likely to be upgraded into crisis communications mechanisms affecting security. Instead, such overtures will likely be efforts to bait the United States into sinking time and energy into endless negotiations.
- The PLA's push to proactively shape its strategic environment indicates that USSF will face a bellicose PLA eager to assert itself in space during peacetime, although the PLA remains unlikely to escalate in a way that risks its political imperatives. USSF should anticipate that PLA provocations in peacetime likely comprise a new normal in day-to-day space operations that involve China.
- Still, the PLA's proactive steps and higher risk tolerance remain subordinate to political decisionmaking. In interpreting PLA messaging, USSF operators should anticipate that the PLA is not likely to take proactive, escalatory steps in a crisis if those steps undermine its ability to prosecute such politically imperative missions as a war over Taiwan. Though PLA operators might consider the space domain sufficiently stable for escalatory actions, they might not view political circumstances to be as permissive.

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