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The geopolitical genius of China's satellite kill

By Victor Mallet

China's successful launch of a ballistic missile this month to destroy a satellite in orbit has been variously portrayed by defence analysts and commentators as a damaging blow to Beijing's relations with Washington, a sign that China has overreached itself and just "a big mistake".

These conclusions suggest **a fundamental misunderstanding** of how Chinese leaders have behaved in the past, how they will behave in the future and how they will probably continue to get the better of their western counterparts in the chess game of international diplomacy.

On this occasion, as before, China has put into practice a ruthless, rational and legally defensible strategy that exploits a key weakness of the world's biggest economy and sole military superpower.

For years – a period coinciding with the rise of China – the US has failed to provide moral or political leadership in tackling the big challenges facing humankind, whether they concern global warming or the peaceful use of space. Crucially, the US has been reluctant to subsume its national interests into multinational efforts to benefit the wider world.

China's destruction of an obsolete weather satellite, similar to past tests conducted by the US and the Soviet Union, exploits this failure. Both China and Russia have for years urged the US to agree to a ban on space weapons and the use of force against satellites, but the US refused to negotiate, instead announcing a policy last year that boldly asserts US national rights in space.

What is surprising about the Chinese test is that anyone was surprised. As the office of Tony Blair, the UK prime minister, conceded, the test "does not contravene international law".

Sure of its ground, the Chinese government – after a test whose only aim was to prove it could obliterate enemy satellites in low earth orbit – even had the gall to declare that "China has never, and will never, participate in any form of space arms race". This was no more truthful than President George W. Bush's insistence that "we do not torture" detainees.

The militarisation of space is only the latest area in which an increasingly assertive China has taken advantage of the typical US approach to critical issues of global importance since the end of the cold war. **The US is so protective of its sovereignty and complacent**

about its power that it often refuses to adhere to accepted international norms or contemplate an international regime that might constrain its room for manoeuvre.

There are at least three areas in which China is happy to ride on America's coat-tails and the first is human rights. Until the US began detaining people without trial at Guantánamo Bay five years ago, it was possible for US politicians, without hypocrisy, to criticise Chinese Communist leaders for jailing their political opponents. The US could exert real influence on Chinese behaviour. Exchanges of presidential visits between the two countries were in those days preceded by the ritual release of Chinese dissidents into US care; today such visits are more likely to be marked by the ritual purchase of Boeing aircraft as part of China's efforts to reduce the US trade deficit.

Chinese officials are not shy to point out Washington's selective approach to human rights. They do not see why resource-hungry China should not support dictatorships in Burma and Zimbabwe if the US does the same in Pakistan, central Asia and west Africa. Nor is there any obvious reason why China should not use its United Nations Security Council veto to protect allies such as Sudan from sanctions when the US does the same for its protégés, including Israel.

The second issue is economic nationalism. China, along with several other Asian nations, is rightly accused of using dubious stratagems – including peculiar product standards and health and safety scares – to protect its domestic market from foreign competitors. Yet whenever this issue is raised, China has only to recall a two-year-old dispute that still rankles with Chinese officials: CNOOC, the state-controlled oil group, was stopped from buying Unocal, the US oil company, on spurious national security grounds.

Third is the environment. True, air pollution from China has been detected on the US side of the Pacific and Chinese industrialisation threatens the global environment. But why should China take action when the US, still the world's biggest contributor to global warming, has refused to adopt the Kyoto protocol on climate change and has barely begun to take the matter seriously?

Notwithstanding Mr Bush's call for lower US petrol consumption in his state of the nation address on Tuesday, fuel economy standards for new vehicles are more stringent in China than in the much wealthier US.

If China is to be held to account for its actions – whether in polluting the world, persecuting its dissidents, supporting dictators or disturbing the peace in space by blowing up satellites – the US must re-arm itself with credibility, moral conviction and a willingness to help craft and then submit to international law.

China is not the only nation to have taken advantage of the plight of the US since it became obsessed by Iraq and Islamic fundamentalism. Authoritarians everywhere – from Russia to Venezuela – have done the same. This month's satellite kill, however, is another sign that no big nation has learnt to play the game of geopolitics as skilfully as China.