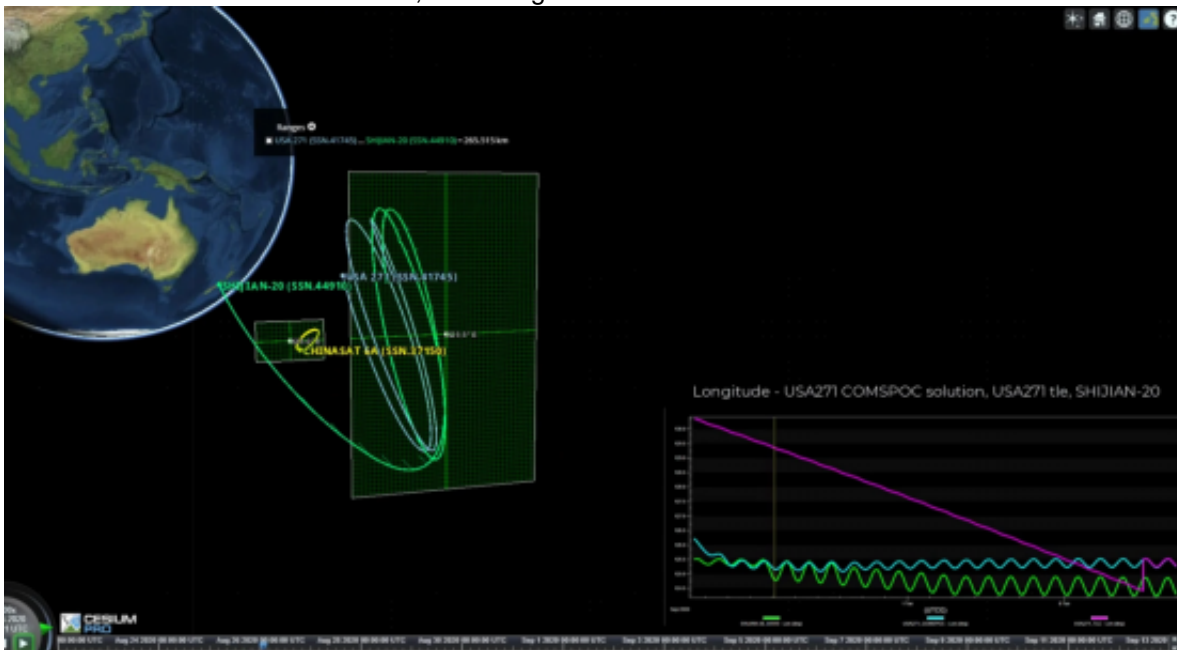


China has demonstrated the ability to track and maneuver a satellite with a remarkably high degree of precision, allowing the Chinese military to spot a US satellite moving close and then to redirect its own satellite away from the US bird in little more than 24 hours, according to never-before-seen video recreations.



In a July 2021 incident, USA 271, a space surveillance satellite developed covertly by the Air Force and Orbital Sciences, approaches Chinese satellite SJ-20, the PRC's heaviest and one of its most advanced satellites. The US satellite, part of the Geosynchronous Space Situational Awareness Program (GSAPP), shadows the Chinese bird in parallel. But then the Chinese clearly detect the US satellite and rapidly move theirs away. (Pro tip: If you look closely, you can see how close the two satellites are by looking under "Ranges" in the video below.)

China certainly isn't alone in its ability to move its satellites and control them. Russia and the United States have both demonstrated this capability numerous times. Of course, as veteran space watchers know, there can be multiple applications for a satellite that can move with precision.

"There are good things happening in space today that includes things like on-orbit servicing, refueling, end-of-life disposal; all of those types of operations require satellites to get very close to and in some cases to dock with each other," Cooper said. "But [...] you can also do intentionally nefarious or threatening things with that same type of technology. What's the actual intent as we watch this?"

Cooper said intent is "definitely" something Space Force and Space Command are concerned about.

"With that idea of space domain awareness comes understanding of the intent of the activities that they're seeing," he said.