

## Art meets life

Shanxi sculptor's clay creations prove popular with local residents **CHINA, PAGE 6**

Road map highlights green energy

**BUSINESS, PAGE 14**



## Worrisome winter

US freeze on financial assets compounds Afghans' woes

**WORLD, PAGE 12**



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## Near miss in outer space prompts call for US respect

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China on Tuesday revealed that its space station has had to avoid two collisions with SpaceX satellites, and called on the United States to respect the international order in outer space and to safeguard the safety of astronauts in orbit.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian made the remarks while confirming that China's permanent mission to the United Nations had submitted a note verbale to the UN secretary-general for safety reasons earlier this month.

Starlink satellites launched by SpaceX of the US have had two close encounters with the Chinese space station, which constituted dangers to the life and health of astronauts, the note said.

Out of security considerations, the Chinese space station implemented collision avoidance control in July and October, Zhao said.

"The Outer Space Treaty that entered into force in 1967 is a universally recognized cornerstone of international law in the field of outer space," Zhao said.

The US talks about the concept of responsible behaviors in outer

space, yet in practice it ignores its obligations under the international treaty and has posed severe threats to astronauts, which is a typical double standard, he stressed.

Under the treaty, astronauts are regarded as envoys of mankind and their safety should be respected and protected by all countries, he said.

State parties to the treaty shall immediately inform other states or the secretary-general of the UN of any phenomena they discover in outer space that could constitute a danger to the life or health of astronauts, the treaty says.

It also stipulates that states shall

bear international responsibility for national activities in outer space, whether such activities are carried out by government agencies or non-government entities.

In order to fulfill the obligation of the treaty and protect astronauts' safety, China notified the UN secretary-general of the dangerous situations as well as the measures China had taken, and asked the secretary-general to circulate relevant information to all state parties to the treaty, Zhao said.

The US should immediately take actions to avoid a recurrence of the incidents, Zhao added.

### To The Point

## Close encounters of a potentially tragic kind

Elon Musk has become a target of Chinese netizens' ire after reports that the Chinese Permanent Mission to UN and other International Organizations in Vienna sent a note verbale earlier this month informing the secretary-general of the United Nations General Assembly of two close encounters China's space station has had with SpaceX Starlink satellites, "which constituted dangers to the life or health of astronauts" aboard the Chinese space station.

Between May 16 and June 24, the Starlink-1095 satellite descended from an orbit altitude of 555 kilometers to an orbit of around 382 km, forcing China's Tianhe space station core module to conduct an evasive maneuver on July 1 to avoid a potential collision.

On Oct 21, the maneuvers of the Starlink-2305 satellite brought it into dangerous proximity to the space station, forcing the latter to again perform an evasive maneuver to avoid the risk of collision.

SpaceX is yet to respond. However, this isn't the first time the company's satellites have posed a risk to astronauts. The US space agency NASA called off a scheduled space walk in November due to risks posed by Starlink satellites, which the company "had to shift to reduce the probability of collision,"

Musk tweeted. "Not great, but not terrible either."

However, the potential outcome of a collision would be terrible no matter how much Musk tries to downplay the risks. Any collision between a satellite and a manned spacecraft would likely prove fatal to the astronauts on board. Even if two satellites collided, it would cause dangerous space debris.

According to research by the Astronautics Research Group at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom, Starlink satellites alone are involved in about 1,600 close encounters between two spacecraft every week, accounting for about half of all such incidents. And there are many small satellites in space, not only those of Starlink, but others, which, if not well controlled, would almost inevitably lead to a collision of some kind.

According to the UN Online Index of Objects Launched into Outer Space, the total number of objects launched into space is 12,017, of which 5,860, more than one-third, belong to the United States.

The Chinese document calls for all parties who are utilizing space, whether government agencies or nongovernment entities, to do so responsibly. That is a call that must be heeded to prevent a space tragedy.

—ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY