

Giant Chinese Space-Tracking Ship Makes Rare Visit

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A big Chinese space-tracking ship bristling with satellite dishes is on a rare but low-key visit. The 21,000-tonne Yuan Wang II and its 470 crew are stocking up on supplies in Auckland after a month in the Pacific, reports The New Zealand Herald.

The vessel was monitoring a five-day flight of the Shenzhou 6 capsule and its two astronauts.

The Chinese consulate in Auckland was guarded yesterday about the purpose of the week-long visit of the Yuan Wang II, saying it was unable to confirm the ship's involvement in the space programme.

But the People's Daily online edition was clear about the involvement of the ship and three others of its class in tracking the space capsule, running into bad weather in all three oceans where they were posted.

The head of the monitoring programme was quoted as saying the four ships had to readjust their positions in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans to ensure "the fulfilment of their tasks of tracking, measuring and remote controlling of China's second manned spacecraft".

An Auckland consulate official said the visiting crew were not military personnel but "scientific workers", and most were staying on the vessel during the visit here.

Their unannounced visit is in contrast to that of a warship in 1998. Hundreds of Auckland's Chinese community flocked to welcome it,

although pro-Tibetan protesters prompted that vessel's naval band to cancel a public performance.

Although unarmed, the 26-year-old Yuan Wang II - listed in Jane's Fighting Ships as a "space events ship" - is bristling with satellite dishes and scanners.

According to the authoritative US intelligence website GlobalSecurity.org, the fleet of tracking ships relayed 212 remote orders to China's previous manned spacecraft.

They had in their time also monitored an intercontinental ballistic missile test and satellite launches.

The website said the ships had made "a great contribution to China's science and technology development as well as weapons and equipment development" by measuring the trajectories of long-range missiles and satellites.

But Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade spokeswoman Emma Reilly said approval was granted for the visit to Auckland after her organisation confirmed the ship was "not of a military nature".

The consulate staff member told the Herald before attending a reception on the ship that he had not been told officially what it was doing in Auckland but understood from crew members that it had been at sea for a month and needed to stock up on food and water.

Waikato University security analyst Ron Smith said it was inevitable and understandable that a ship of its capability would conduct some level of electronic surveillance wherever it went, but he was unconcerned about the visit.

Dr Smith said the ship could probably find out all it needed to know about this country's defences from outside New Zealand's territorial waters in any case.

Given China's emergence as a major power in the region, and New Zealand's desire for closer economic relations with the people's republic, he said, "we should be welcoming a Chinese ship".

A Navy spokeswoman across the water at Devonport, where the only frigate to be potentially noticed by the Chinese is under maintenance in dry dock, said security had not been changed there as a result of the visit.

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