Enhancing Sino-American Military Relations

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ENHANCING U.S.-CHINA MILITARY RELATIONS

by

David Shambaugh

As Sino-American relations have begun to stabilize in the wake of reciprocal presidential visits in 1997-98, the security and military components of the relationship are gaining greater prominence. The two governments have agreed to forge a "constructive strategic partnership for the 21st century," and "strategic dialogue" concerning regional and global issues has become an important element in improving bilateral ties. The Chinese and American military establishments are concomitantly engaged in establishing confidence building and security enhancing measures aimed at improving mutual trust and understanding, while decreasing tensions and avoiding an unnecessary slide into an adversarial relationship.

This short study examines the emerging military-to-military relationship, traces its evolution during the decade, discusses the accomplishments and impediments to date, and considers potential future developments. Although defense ties between the United States and China can be expected to grow or atrophy in tandem with the overall bilateral relationship, the military sphere presents special policy considerations for both sides and for other actors in the Asia-Pacific region that warrant careful monitoring and management.

The Ebb and Flow of U.S.-China Military Exchanges

After developing rapidly and extensively during the 1980s, Sino-American military relations have had their ups and downs during the 1990s. The decade began with their complete suspension following the People’s Liberation Army’s actions on June 4, 1989. As the freeze in bilateral relations began to thaw slightly in 1993, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Chas Freeman was dispatched

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1 CAPSTONE delegations from the U.S. National Defense University were never formally suspended, and resumed quarterly visits in 1991.

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to Beijing in November in an effort to jump-start military exchanges. Freeman's initiative was successful and immediately bore fruit. It set in motion a series of exchanges during Secretary of Defense William Perry's tenure. Both sides wished to rebuild the defense relationship gradually, but it quickly (and quietly) picked up momentum. An initiative to locate U.S. servicemen missing-in-action (MIA) from the Second World War, and a Joint Commission on Defense Conversion, were begun. Exchanges between the two National Defense Universities and some service staff colleges were resumed, and a series of high-level and service exchanges took place:


Just as bilateral military exchanges were gaining momentum and some degree of mutual trust and confidence was being restored, they were derailed by renewed tensions over Taiwan. In May 1995 the PLA cancelled the planned visit by Air Force Commander Gen. Yu Zhenwu and suspended other exchanges in response to the private visit to the United States of Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui. Although the Chinese received the U.S. NDU CAPSTONE delegation as planned in late-May, no exchanges took place until July when a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers delegation went to China. The tensions in the relationship during this period were palpable.

During the autumn and winter of 1995-96 tempers cooled, and it looked as though exchanges were back on track—including visits to China by the Under Secretary of Defense, two Assistant Secretaries, the Chief of Naval Operations, a series of NDU delegations, and a port call by the *USS Fort McHenry*. The PLA sent the Guangzhou Military Region Commander to Hawaii for the 50th anniversary of the Japanese surrender and end of World War II in the Pacific, and a General

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2 While in office, and subsequently, Perry has displayed unusual personal commitment to advancing the U.S.-China defense relationship.
Logistics Department delegation toured the U.S. But then the PLA undertook its second round of provocative missile "tests" and live-fire exercises near Taiwan in March 1996 (the first round took place in July 1995). This round was meant to intimidate Taiwanese as they went to the polls for their first-ever direct presidential election. This time the United States reacted by curtailing defense exchanges. Secretary of Defense William Perry was incensed enough with the provocative Chinese behavior that, on instructions from the President, he ordered two aircraft carrier battle groups into the waters off Taiwan as a demonstration of U.S. resolve. For the U.S., China's promise to "peacefully resolve" the Taiwan issue has always been a core condition for the joint management of the Taiwan question; the missile firings within 30 miles of Taiwan's two principal ports and large-scale air, naval, and amphibious exercises in the strait mandated a firm American response. Although there was no real threat of Chinese military action against the island, and the USS Nimitz and Independence operated well away from the Taiwan Strait, this "crisis" brought tensions to their highest since the late-1950s.

The resulting slowdown in military exchanges did permit the continuation of defense educational delegations, but high-level exchanges were limited to Under Secretary Walter Slocombe's visit in June 1996. Both sides did not wish to completely cease or suspend exchanges, but both decided to reduce their quantity and quality to express displeasure. Beginning in the fall of 1996, though, exchanges picked up again. New CINCPAC Admiral Joseph Prueher paid an important visit to China in September, followed by the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and other DoD officials.

New momentum was added in December 1996 with long-postponed visit to the United States by Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian. General Chi and outgoing Secretary of Defense Perry held extensive talks, while counterpart talks were held with other members of Chi's delegation. Chi was given red-carpet treatment in Washington (including a meeting with the President) and a top-flight itinerary throughout the country, meant to simultaneously impress him with American strength and transparency.

Sino-American military exchanges have expanded rapidly since Chi's visit. This is to be welcomed—both as a vital component of the overall bilateral relationship, as well as being a significant stabilizing factor in Asia-Pacific regional security. Since their resumption, quite a lot has been accomplished in a relatively short period of time. A
plethora of exchanges have occurred. These tend to fall into four broad categories:

- High-level visits;
- Functional exchanges;
- Military educational exchanges;
- Port calls and familiarization exchanges.

A variety of important visits have taken place in each category. Notable accomplishments include visits to Beijing by Secretary of Defense Cohen, Under Secretary Slocombe, Assistant Secretary Kramer, and Deputy Assistant Secretary Campbell; visits by the CINCPAC and Army and Air Force Chiefs of Staff; visits by PLA Chief of Staff Fu Quanyou and Logistics chief Wang Ke; the inauguration of annual Defense Consultation Talks at the Under Secretary/Deputy Chief-of-Staff level; the agreement of a Military Maritime Accord to avoid “incidents at sea”; a nuclear weapons non-targeting agreement; consultations on humanitarian relief; and the first-ever visit by PLA naval vessels to the continental United States. In addition to these official exchanges, a variety of “Track II” exchanges between officials in their private capacities and security specialists in the NGO community have taken place;³ weapons development and defense research laboratories (e.g. Sandia and Lawrence Livermore on the American side) meet with their counterparts; and American and Chinese officers regularly meet in multilateral settings in third countries.

As a result of the reciprocal presidential summits in 1997 and 1998, military exchanges are due to be deepened and broadened over the next year. They are expected to include:

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- **High-Level Visits.** To China: CINCPAC Admiral Prueher in August; Under Secretary Slocombe in October for the second round of Defense Consultative Talks; Secretary Cohen in late-1998; and JCS Chairman Shelton in early-1999. To America: Deputy Chief-of-Staff Chen Xugeng in July; Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Zhang Wannian in September; and likely visits by the Commanders of the PLA Navy and Air Force.

- **Confidence Building Measures.** PLA field-grade officers to observe RIMPAC and Cope Thunder exercises; first round of Military Maritime Consultative Agreement talks; first round of environmental security consultations; disaster relief “sandtable” exercise; US Navy ships to visit Qingdao and Zhanjiang, with possible return visit of PLAN vessels; possible visit of PLA delegation to Sandia Laboratories Cooperative Monitoring Center.

- **Functional Exchanges.** To China: National Defense University President General Chilcoat; NDU faculty exchange and first meeting of annual NDU bilateral strategic dialogue; NDU CAPSTONE delegation; Air War College, Army War College, and Industrial College of the Armed Forces delegations; US Army military history delegation; and an “ammunition demilitarization” delegation. To America: First PLA NDU CAPSTONE and PLA Air Force Academy delegations; Academy of Military Science Commandant General Liu Jingsong; delegations to study ROTC system, quartermaster system, and air traffic control.

Thus, a flurry of exchanges can be expected in coming months. While the U.S. side seems content with the quantity of these planned exchanges, there is a desire to improve their quality in several potential areas:

- Intensification of high-level strategic dialogue and expansion to different levels of the military and civilian national security bureaucracies.

- Expansion of regional security discussions to include Japanese, South Korean, and Russian armed forces.

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- Initiation of functional exchanges in the areas of military medicine, environmental security, and humanitarian relief.

- Training of military personnel in each country’s military educational institutions (as distinct from exchanging delegations).

- Joint exercises—beginning in the area of disaster relief and leading to naval, air, and ground maneuvers.

- Familiarization briefings to encourage mutual transparency—on topics such as doctrine, force structure, threat perception, national security decision-making; defense expenditure, defense conversion, and civil-military relations.

- New confidence building measures—more agreements to prevent accidental military confrontations, such as the Military Maritime Accord, as well as establishing secure communications links, and possible notification of major weapons tests and exercises.

- Dialogue, exchanges, and site visits on nuclear weapons safety, security, command and control.

- Joint activity in combating non-conventional and transnational security threats—such as terrorism, organized crime, alien smuggling, and narcotics trafficking.

- Possible coordination of export control measures and closer consultation on implementing arms control accords.

This is more a “wish list” than a blueprint for how the Pentagon would like to develop Sino-American military relations in the next few years. To be sure, the PLA will have difficulty responding to several of these American desires: triangular meetings with Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) personnel or multilateral meetings with Japanese, Russian, and South Korean military personnel; participation in joint exercises (the PLA has refused to enter joint exercises as a matter of principle and policy since 1949); joint humanitarian relief (although there may be room for “parallel” action); accepting U.S. military personnel for training in Chinese military institutions; exchanges involving nuclear weapons; and expanded transparency (see discussion below).
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Objectives of Sino-American Military Exchanges:
Sleeping in the Same Bed, Dreaming Different Dreams

To some extent the U.S. and Chinese military establishments share a mutual desire to enhance ties and to exploit complimentary interests. But it is also evident that the two approach the military relationship with differing priorities and considerable "baggage" from the past, which serve to restrict the fuller development of ties.

In recent years the initiative to develop and expand military-to-military relations has largely come from Washington. For the most part, the PLA has been a passive and often reluctant partner in the exchanges. Chinese reluctance derives from a variety of factors:

- continuing ill-will from the suspension of exchanges after 1989;
- continuing U.S. sanctions prohibiting weapons sales, defense and dual-use technology transfers, and spare parts for previously-sold systems;
- latent suspicions of an American "containment" policy that defines China as a strategic adversary;
- anger and frustration over escalating U.S. arms sales to Taiwan;
- ambivalence about U.S. alliances and forward-based forces in the Asia-Pacific region;
- the redefinition of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty and Defense Guidelines, and its potential application to Taiwan;
- inexperience in broad-gauged bilateral and multilateral defense relationships; and
- the insular and sometimes xenophobic "institutional culture" of the Chinese military establishment.

In each of these categories, the PLA has substantial concerns and fears (this is not to say that they are justified). In particular, the PLA believes it has been unfairly singled out for punitive sanctions, while other sectors of Chinese government and society enjoy relatively unfettered access to American trade, technology, and exchanges. They are still stinging over the termination of military assistance programs
(notably the “Peace Pearl” program to upgrade avionics in the F-8 II fighter) and sanctions implemented after 1989. Some in the PLA argue that these terminated programs and the refusal of the U.S. to relax sanctions (in particular to release spare parts for the Sikorsky Blackhawk helicopters and General Electric LM-2500 gas turbine engines) is proof positive of American attempts to “contain” China and retard its military modernization. Said one PLA Senior Colonel: “Your government says that you want China to be ‘strong, secure, and prosperous’ but your policies suggest the opposite.”⁵ Some in the PLA even argue that it will be impossible to sustain a long-term military exchange program as long as defense technologies and weapons are embargoed, and they explicitly suggest that the PLA is prepared to slow down the bilateral military relationship if these sanctions are not lifted. As a carrot, they intimate that the PLA would be interested in buying helicopters, aircraft and ship engines, transport aircraft, AWAC aircraft, radars, avionics, and surface to air missiles.⁶ Further, they bluntly warn that continued American sales of high-tech weaponry to Taiwan will impede the further development of bilateral military ties. PLA (as well as civilian) personnel also point to the US-Japan Defense Guidelines as another substantial irritant clouding defense ties, and they remain convinced that the strengthened treaty is both directed against China and covers Taiwan.⁷

Above all, in these exchanges, the PLA seeks to learn about the U.S. military—both its intentions and capabilities vis-à-vis China, but also as a model for the PLA’s own development. The U.S. military is more than happy to impress upon their Chinese counterparts their strengths and capabilities, but are naturally reticent to build up a “peer competitor.” For all of these reasons, PLA personnel evince suspicions of the United States, warn that bilateral military ties may be impeded, and call for the U.S. to address their concerns. At the same time, both high-ranking and senior officials in the PLA express satisfaction with the progress in development of defense ties over the past eighteen months since General Chi’s visit to the United States and resumption of bilateral defense ties. This ambivalent view that military ties are

⁵ Interview with PLA personnel, 12 May 1998, Beijing. Since the Carter administration, the US Government has used the terms “strong” and “secure” either together or separately, in conjunction with other adjectives, when referring to the kind of China the US desires, i.e. “An open, prosperous, stable, strong, and secure China.” These terms have been quietly dropped from official U.S. lexicon in recent years.
simultaneously progressing well and that substantial impediments exist is mirrored on the American side.

What does the U.S. want out of the relationship? Officially, the Department of Defense lists six “broad objectives” that guide its contacts with the Chinese military⁸:

1. To engage the PLA, a critical actor in the PRC’s national security community, on a range of global and Asia-Pacific regional security issues.
2. To increase Chinese defense transparency.
3. To establish confidence building measures (CBMs) designed to reduce the possibility of accidents or miscalculations between U.S. and Chinese operational forces.
4. To conduct professional exchanges that are of mutual benefit.
5. To encourage PLA participation in appropriate multinational military activities.
6. To support the United States Government overall policy of engagement with China through selected functional programs.

These are worthy and appropriate policy objectives and goals, but uneven progress has been made to date. Of particular concern is the continuing lack of PLA transparency and reciprocity in access to military facilities. The steps taken have included: an exchange of “transparency briefings” between Gen. Xiong Guangkai and DoD counterparts in April 1995 (Gen. Xiong presented very superficial boilerplate explanations of PLA expenditure and activities); the publication of a White Paper on Arms Control in 1996 (a long-rumored follow-up has yet to appear, although some PLA sources indicate that one may be forthcoming soon); and permitting visits by some high-ranking U.S. military personnel to previously unseen PLA installations. For example, Admiral Prueher visited the PLAN South Sea Fleet in Zhanjiang; Secretary of Defense Cohen and Assistant Secretary Kramer were shown the Beijing Air Defense Command Center; former JCS Chairman Shalikashvili was given a demonstration by rapid reaction units (kuaisu fanying budui) of the 15th Airborne Division in Wuhan; and Air Force Chief of Staff Ryan was permitted to visit several air bases, shown the F8-IIM fighter, and was allowed to pilot a training fighter.

⁸ Report to Congress on Department of Defense Activities with China (H.R. 104-563), February 28, 1997.
These steps do represent some progress, and the PLA should be so credited, but it is minimal and marginal when compared either with the levels of transparency among other Asia-Pacific militaries (to say nothing of U.S. military transparency) or what the U.S. has requested to see. American requests for visits to bases and installations continue to be routinely rebuffed by the Chinese side. In addition to exchanges noted in the “wish list” above, the U.S. seeks increased transparency in the following areas:

- Detailed and realistic estimates of PLA defense expenditure (including for R,D,T & E);

- Detailed discussions of Chinese defense doctrine and military planning;

- In-depth assessments of regional and global security issues;

- Joint contingency planning for various scenarios in North Korea;

- Discussions of the purposes and progress in PLA force restructuring and modernization;

- Access to a wide range of ground force, air force, naval, nuclear, and command installations across China.

In seeking such transparency, the U.S. proceeds from a simple premise: openness breeds trust, while secretiveness breeds distrust. Certainly, all militaries must safeguard their national security secrets—but this can be done while, at the same time, reducing misperceptions and suspicions through adhering to international norms of transparency. This includes, for example, full compliance with the U.N. Arms Register, full disclosure with the Defense White Paper template adopted by the ASEAN Regional Forum; and the publication of annual strategic assessments modeled on the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) Military Balance and Strategic Survey.  

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10 Indeed, the PLA National Defense University has recently done so for the first time. See Pan Xiangting (ed.), Shijie Junshi Xingshi [World Military Situation], 1997-1998 (Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 1998). This volume also contains a brief discussion of China military expenditure, security environment, and defense policy (pp. 268-72); as well as a discussion of US-China military exchanges (pp. 279-81).
Despite limited progress on the Chinese side, there is little doubt that DoD is not satisfied with the absence of candor and “depth” in the “strategic dialogue,” and the Pentagon is growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of transparency and access to Chinese military installations. As former JCS Chairman John Shalikashvili noted in his speech at the PLA NDU:

“We should not fool ourselves. Improving military-to-military contacts will not be easy. And in order to earn big dividends, we must make a big investment. If we listen to the suspicious side of our military minds, if we do not pursue exchanges on a fair and equitable basis, if we lack openness, transparency, or reciprocity, or if we hold back even routine information on our military forces, then we will fail.”

While there is frustration among many on the American side, some closely involved in the exchanges believe that the U.S. has expected too much, too fast and has “set the bar too high” by unrealistically expecting the PLA to reciprocate at the same level of information openness and access to military facilities provided to Chinese (and other) foreign military visitors. This argument coincides with the PLA’s explanations that there is great disparity between American and Chinese forces (and the U.S. can therefore afford to be more open), that the PLA has a different history and culture concerning transparency, and that transparency must be increased incrementally in tandem with the overall development of political and military relations. There is some truth in these Chinese arguments, but they nonetheless mask fundamental Chinese reticence to open up their military establishment to foreign scrutiny. Such reluctance breeds suspicions. Sometimes this penchant reaches unreasonable and infuriating lengths when the PLA denies the very existence of well-known facts and repeatedly rebuffs U.S. requests for visits to various installations. What the Chinese side does not realize is the extent to which foreign analysts already know a considerable amount about Chinese military doctrine, capabilities, expenditure, and deployments—and this is the case in the private and scholarly sectors, to say nothing of U.S. government intelligence agencies. For example, the PLA would have a much clearer sense of the level of public knowledge abroad if the June 1996 special issue of The China Quarterly or other recently published books were

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translated into Chinese. This, in turn, would hopefully make the PLA realize the futility of trying to hide basic data that is already well-known.

A further problem in the area of transparency lies on the American side. That is, the PLA is actually considerably transparent about a wide range of subjects through their publications in Chinese. This includes hundreds of books and dozens of periodicals published in China and routinely available to Americans (or any other foreigners) for purchase. The problem lies in the fact that precious few American analysts and scholars of the PLA buy and use these materials in their research, and—worse yet—there is no attempt by the U.S. Government to collect and translate these materials into English. A modest investment of $500,000 by DoD or the Foreign Broadcast Information Service would go a very long way towards increasing PLA transparency and foreign awareness of developing trends.

Outlook

This brief paper has attempted to trace the development of bilateral military ties over the past several years, to elucidate the potential “roadmap” for their development in the near and medium-term future, and to identify the impediments to future growth and development. There are certainly other constricting variables at play, such as the perceptions of the new Chinese military leadership; cultural factors; strategic perspectives; national security concerns; and differences in levels of development and political systems.

Despite these impediments, the Sino-American military relationship has developed surprisingly rapidly and fruitfully. This is testimony to those working hard on both sides to advance it, as well as the recognition by the civilian leaders of both countries that solid military ties are a key component of the overall bilateral relationship which also contribute significantly to stabilizing regional and global security.

12 When I broached this possibility with a leading PLA publisher, I was told that such a translation would have to be restricted to “internal” channels and not be made available to the general Chinese public.
13 To be sure, a number of publications are classified various levels of nei bu [internal] circulation, but there are still a wealth of non-classified publications available.