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# Sino-US Military Relations Since Tiananmen: Restoration, Progress, and Pitfalls

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Sino-US relations have experienced uneven developments over the last decade as the two major powers have grappled with the evolving post-Cold War international security environment as well as shifting domestic agendas and foreign policy priorities. The bilateral military-to-military relationship likewise has gone through a period of resumption and exploration, important achievements and major setbacks, and continued efforts at improving mutual trust and understanding. Among the key features of this relationship are high-level exchange visits of defense ministers and military leaders; confidence-building measures, including the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, annual Defense Consultation Talks, and port visits; and regular contacts at the functional level between the two countries' national defense universities and military academies. Through these contacts, the two militaries have begun to engage each other in exchanging views on threat perceptions, perspectives on global arms control and regional security, defense conversion, military doctrines, and broader politico-security issues.

This article offers a preliminary assessment of the nature, evolution, and pitfalls of the Sino-US military relationship since the Tiananmen incident in 1989. It begins with a brief overview of the major developments over the last decade, identifying both progress and setbacks. The next section discusses US and Chinese interests in developing and maintaining military ties both from the broader strategic objectives sought by policymakers in Beijing and Washington and the institutional perspectives of the two militaries. It is clear that the two sides have different agendas and have adopted different approaches. This at once

explains the tensions in pursuing the bilateral military relationship and calls for pragmatic initiatives conducive to future developments. This is followed by an examination of the factors that have influenced, and may well continue to affect, bilateral military relations. The article concludes by summarizing the major findings of the research and offering some tentative recommendations for developing stable, pragmatic, and meaningful bilateral military relations between China and the United States.

## *Sino-US Military Relations Since 1989: An Overview*

The Tiananmen incident of June 1989 remains a pivotal event in the chronicle of Sino-US relations. It fundamentally changed the way in which bilateral relations had been managed since President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the fundamental basis of bilateral cooperation during the Cold War years evaporated. Among the first casualties of Tiananmen was the Sino-US bilateral military relationship. The Bush Administration of that era immediately suspended all high-level military contacts and froze the ongoing foreign military sales (FMS) programs for China.[1] Although the US National Defense University (NDU) "Capstone" delegations resumed visits to China in 1991, and there were informal contacts between the two militaries during Operation Desert Storm, including the PRC Defense Attaché's visiting the Pentagon and receiving briefings on US operations in the Gulf, it was not until October 1993 when Chas W. Freeman, Jr., Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, visited China that bilateral military-to-military contacts resumed.

This important visit followed the Clinton Administration's decision to shift from a confrontational China policy to one of engagement. In the aftermath of the *Yinhe* fiasco[2] and faced with the looming crisis over the North Korean nuclear weapons program in the summer of 1993, the Pentagon, in particular two senior officials—Deputy Secretary of Defense William Perry and Freeman—pushed for a more conciliatory China policy, including resuming contacts and opening up dialogues with the Chinese military.[3]

The Freeman visit ushered in a period of uneven developments in Sino-US military relations with both concrete accomplishments and major setbacks. From the start, there was renewed hope in the US policymaking community, including the Pentagon, of building bilateral military ties as part of a broader

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engagement policy to incorporate China into the global and regional security frameworks aimed at stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles and promoting peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region. In a 1994 memo to the service secretaries, Secretary of Defense William Perry instructed that as part of the engagement policy, the US military must "rebuild mutual trust and understanding with the PLA [People's Liberation Army], and this could only happen through high level dialogue and working level contacts." Perry further emphasized: "The military relationship with China could pay significant dividends for DOD. Let us proceed in a forward-looking, although measured, manner in this important relationship."[4] Beijing was seen as instrumental if nonproliferation efforts were ever to succeed; in this context, engaging the PLA would promote a better understanding of the decisionmaking process behind China's arms exports, a process in which the military's role was clearly growing. At the same time, China's role in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis indicated that China and the United States shared some important common interests and heightened hope of expanding cooperation.

An upsurge of regular exchange visits between the top defense and military leaderships of the two countries followed. Visitors to the United States from China included PRC Defense Minister Chi Haotian; key members of the Central Military Commission (CMC), including Vice Chairman Zhang Wannian, PLA Chief of the General Staff; the directors of the General Political Department and the General Logistics Department; and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and PLA Navy (PLAN) commanders. From the US side, Secretaries of Defense William Perry and William Cohen, Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Shalikashvili and General Shelton, the service secretaries and chiefs of staff, and the combatant commanders of the US Pacific Command made regular trips to China. Indeed, with the exception of US military sales to China, whose ban remains in effect, there was a significant expansion of official military contacts during the Clinton Administrations, both in terms of the level of officials involved and their frequency, compared to the decade of the 1980s, when the United States and China were aligned against the Soviet Union.[5] These exchanges provided greater opportunities for both sides to share views on a wide range of issues, from threat perceptions and military strategies to the future global and regional security architectures.

In parallel with the expanding defense and military contacts, there also have been efforts to introduce and institutionalize confidence-building measures. The most important of these are the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) and the initiation of annual Defense Consultation Talks (DCTs). Other confidence-building measures include invitations to observe military exercises (e.g., RIMPAC and Cope Thunder for PLA officers, and General Shelton observing a military exercise in the Nanjing Military Region during his November 2000 visit to China); greater transparency measures (PLA officers' visits to US military facilities and briefings on US military doctrines; Secretary Cohen's visit to the Beijing Air Defense Command Center); humanitarian assistance and disaster re-

lief cooperation, "sand table" and joint exercises, and port calls. Finally, functional exchanges have taken place between the two countries' national defense universities, war and staff colleges, and logistics and military medicine institutions, among others.[6]

Apart from official contacts, a variety of "Track-II" programs also have been initiated. PLA officers have attended seminars at Harvard University and the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS); participated in working group meetings at the Council for Security and Cooperation in Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and in visiting fellow programs at the Atlantic Council, George Washington University, and the Monterey Institute of International Studies' Center for Nonproliferation Studies (MIIS, CNS); and attended the Washington Intensive Seminar on Nonproliferation (WINS) sponsored by CNS. Although these are not, strictly speaking, considered part of the military-to-military exchange programs, these initiatives nevertheless have contributed to promoting mutual trust and better understanding.

Sino-US military relations also have experienced difficulties and, at times, severe setbacks. At least five such setbacks can be identified during the period under discussion. The first occurred in the wake of the US government issuing a visa to Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui in 1995. PLAAF Commander Lieutenant General Liu Shunyao cut short his US visit in protest. The Chinese government also postponed the scheduled visit to the United States by Defense Minister General Chi Haotian. The brief resumption of military-to-military contacts after the November 1995 visit to China by Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye was again interrupted amid PLA military exercises in the spring of 1996, touching off a crisis and the dispatch of two US aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait. This time the US side called off the rescheduled visit of General Chi Haotian.

The third major setback was the congressional suspension of the US-China Joint Commission on Defense Conversion, which Secretary Perry signed during his October 1994 visit to China with General Ding Henggao, Director of the Commission of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND). However, the most severe blow to bilateral military relations was dealt with the release of the Cox Report and the May 1999 accidental US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. After the release of the Cox Report in March 1999 charging Chinese espionage of US nuclear secrets, a Republican-controlled Congress wary and suspicious of Sino-US military exchanges raised serious questions. Indeed, congressional leadership pressed the Clinton Administration to limit the scope of military contacts, and particularly PLA observation of US training and sensitive military facilities.[7]

The Embassy bombing touched off storms of protests from China and led to suspension of almost all military contacts and planned visits. These included the postponement of a visit by PLAN Commander Vice Admiral Shi Yunsheng, originally scheduled for June 1999 in conjunction with a planned port

***"US-China military relations are constrained by the larger strategic context in which the United States continues to view China as a potential competitor."***

call to Hawaii and Seattle. An earlier planned PLA delegation visit to the Sandia National Laboratories' Cooperative Monitoring Center did not materialize. The Chinese also canceled the scheduled visit by the Commandant of the US Marine Corps, General Charles Krulak, as well as a visit by Secretary Cohen.[8]

Sino-US military contacts resumed only after the Jiang-Clinton meeting at the September 1999 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Auckland and the November US-China agreement on China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). After the United States agreed to pay $28 million in compensation for the Chinese Embassy bombing, the hurdle was cleared for the resumption of military contacts. The first of these was a visit by Kurt Campbell, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, to China, followed by Lieutenant General Xiong Guangkai's late January 2000 visit to the United States for the Defense Consultation Talks, at which the two sides agreed to resume military-to-military relations.[9] A number of important visits followed, including Secretary Cohen's July 2000 visit.

However, this improved atmosphere would not last long before another major crisis developed. The fifth setback occurred in the aftermath of the 1 April 2001 collision of a US Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter aircraft some 100 kilometers off China's Hainan Island. The US plane made an emergency landing on a Chinese military base in Lingshui; the Chinese pilot was killed when his plane crashed. A diplomatic crisis ensued, with each side blaming the other for the accident. The stalemate was finally resolved 11 days after the incident with the release of the 24 American crew members and the issuance of a US letter expressing regret over the loss of the Chinese pilot and his plane.[10] Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld subsequently ordered a review of bilateral military-to-military exchanges, placing existing and future programs on a case-by-case basis.[11]

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States to some extent arrested the downturn of the bilateral relationship. The Bush Administration's policy priority on combating terrorism has refocused its attention to better handling its China policy. President Bush has traveled twice to China. Chinese Vice President and heir apparent Hu Jintao visited the United States

in April-May 2002, and Presidents Jiang Zemin and Bush held their summit at Bush's Crawford, Texas, ranch in late October. China and the United States also have engaged in other high-level exchanges, including talks on strengthening economic cooperation and discussions on the resumption of military-to-military ties. The NDU Capstone delegation visited China in February 2002. Several rounds of MMCA working group meetings were held in September 2001, April 2002, and December 2002. During his visit to the United States in April-May 2002, Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao visited the Pentagon and met with Secretary Rumsfeld. In late June 2002, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman visited China. This was followed by visits by Vice Admiral Paul G. Gaffney II, President of the US National Defense University, in October and Admiral Thomas Fargo, Commander of the US Pacific Command, in December 2002. Also in December 2002, General Xiong Guangkai, PLA Deputy Chief of the General Staff, visited Washington to hold the fifth round of Defense Consultation Talks with his counterpart, Douglas Feith, US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. Port calls have also resumed, and the two militaries also have conducted joint seek and rescue operations.[12]

### *Divergent Interests, Different Objectives*

The United States and China naturally have approached bilateral military relations based on their divergent interests. Each pursues its own set of objectives. Progress has been possible where these interests coincide; at the same time, disappointments are bound to arise when each expects outcomes that the other cannot (or declines to) deliver due to differences in perceptions, agenda, and core values. This section seeks to sketch a rough outline of the interests and objectives of the two countries in developing and maintaining bilateral military ties.

During the 1980s, US strategic objectives of competing with the Soviet Union largely drove the process of initiating and developing bilateral military relations with China. With the end of the Cold War and in particular the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the focus of US strategic priorities has shifted to regional stability and the development of greater ability for intervention to maintain US primacy. Within this context, Washington has developed a two-pronged strategy of both engaging and hedging against China. China remains a critical factor in US strategic calculations: it is a growing power; it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council; and it has increasing influence in the Asia Pacific region. Consequently, continued exchanges between the two militaries, the world's strongest and the world's largest, would serve post-Cold War US interests of transparency, confidence-building, and the avoidance of potential conflict.

By actively engaging the Chinese military, the United States has hoped to develop a better understanding of the PLA military doctrines and security perspective; at the same time, greater transparency could also help prevent misunderstanding, especially in the context of a potential conflict across the Taiwan Strait and the enhanced US-Japan security alliance.[13] The basic premise behind a

comprehensive US engagement with the PRC is that such a strategy will facilitate an orderly integration of China, an acknowledged regional and potential global power, into international and regional affairs and allow the world to avoid the kinds of conflicts that accompanied the rise of Germany and Japan. The United States also recognizes the important role of the military in Chinese politics and foreign policy, which justifies engaging the PLA.[14]

The rationale for engaging China's military was spelled out by Defense Secretary Perry in a 1995 speech:

> Engagement opens lines of communication with the People's Liberation Army—the PLA. A major player in Chinese politics, the PLA wields significant influence on such issues as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and proliferation. And if we are to achieve progress on these issues, we must engage PLA leaders directly. . . . [B]y engaging the PLA directly, we can help promote more openness in the Chinese national security apparatus, including its military institutions. Promoting openness or transparency about Chinese strategic intentions, procurement, budgeting, and operating procedures will not only help promote confidence among China's neighbors, it will also lessen the chance of misunderstandings or incidents when our forces operate in the areas where Chinese military forces are also deployed.[15]

The general policy of engagement is not pursued blindly. Indeed, there are important principles that must be observed in its implementation. According to Campbell, "Our engagement strategy is this: 'We will work with China where we can—such as the Korean Peninsula; and we will disagree where we must—as we do with some of China's proliferation activities.' I believe this engagement recognizes China for what it is—an emerging power, poised to either contribute to, or detract from, the tides of economic dynamism, cooperation, and trust that are filling the Pacific Basin."[16]

Under the premise of engagement and recognizing the importance of the PLA in China's national security decisionmaking, the United States has sought to achieve several broad objectives in its military contacts with China:[17]

- To establish clear lines of communication between senior leaders to reduce chances of miscommunication and miscalculation.
- To establish confidence-building measures designed to reduce the possibility of accidents or miscalculations between US and Chinese operational forces.
- To encourage PLA participation in appropriate multinational military activities.
- To engage the PLA, a critical actor in China's national security community, on a range of global and Asia-Pacific regional security issues; part of such efforts would be to shape PLA behavior.
- To conduct functional and professional exchanges of mutual benefit.
- To increase Chinese defense transparency to better understand the scope and extent of PLA modernization.

- To engage the Chinese military in the areas of nuclear weapons, arms control, and security of fissile materials. One hopes this would involve officers from the US Strategic Command and the PLA Second Artillery Corps.

Beijing has a different perspective and emphasis on developing bilateral military ties. *China's National Defense in 2000* lays out its general approach:

> China handles its military relations independently, and conducts military exchanges and cooperation with other countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Military diplomacy should serve the state's overall diplomacy and the modernization of national defense and the armed forces. In pursuance of this purpose the PLA has actively engaged in external contacts and exchanges in a flexible and practical manner, and made sustained efforts for enhanced mutual trust, friendship, and cooperation with armed forces of other countries, and for regional and world peace, stability, and development.[18]

According to two American defense analysts, two broad overall objectives of PLA foreign military relations can be identified: to shape international security environments and to contribute to Chinese defense modernization. Within this broad framework, two specific measures are to be adopted: those that contribute to enhanced mutual understanding and those that are reflections of mutual trust.[19] The PLA is more interested in engaging in exchanges and dialogues to gauge the other's intentions; specific programs that require greater transparency and closer contacts of personnel must follow a certain level of mutual trust. In other words, trust is a precondition for actual bilateral activities to happen, not vice versa. Sino-US military relations cannot develop independently of the larger bilateral relationship.[20] If the US premise is that openness breeds trust and secretiveness distrust, the Chinese operational principles appear to be exactly the opposite: the level of openness can be determined only by the degree of trust, and strategic ambiguity naturally leads to operational ambiguity, with secretiveness a reflection, not a cause, of such ambiguity.

The PLA has a number of rationales for developing military contacts with the United States. To begin with, Beijing regards the Sino-US military relationship as an important component of the overall bilateral relationship; hence, enhanced military contacts should reflect improved bilateral relations and vise versa. Second, there are important psychological factors in that the PLA wants to be seen as a peer with the US military, the strongest in the world. Port visits, for instance, can have good demonstration effects where the PLA Navy can be showcased to the American public as well as to China's domestic audience. Yet another reason may be to gain a better understanding of US military thinking, particularly regarding the Revolution in Military Affairs, and to explore the possibility of greater cooperation—even possibly the transfer of military technology, although under the current circumstances that would be most difficult to achieve. In addition, China's goals in bilateral military relations are to help promote the broader bilateral politi-

***"There are a number of potential points of conflict between China and the United States that could lead to military confrontation if mismanaged."***

cal relationship, including lifting sanctions and resumption of US military sales to China; to seek opportunities for cooperation on global and regional issues; and to present to the United States China's bottom-line on Taiwan.[21]

Chinese analysts note that the US military, defense think tanks, and the military-industrial complex can play important roles in affecting US policy toward China, which in turn will affect the scope and extent of bilateral military relations. The Pentagon and US Pacific Command form the key influencing voices within the US military and represent different perspectives. Think tanks are also divided on this issue. Major US companies that have developed substantive economic contacts in China support the engagement policy, except for a few key defense contractors that have greater interest in selling weapons to Taiwan.[22] While China and the United States share some common interests in developing and maintaining bilateral military relations, their agendas and preferences differ. The Chinese emphasize the importance of dialogues and exchanges of ideas to clarify strategic intents, while the United States is more interested in seeking greater transparency from the PLA, including insights into its defense budgets, force structure, and military procurement.

To pursue these objectives, the US military has sought to establish broad, regular, and more balanced military contacts with China. In his 14 May 1997 address at the PLA National Defense University, General John Shalikashvili, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, outlined these mutual goals for the United States and China: to "decrease suspicion, further mutually beneficial military cooperation, and lessen the chances for miscalculation in a crisis." These could be achieved only through "a more equal exchange of information with the PLA; the development of confidence-building measures to reduce further the possibility of miscalculations; military academic and functional exchanges; PLA participation in multinational military activities; and a regular dialog between our senior military leaderships."[23]

Indeed, the United States views the PLA as less than forthcoming in military transparency, let alone reciprocity. As one study of China's foreign military relations suggests, "The PLA carefully orchestrates its bilateral exchanges to maximize benefits for itself and, through use of limited reciprocity and transparency, to minimize the amount of information the PLA provides to other coun-

tries."[24] Since late 1995 the US side had been trying to get the PLA to sign the equivalent of an "incident at sea" agreement after the 1994 *Kitty Hawk* incident, in which the USS *Kitty Hawk* carrier group twice encountered Chinese submarines, and subsequently fighter aircraft, in the Yellow Sea. The Chinese side had been reluctant to come along until late 1997 after the first Jiang-Clinton summit, accepting it as an acknowledgment of the overall improved bilateral relationship. The PLA also had resisted US initiatives in joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises.[25] Lack of reciprocity has fanned accusations from detractors as well as frustrated US defense officials. The US sources complain that PLA delegations normally receive detailed briefings and are allowed to visit US military facilities, while US visits to China tend to be more show than substance, with limited access to personnel and facilities, and at best involving insignificant military installations.[26]

What the US side considers as a lack of progress in transparency may be a reflection of China's strategic culture and its very different interpretation of military transparency. To begin with, the PLA's unwillingness to reciprocate in granting the US military equal access to personnel, facilities, and information stems from its continuing uncertainty about the strategic direction of US-China relations in general and the military-to-military exchanges in particular. But China's perceived lack of transparency—or intended ambiguity—also reflects deep-rooted Chinese strategic culture. According to Chong-pin Lin, an avid student of Chinese military affairs,

> What underlies the particular Chinese style of deception is the art of ambiguity (*guidao*): the marginal manipulation of the enemy's perception through a combination of massive secretiveness, concealment, and cryptic or redundant revelation. As perception, based on a core of reality, contains a margin of uncertainty, the latter is susceptible to manipulation. Containing yet transcending deception, the art of ambiguity in Chinese strategic tradition is the ultimate form of psychological warfare.[27]

Second, Chinese views on transparency are that transparency is a relative, rather than absolute, concept. To quote two Chinese analysts:

> Given its size relative to other powers in Asia, China should have no difficulty being transparent. But, military transparency is not bilateral; rather, it is open to all. Therefore, it will be impossible for China to allow the same degree of transparency—given China's limited nuclear arsenal—as exists with regard to the Russian or American nuclear arsenals. Such a degree of transparency would call into question the survivability of China's nuclear weapons. Accordingly, a better political climate will be necessary before China can be more transparent.[28]

In other words, military transparency for China can proceed only step by step, and can never achieve the degree of the United States because of China's weaker military forces.[29] The purpose of transparency is to enhance confidence and trust, not to obtain unavailable information. In other words, the aim of in-

creasing transparency should be to enhance security rather undermine it.[30] And transparency itself is not a panacea and should go hand-in-hand with other efforts in promoting political trust and a peaceful environment. This being the case, the Chinese military has been less than forthcoming in reciprocity. In addition, PLA officers consider transparency in strategic intents as more important than detailed information about defense budgets, military facilities, and so on. But the PLA is gradually opening up, with the publication of three defense White Papers (1998, 2000, 2002) and limited military educational programs offered at China's National Defense University for foreign military officers.[31]

### *The Limits to Sino-US Military Relations*

Military diplomacy and cooperation range from alliance relationships to minimum confidence-building measures, the purpose of which is to avoid the risk of war. The current Sino-US military relationship is somewhere in-between. It is neither an alliance relationship nor a directly adversarial one.[32] While there have been some notable achievements over the last decade, continued progress has been impeded by a number of factors. Prominent among them are fundamentally different views between the United States and China on key issues relating to regional security, institutional interests, and different sets of agenda; inconsistent implementation of policy by the United States; and poor communication between successive administrations and Congress.[33]

There are important differences in the security outlooks and military strategies of the two countries. The United States sees its continued military presence and active engagement in regional security through bilateral defense alliances as crucial to regional stability. It relies on quick reaction and the ability to intervene as an important post-Cold War strategic requirement. The Chinese, on the other hand, want to regain regional prominence and freedom in dealing with what they regard either as domestic or purely bilateral issues. China's change of attitude toward multilateral security structures and an emphasis on security cooperation partnerships runs directly opposed to the US reliance on bilateral security alliances and forward military deployments.[34]

China and the United States differ on a number of security issues in the Asia Pacific region. To a significant extent, their divergent views derive from different historical and cultural experiences, and from their national interests and fundamental goals; these in turn affect the strategies they adopt. For the United States, its fundamental interests center on the prevention of the rise of any single power in the Asia Pacific that can challenge and even pose a threat to US national security, access to the region's expanding markets, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and the promotion of marketization and democratization.[35] These interests call for continued US commitment to the region's security through the presence of forward-deployed troops (to minimize the effects of the "tyranny of distance")[36] and the consolidation of US-Japanese and US-

***"The United States views the PLA as less than forthcoming in military transparency, let alone reciprocity."***

Republic of Korea security alliances, and by support of the region's multilateral security arrangements such as the ASEAN Regional Forum.[37]

China's post-Cold War security policy aims at maintaining a relatively stable and peaceful environment for economic development and building comprehensive national strength, protecting territorial integrity and achieving reunification with Taiwan, and participating and supporting regional security cooperation through dialogues and consultation.

There are a number of potential points of conflict between China and the United States that could lead to military confrontation if mismanaged. For China, the impediments to the development of a solid bilateral military relationship remain structural. Chinese uncertainty about the general state of bilateral relations at the politico-strategic level precludes a well-developed military-to-military relationship, as was suggested earlier in the article. In other words, as long as the United States continues to view China as a strategic competitor, such a relationship cannot be deepened. The annual DOD reports on Chinese military capabilities and the military balance across the Taiwan Strait, the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR), and the 1998 *East Asia Strategic Report* (EASR) all view China as a potential challenger to US interests. The United States continues to maintain bans on military sales to China. In addition, the two countries have fundamentally different views on regional security architectures, the role of military alliances, missile defenses, global strategic stability, and US arms sales to Taiwan.[38]

For US policymakers, the fundamental questions relate to the rise of China as a major power on the international scene and how Washington is to assess and manage the evolving Sino-US relationship in strategic terms.[39] A rising China, according to some analysts, will likely pose serious threats to US security interests in the Asia-Pacific region because of the greater resources that can be devoted to China's military buildup, a track record of the propensity of the PRC for the use of force, and the fact that deterrence and the use of economic sanctions may prove inadequate in stopping China from asserting itself and imposing its preferences on its neighbors. The liberal argument that prosperity leads to peace will not work in China's case.[40] US-China military relations are constrained by the larger strategic context in which the United States continues to view China as a potential competitor. General Henry Shelton, former Chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, warned that US diplomacy should focus on "ensuring that China does not become the 21st-century version of the Soviet bear."[41]

These inherent distrusts have led to calls for caution in conducting US-China military relations to avoid any measures that could enhance the PLA's capability to wage war against Taiwan, the United States, and its allies.[42] There have been reports that during earlier exchanges the US side, to demonstrate its good will, passed on important information on war-gaming, staff training, and Army warfighting doctrine.[43] Indeed, US-China military contacts have been attacked by conservatives who worry that the PLA would use these contacts to learn about US doctrines, warfighting strategies, joint training methods, and other sensitive information that could improve the PLA's capabilities to fight the US military one day. Objections range from opposing allowing PLA officers to tour sensitive US military facilities and receive briefings, to questions about high-ranking US military officials possibly feeding PLA officers information on sensitive military topics. Senator Robert C. Smith and Representative Tom Delay cosponsored specific legislation aimed at restricting such visits and exchanges that could enhance Chinese military capabilities.[44]

The FY 2000 Defense Authorization Bill imposed on DOD specific restrictions on its military contacts with China. The Secretary of Defense may not authorize any military contact with the PLA that would result in inappropriate exposure to these specified advanced US military capabilities:

- Force projection
- Nuclear operations
- Advanced combined-arms and joint combat operations
- Advanced logistical operations
- Chemical and biological defense and other capabilities related to weapons of mass destruction
- Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations
- Joint warfighting experiments and other activities related to a transformation in warfare
- Military space operations
- Other advanced capabilities of the armed forces
- Arms sales or military-related technology transfers
- Release of classified or restricted information
- Access to a Department of Defense laboratory[45]

In response, Ken Allen, a former USAF Assistant Attaché to China, argued:

> While Congress's restrictions may seem like reasonable requirements to quantify the relationship and to reduce exposure to US military capabilities, they could actually inhibit DOD's ability to learn more about China's military modernization efforts. Although Congress has mandated that the Secretary of Defense evaluate the Chinese military threat, Capitol Hill's stipulations could, in effect, hamstring the US military from carrying out substantive discussions with the PLA about the very issues the US military needs to understand better.[46]

The congressional backlash against US-China military relations found some resonance with the Bush Administration when it came into power in early 2001. The Administration placed greater emphasis on alliance relationships, downplaying the importance of China. It has since moved away from "strategic ambiguity" regarding Taiwan, with greater emphasis on American obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act, a strong preference for cross-Strait dialogue, and explicit opposition to coercion and the use of force in resolving the issue. In April 2001, the Bush Administration approved the largest arms sales to Taiwan in more than a decade.

In the aftermath of the April 2001 EP-3 incident, DOD drastically reduced its military-to-military contacts with China. The 2001 bilateral military program was placed under review at the direction of Secretary Rumsfeld, who basically has to approve each activity on a case-by-case basis. According to one report, PLA officers are no longer invited to attend seminars at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.[47] While this policy had its immediate cause in the EP-3 incident and subsequent Chinese holding of US crewmembers, at a deeper level it also reflected a growing skepticism at the very top of the Pentagon hierarchy of the value of a bilateral military relationship.[48] All of this suggests further limits to Sino-US military relations. At a time when military-to-military contacts are extremely important simply for the sake of avoiding any misunderstanding and miscalculation, they appear to be the most fragile links in the broader bilateral relationship.

Ironically, the EP-3 incident raised the importance of China in the Bush Administration's immediate policy agenda. The resolution of the incident has pointed to the need for dialogue. The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks provided additional impetuses for rebuilding the bilateral relationship, including efforts to restore military-to-military exchanges.[49] However, while the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the summit meetings between Presidents Bush and Jiang may have arrested the downward trends and provided some opportunity for bilateral cooperation, the foundation of post-Cold War Sino-US relations remains fragile and many of the dividing issues—from missile defense to proliferation to Taiwan—remain unresolved. Washington continues to send out mixed signals. The latest *Quadrennial Defense Review*, the *Nuclear Posture Review*, the Pentagon report on China's military, and the Bush Administration's *National Security Strategy* hint at the rise of China as a future military power that could challenge US interests in East Asia.[50] Bilateral military relations will continue to operate under such constraints.

## *Conclusion*

The Sino-US military relationship has undergone uneven developments over the past decade. There have been periods and areas of better cooperation and ones of suspicion and confrontation. This article has sought to provide an assessment of the major achievements and pitfalls of the bilateral military relationship

and place them in the broader contexts of divergent interests and objectives, and the structural constraints impeding the development of normal military-to-military contacts. While China and the United States have managed to maintain or repair bilateral military relations after major setbacks, they have yet to really resolve their core differences. Thus behind pledges of cooperation and building a healthy, stable relationship lie deep rifts over a number of issues, namely Taiwan and US arms sales to Taiwan, Chinese concerns over US strategic intentions in the Asia-Pacific region and objection to US missile defenses, and US questions about the lack of Chinese transparency in defense modernization, military threats against Taiwan, including deployment of short-range ballistic missiles across the Taiwan Strait, and Chinese nonproliferation commitments.[51]

This residual difficulty in maintaining a stable bilateral relationship is further complicated by the dearth of expertise on China in the Bush Administration, opening up possibilities for policy confusion. The twists and turns of announcements regarding suspension of military contacts with China is a case in point.[52] While the overall picture is far from optimistic, some recommendations are nonetheless suggested here if for nothing else than to echo what General Shalikashvili said in 1997 at the PLA National Defense University: "Improving our 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 don't 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 the May 2002 visit by Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao to the United States, the October 2002 Crawford summit between Presidents Bush and Jiang, and the resumption of the Defense Consultation Talks in December 2002 offer the prospect for restoring bilateral military contacts, significant challenges remain ahead. For a more stable bilateral military relationship to develop and be sustained, longer-term strategies must be formulated that emphasize engagement, exchange, and better understanding of each other's interests, priorities, and policy options. Particularly important may be greater contacts between the two militaries at the officer corps level, where both sides are of increasingly similar makeup in terms of education and selection criteria and share the ideals of their profession. Such a relationship cannot be left untended to be swayed by the vicissitudes of bilateral relations during a crucial period of transition in international politics and adjustments for both. The relationship must be constantly nurtured. That remains, perhaps, one of the greatest challenges ahead.

**NOTES**

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1. The FMS programs to China at the time included: the $550-million Project Peace Pearl to upgrade the avionics for China's F-8 fighter/interceptor; the $62.5-million AN/TPQ-37 artillery locating radar package; a

$28.5-million program to upgrade two 155mm ammunition production facilities; and Mark-46 Mod-2 anti-submarine torpedoes worth $8.5 million.

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