

A Matter of Trust

Cultural and Institutional Barriers to U.S.-China Military Relations

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Chinese mistrust of American military officials and limited opportunities for communication have hindered U.S.-China military relations. The lack of regular, candid discussion between both armed forces jeopardizes East Asian regional stability by precluding a key mechanism for deescalating crises. Washington should adopt a two-phase process to improving communication. First, the United States should increase combined operations where Chinese and American interests align, such as in disaster relief and counter-piracy efforts. This interaction can encourage informal communication channels, build mutual trust, and clarify intentions. Second, when China demonstrates interest, Washington should expand gatherings of retired U.S. and PLA officers at civilian institutions and eventually add an active duty military engagement component to the U.S.-China Economic and Strategic Dialogue.

Introduction

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping's leadership, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has become increasingly assertive in pursuing its territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, modernizing its military technology, and challenging American regional primacy. For example, China created an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013 and significantly expanded its island building in the South China Sea.¹ PLA efforts to boost space-based offensive capabilities demonstrate the broader Chinese goal of mirroring U.S. initiatives, specifically Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's (DARPA) Prompt Global Strike initiative.²

As regional tensions and the PLA's power projection capabilities continue to rise, ensuring East Asian stability and clarifying intentions becomes even more important for the United States and China. Strong U.S.-China military relations can improve the bilateral relationship, promote constant communication, and establish de-escalation mechanisms to prevent conflicts from spiraling. However, Chinese suspicion of American officers and cross-cultural barriers to building trust severely limit the value of current military-to-military engagement.

Left unaddressed, ineffective military relations will continue to exacerbate tensions in East Asia as PLA assertiveness grows. The United States should pursue a phased, comprehensive approach to streamlining U.S.-China military relations, drawing from the successes of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Washington should start by building trust with the PLA and, over time, establish regular, biannual meetings between high-level military officials on both sides.

Current U.S.-China Military Relations: A Problematic Approach

Admiral Wu Shengli, Commander of the PLA Navy, “had come to the United States in September of last year, and we sat down and we looked at each other and said, ‘Are we going to trust each other?’ We have to figure that out.”

– Admiral Jonathan Greenert, 2014³

A lack of mutual trust, insufficient transparency, and limited engagement opportunities hinder current U.S.-China military engagement and assurance programs. These challenges stem from deep-rooted cultural and institutional barriers. To enhance the value of military relations, the United States and China need to work collaboratively to mitigate cultural and institutional obstacles.

Cultural Barriers to Effective Military Relations.

Several cultural barriers hinder U.S.-China military relations. First, PLA officers overwhelmingly view the United States as a “hostile, hegemonic power,” reflecting deep-rooted historical bitterness and Chinese suspicions of American intentions in the Asia-Pacific.⁴ Second, the Chinese cultural concept of “*Guanxi*” impedes the development of trust-based relationships with “outsiders.” Finally, the PLA and American military interpret transparency and reciprocity in different ways.

- *Historical and cultural suspicion of American intentions.* Historically, the Opium Wars and the Eight Nation Alliance intervention after the Boxer Rebellion have led China to view the West through a lens of victimization, distrust, and resentment.⁵ Due to Cold War tensions, historical American support for Taiwan, and strengthened military ties between the U.S. and Japan, the official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology portrays the United States as “the mainstay of the ‘hostile forces’ that try to destabilize China” and “the hegemonic power that threatens global security.”⁶ According to one former USPACOM commander, “the PLA as a whole is far more suspicious of the United States and its regional intentions than other entities in the Chinese government.”⁷ Another U.S. flag officer noted that “many PLA officers appear to view the [U.S.-China] relationship through the lens of ‘100 years of being a victim.’”⁸ In 2010, PLA Rear Admiral Guan Youfei publicly accused a visiting delegation of 65 U.S. officials of “plotting to encircle China with strategic alliances.”⁹
- *Different views on personal relationships.* American and Chinese officers have different views on the nature of relationships, inhibiting the development of trust. *Guanxi*, an aspect of Chinese culture, makes trusting “outsiders” difficult for Chinese officials.¹⁰ *Guanxi* refers to “interpersonal relations” involving the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness.”¹¹ According to Larry Wortzel, “[*Guanxi*] relationships typically last as long as there is something that each counterpart can do for each other, and if the situation changes, then the relationship may end.”¹² Indeed, a Columbia University study comparing *Guanxi* to western networking found that *Guanxi* involved a higher correlation between economic exchange and trust, whereas “the effect of friendship on

trust was more positive for Americans than the Chinese.”¹³ U.S. officers often prioritize “endurance, candid dialogue, and transparency,” and not necessarily “aspects of obligation and indebtedness that primarily characterize *Guanxi* relationships that their PLA counterparts might be focused on.”¹⁴

- *Lack of transparency and reciprocity.* Whereas Clausewitz and other Western military strategists valued transparency in the use of force, Chinese strategic culture historically focused on a Confucian aversion to violence and emphasized psychological warfare.¹⁵ Additionally, Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* emphasizes a Taoist concept called *Shih* (勢), which relies on deception.¹⁶ This concept has largely influenced modern Chinese military strategy.¹⁷ Chinese strategic culture is slowly changing due to PLA modernization after the first Gulf War and a new group of officers has challenged these traditional strategic concepts.¹⁸ However, deception and strategic ambiguity is still largely present in PLA culture as former American officials have expressed frustration at the PLA’s lack of transparency.¹⁹ Even when the American military exhibits its capabilities and facilities to visiting PLA officials, the PLA does not reciprocate and often denies American officials access to Chinese facilities on subsequent visits. On a PLA delegation visit to Pearl Harbor, a former USPACOM commander allowed his Chinese counterparts to tour a U.S. nuclear submarine and freely talk to enlisted personnel.²⁰ However, his visits to China only involved “limited visibility of capabilities, scripted exercise observations, and partial facility visits.”²¹

Due to these cultural obstacles, few active duty senior American officers have been able to develop strong, personal relationships with their Chinese counterparts during engagement events. For example, one USPACOM official shared a similar upbringing and pilot background with his Chinese counterpart.²² However, this American official indicated that “common interests rarely translated into trust-based ‘friendships,’” and overall, he was disappointed at the lack of reciprocity.²³

Institutional Barriers to Effective Military Relations

The infrequency of U.S.-China engagement opportunities and lack of continuous relationships between American and Chinese officers further limits the effectiveness of military relations. Even during engagement events, American officials cannot freely discuss operational issues due to the presence of Chinese political commissars. Additionally, high-level American and Chinese officers serve in a given position for different lengths of time, which inhibits the development of strong personal relationships.

- *Infrequent opportunities for engagement.* Currently, American and Chinese officers have few opportunities for interaction. According to Kenneth Allen, “most high-level visits between China and the United States are reciprocal visits over a two-year period.”²⁴ Internal Chinese policies restrict the PLA to hosting a limited number of American leaders each year, and “these visits are divided among the Secretary of Defense, the three service secretaries, the four service chiefs, and organizations within the USPACOM

structure.”²⁵ Therefore, only a select number of qualified, high-level American defense officials can engage with the PLA in a given year.²⁶

Most senior PLA officers are permitted to only make one trip out of China per year; however, some choose not to travel at all.²⁷ Those officials therefore rarely meet the same foreign military official twice or visit the same country twice.²⁸ According to a former U.S. officer and intelligence analyst, “you meet with one person from the PLA, and then you never see them again.”²⁹

- *Lack of continuing relationships.* The American military generally rotates flag and general officers to different positions every two or three years.³⁰ However, senior officers who serve as the vice chairmen and members of the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) can hold their office for as long as ten years (two Party Congresses).³¹ These different terms of service complicate continuous engagement. Additionally, since high-level American officers visit different PLA officers during each engagement event, American officers rarely develop continuous relationships with particular PLA counterparts.
- *Rigid Communist Party protocol.* Political commissars closely monitor all PLA officers to maintain operational security and connect PLA objectives with broader CCP goals, creating a barrier to substantive discussions.³² With rare exceptions, visiting American officials only interact with political commissars and have limited access to other PLA officials who might be willing to discuss substantive operational issues.³³

Rigid Communist Party protocol and political commissars erode the quality of dialogue between American and Chinese officers by eliminating the possibility of informal and candid interaction. Because of the constant rotation of high-level American officials and infrequent PLA travel opportunities, establishing strong, continuous relationships proves challenging. Institutional barriers on both the American and Chinese sides reduce the operational value of military relations.

Criticisms of the Current Approach

“I believe that the [Department of Defense] currently lacks the thorough guidance and oversight mechanisms necessary to maintain a consistent mil-mil policy [with China] that best serves U.S. national security objectives.”

—Congressman Randy Forbes (R-VA), 2014³⁴

One-sided American military transparency and access without Chinese reciprocity could indirectly threaten American national security, may further empower the PLA, and will provide minimal operational returns to the United States. Additionally, ineffective U.S.-China military relations could impede the United States’ ability to promote safer operating environments in East Asia and increase institutional cooperation with the PLA.

The United States as an “Ardent Suitor.”

The United States currently offers some transparency and access to military facilities without Chinese reciprocity. The status quo approach could consume the time of senior Department of Defense (DoD) officials without providing significant returns and could give the PLA insight into American military vulnerabilities. Several analysts portray Washington as an “ardent suitor” eager to court the Chinese, even if the Chinese fail to offer substantive benefits in return.³⁵

- *Costs of one-sided access.* One-sided American military transparency and accessibility without Chinese reciprocity carries strategic costs, particularly the valuable time of American officials and the potential for leaks of sensitive information. According to Scott Harold, some American experts worry that Washington might “overpay” in military exchanges with China, especially in the absence of adequate operational returns.³⁶ Additionally, many American officials believe that one-sided access and transparency “are likely to give the [Chinese] insight into how to improve their capabilities and image.”³⁷ Randy Schriver suggests that American concessions to the PLA may have emboldened the Chinese to “gain insights on U.S. military vulnerabilities and to make advances in the area of technology transfer, particularly where dual-use technologies are concerned.”³⁸
- *Damaged American credibility.* Perceived one-sided concessions without PLA reciprocity will damage American credibility in the eyes of allied East Asian governments, including but not limited to Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines. For example, a 2016 editorial in the Japan Times calls for the United States and other countries to “make clear to Beijing that its unilateral attempts to rewrite the status quo [in the South China Sea] will not be tolerated.”³⁹ Randy Schriver notes, “despite Chinese provocations in the South China Sea, Obama Administration officials are openly discussing scaling back reconnaissance flights to build confidence with Beijing.”⁴⁰ In recent years, Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines have become increasingly concerned about a declining American commitment to East Asian stability and potentially empty American security promises.⁴¹

Without reforms, U.S.-China military engagement programs could continue to consume the time of high-level officials while providing virtually no benefits in crisis management and barely enhancing bilateral military cooperation.

Lack of De-escalation Mechanisms

Ineffective U.S.-China military relations could exacerbate regional tensions in East Asia and threaten American national security. Currently, the United States cannot clarify Chinese military intentions or establish emergency de-escalation mechanisms.⁴²

- *Potential growing tensions in East Asia.* Considering the PLA’s growing assertiveness and asymmetric warfare capabilities, a lack of military transparency between the United States and China may jeopardize East Asian stability, lead to future conflict spirals, or

threaten American interests in Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan. China has significantly expanded its island building in the South China Sea, quadrupling the number of artificial islands in the first half of 2015 alone.⁴³

The PLA has also demonstrated an unprecedented commitment to offensive, space-based warfare technologies intended to challenge American primacy. PLA officials are “reaching out to people with necessary cyber skills in the IT sector or academic community to fill gaps in state personnel” and strengthening cyberwarfare units, such as the notorious “Unit 61398” based in Shanghai.⁴⁴ Ge Juchang, a space-based warfare expert at the Chinese National Defense University, indicated that China “will construct whatever the enemy fears, with an emphasis on developing offensive warfare means. We will construct primarily offensive and asymmetrical space based warfare capability systems.”⁴⁵ In the near future, growing Chinese warfare capabilities will facilitate cyberespionage, cybertheft, and space-based operations against the United States. or other East Asian allies in the near future.

- *Chinese resistance to crisis communications.* American officials have repeatedly tried to establish de-escalation mechanisms with their Chinese counterparts. According to Lieutenant General Gregson (USMC), “the pursuit of a counterpart’s contact information is a fool’s errand and it would be worth a [Chinese] diplomat’s or an officer’s career, or worse, to be found talking to a U.S. person during a crisis.”⁴⁶ During the March 2009 *Impeccable* incident, USPACOM officials attempted to contact the PLA Navy via telephone to clarify intentions, but attempts to reach the Chinese were unsuccessful.⁴⁷ The U.S. Navy only resolved this incident after a show of force.⁴⁸ Without reliable de-escalation mechanisms, crisis situations may more easily spiral into instability.

De-escalation mechanisms and other communication channels can help diffuse dangerous crisis situations. Without significant reform, U.S.-China military relations cannot effectively combat threats to American interests in East Asia and threats to regional stability.

Existing Options for Reform: Scaling Back or Expanding Relations

“[The United States and China] must and will be in some form of contact—the only question is what level of engagement.”

– Larry Wortzel, 2012⁴⁹

Policymakers have suggested two options for reforming U.S.-China military relations. First, Washington could curb military relations with the PLA until China reciprocates American transparency. Second, by focusing on mutual, strategic interests, including disaster relief, climate change, and counter-piracy, Washington could broaden U.S.-China military engagement.

Scaling Back U.S.-China Military Relations.

First, Washington could scale back U.S.-China military relations and reduce demands for the time of high-level officials, recognizing that any military engagement programs will only provide limited operational returns.⁵⁰ The United States could also expand military relations in the future, when China provides reciprocal access to military facilities.

- *Strengths.* The DoD can conserve time and resources by reducing U.S.-China military engagement programs. Washington could have “moderate expectations” when engaging with the PLA and only invest the resources necessary to procure limited operational benefits.⁵¹ Scaling back military relations would also reduce the PLA’s access to sensitive American military information and reassure critical allies of American support in the event of East Asian instability. Kurt Campbell argues that “progress in military confidence-building and related security ties will follow, not lead, other facets” in the U.S.-China relationship.⁵² The United States can expand military relations when China engages the United States in a mutually beneficial manner.
- *Weaknesses.* This strategy assumes that overcoming barriers to effective engagement with the PLA will be impossible. Scaling back military relations while Chinese assertiveness grows will challenge Washington’s ability to clarify intentions to the PLA in crisis situations. In a 2014 meeting with President Obama, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a “new type of military relations,” including expanded military exchanges, cooperative exercises, and “a mutual reporting mechanism for major military operations.”⁵³ Diplomatically, China also emphasizes the importance of effective military cooperation, and cutting military relations may harm other facets of the U.S.-China relationship by signaling a deeper mistrust.

Targeted Expansion of U.S.-China Military Relations.

Second, Washington could expand U.S.-China military relations. Scott Harold of the RAND Corporation presents a strategy to expand military relations across all levels of the American and Chinese governments, starting with senior leadership.⁵⁴ Harold proposes creating additional engagement events between top American and Chinese political and military leaders, similar to the Strategic Security Dialogue, Defense Consultative Talks, and meetings under the Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA).⁵⁵

After expanding top-level contacts, the United States can expand lower-level contacts through counter-piracy cooperation, humanitarian exercises, professional military exchanges, and discussions about other common strategic interests like climate change and infectious disease outbreaks.⁵⁶ Harold indicates that expanding engagement events through think tanks and federally funded research and development institutions can bolster U.S.-China military relations, because military leaders can attend in unofficial capacities and have more opportunities for forthright discussions.⁵⁷

- *Strengths.* Lower-level meetings require the “blessing” of top Chinese leaders, and increasing top-level contacts could win top level Chinese military support for a broader, lower-level relationship.⁵⁸ Expanded military engagement in strategically compatible areas may help establish trust, or at least promote continuous communication in the short term. Finally, American and Chinese officers attending events at civilian institutions in unofficial capacities may engage in more candid discussions on policy issues and even develop strong relationships.
- *Weaknesses.* Scott Harold does not offer a specific plan to implement a long-term expansion of American military relations in all areas. Simply expanding strategically compatible operations, including disaster relief and counter-piracy, will be insufficient for establishing de-escalation mechanisms in more contentious and strategically important regions, including cyberspace and the South China Sea. Only reaching for easily achievable goals may further consume DoD resources without significantly increasing operational returns.

Most policymakers agree that Washington should reform military relations with the PLA. However, analysts disagree on whether to expand or scale back military engagement programs. According to General Chip Gregson, the camps advocating for expanding and scaling back military relations with the PLA have become increasingly polarized within the last several years.⁵⁹ Failure to establish effective military relations between the United States and China will jeopardize the development of de-escalation mechanisms, which will be especially important given the PLA’s growing assertiveness. This paper therefore proposes a two-phase plan for expanding military relations with the PLA.

A Two-Phase Strategy for Enhancing Trust

“I think this is an arena where we have to play the long game. This is not an area where I think you will see dramatic breakthroughs or big headlines, but rather the evolutionary growth of relationships and activities together that, over time, have a positive effect on the overall relationship.”

– Robert Gates, 2011⁶⁰

Based on the success of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Washington should collaborate with Beijing to expand military relations through a two-phase approach. First, Washington should expand combined disaster relief, counter-piracy, and other strategically compatible operations with the PLA. The United States should also establish continuous communication channels with the PLA in areas of mutual interest and share unclassified knowledge about PLA operational structures. Second, Washington should expand informal meetings between American and Chinese active duty and retired military officials, and eventually negotiate with Beijing to create a biannual “military engagement dialogue” solely between flag and general officers under the “strategic” element of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue.

Learning from the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue.

The expansion of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue offers a valuable blueprint for enhancing military relations with the PLA. While the dialogues began with low expectations and only focused on strategically compatible interests, the United States gradually built trust with Chinese leaders and proceeded to discuss more complex and sensitive issues.

- *Prioritizing dialogue over deals.* The Obama Administration combined two Bush-era dialogues with Chinese officials, the Senior Dialogue and Strategic Economic Dialogue, into the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue.⁶¹ The initial purpose of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue was to enhance mutual trust and understanding, not to produce deals.⁶² The dialogue initially focused on strategically compatible interests, particularly North Korean nuclear proliferation, climate change, and enhancing communication between American and Chinese policymakers.⁶³
- *Gradually moving to sensitive topics.* During the first Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the United States and China did not discuss more complex and strategically important issues, like human rights and counterterrorism cooperation.⁶⁴ However, by the third dialogue, discussions about instability in Xinjiang, shared counterterrorism interests, maritime security, cybersecurity, and China's regional leadership role were on the table.⁶⁵ The creation of a Strategic-Security Dialogue between civilian and military officials on both sides under the overall talks represented a move to further expand the U.S.-China relationship.⁶⁶

Drawing from the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue model, the United States should enact a two-phase approach to addressing cultural and institutional obstacles to effective U.S.-China military relations. This approach should initially focus on building trust in areas of mutual interest and gradually move to discussing more controversial topics. Ultimately, Washington should seek to create biannual, small group discussions between high-level military officials on both sides.

Phase One: Gradually Enhancing Communication and Trust

Initially, the United States should expand cooperation with the PLA on strategically compatible areas of military relations, including disaster relief, humanitarian aid, and counter-piracy exercises. Throughout these exercises, the United States should also establish constant communication channels and unclassified information sharing with the PLA to foster trust.

- *Continued expansion of strategically compatible goals.* The United States and China have expanded military engagement opportunities at all levels from 2010 to 2015, despite increasing tensions in the South China Sea and cyber-espionage concerns.⁶⁷ In 2014, the U.S. Navy invited China to participate in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises for the first time, a significant milestone in establishing combined exercises with the PLA.⁶⁸ The Obama Administration has also expanded humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) exercises with the PLA, including an exercise on a hospital ship during

RIMPAC 2014 and additional exercises on coordinating humanitarian aid to an imaginary third country.⁶⁹ The United States and China also successfully conducted a bilateral counter-piracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa in 2014.⁷⁰ Counter-piracy exercises establish contact between American and PLA officers at lower military ranks, not just among high-level officers.⁷¹

- *Areas for future expansion.* Within the limits set by the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act, Washington should also expand military relations with the PLA in other strategically compatible areas, including space exploration, clean energy cooperation, and infectious disease control.⁷² The United States' refusal to allow China open access to the International Space Station has led Beijing to construct its own space station, increasing competition.⁷³ Many policymakers in the Chinese defense community have pushed for increased offensive space-based capabilities, specifically referencing American space dominance.⁷⁴ The European Space Agency has already created space experimentation, astronaut selection, and space infrastructure working groups with China.⁷⁵ Washington could similarly enhance space-based cooperation with China in non-sensitive areas to discourage the PLA from escalating tensions using offensive space-based capabilities.
- *Continuous communication channels.* Despite institutional and cultural obstacles, the Chinese may be open to increased direct communications in strategically compatible areas, including disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. In the 2008 Guangzhou winter freeze that threatened millions of lives, a former USPACOM commander established direct communication with his PLA counterpart to coordinate humanitarian aid.⁷⁶ Building on past practices, American officials engaging in combined disaster relief operations with the PLA should ask their counterparts for contact information, while stipulating that this information will only be used to coordinate humanitarian operations. This provides a unique opportunity for American and Chinese counterparts to build strong personal relationships that can be relied upon in East Asian crises. If possible, establishing hotlines to be used only for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance will allow rapid responses to these types of crises. Building rapport between officers in humanitarian situations will develop a level of comfort that can later be used when deescalating more serious disagreements, such as in the South China Sea.
- *Sharing unclassified information.* Kenneth Allen and Lieutenant General Chip Gregson indicate that sharing unclassified, open source information with the PLA can help dispel Chinese suspicion, strengthen trust, and increase transparency.⁷⁷ Since some PLA officers believe that almost all American information on the Chinese military remains classified; these Chinese officers may perceive American open source information sharing as a positive gesture.⁷⁸ In the past, American officials have successfully used unclassified information about the PLA as a basis for asking questions of Chinese counterparts and persuading PLA counterparts to share or clarify crucial information.⁷⁹ PLA officials may be more likely to provide more information if they know that American officers already have a detailed knowledge of the PLA.⁸⁰ Acknowledgement that not all American knowledge about the PLA is classified will quell Chinese fears that American officers are biased against China. Clearly delineating what information the United States can and

cannot share about the PLA will facilitate more candid discussions, allowing American officers to fill critical knowledge gaps or address misunderstandings about the PLA.

The process of enhancing communication and trust with the PLA may be gradual. However, building rapport between the militaries by expanding collaboration in strategically compatible areas will serve as a foundation for increasing long-term trust. By pushing for continuous communication channels in areas of mutual interest, American officers can develop relationships with their Chinese counterparts that can be used in the future to deescalate more serious crisis situations. At the same time, sharing unclassified information will dispel Chinese suspicion of American officers. Encouraging this operational trust will improve the quality and candor of discussions with the PLA.

Phase Two: Towards a Continuous, Biannual Military Dialogue

After building bilateral trust and confidence, likely within ten years, Washington should collaborate with Beijing to expand informal meetings between active duty and retired military officials. The two sides should also develop a biannual military engagement dialogue under the strategic track of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue to discuss more sensitive and complex military issues, including China's behavior in cyberspace and the South China Sea.

- *Expanding unofficial dialogues.* Several former, high-level American officials developed strong relationships with their retired Chinese counterparts through unofficial "Track 2" dialogues.⁸¹ This dynamic likely arises because retired Chinese officers experience fewer political and security restrictions than their active duty counterparts.⁸² Political commissars may have more difficulty exerting influence over Chinese officers attending unofficial engagement events. To this end, Washington should expand informal dialogues between active duty and retired officers on both sides through government agencies, academic institutions, and think tanks. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) has sponsored biannual conferences with partner institutions in Hawaii and Beijing to discuss U.S.-China cooperation on nuclear proliferation.⁸³ Washington could expand these types of Track 2 dialogues to promote informal engagement between active duty and retired military officials on both sides, making it easier to forge strong relationships.⁸⁴
- *Military engagement dialogue.* The United States and China could each nominate a delegation of eight flag or general officers to participate in a regular military engagement dialogue. On the U.S. side, representatives from each military branch could nominate two officers, and the Secretary of Defense can confirm and prioritize these nominations. These representatives could meet biannually in Washington and Beijing to discuss more sensitive security issues, including tensions in cyberspace and the South China Sea. The "military engagement dialogue," a more frequent forum exclusively for military officers, could complement the Strategic Security Dialogue within the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue by enhancing personal relationships through small-group discussions.⁸⁵

- *Operational benefits.* A formal “military engagement dialogue” will establish communication between high-level military officers, allow the same individuals to meet regularly, and strengthen personal relationships between American and PLA officials. Through regular dialogue, military counterparts on both sides have better chances of using personal relationships to prevent crises from spiraling into war. Additionally, American officials can use the military dialogue as a foundation to push for additional hotlines for crisis communications with the PLA beyond disaster relief operations.

The initial creation of trust through combined operations, informal dialogue, and sharing of open source information will build the framework under which a long-term relationship can grow. Once China demonstrates a commitment to enhanced communication, the development of a formal, biannual dialogue between active-duty officers along with conversations between retired officers at civilian institutions will contribute to a deeper sense of mutual trust between the United States and China. Ultimately, effective, frequent U.S.-China military dialogue will yield the operational value that the current relations cannot deliver.

Conclusion

The PLA’s power projection capabilities have significantly increased since the 1990s. China’s focus on asymmetric cyber and space-based warfare and increased assertiveness in pursuing its territorial interests will elevate the importance of U.S.-China bilateral cooperation to promote regional stability, improve institutional understanding, and de-escalate crises when they occur.

Comprehensively addressing all cultural and institutional barriers to U.S.-China military relations may be impossible, but overcoming even a few of these challenges can add significant operational value to the overall U.S.-China military relationship. Enhancing strategically compatible combined operations and open source information sharing could gradually dispel Chinese suspicions and enhance trust in the long term. Expanding informal dialogues through think tanks can promote stronger relationships between senior officers and mitigate the influence of political commissars. Finally, creating a biannual “military engagement dialogue” can enable regular communication between senior officers and facilitate crisis resolutions.

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- ¹³ Roy Y.J. Chua, Michael W. Morris, and Paul Ingram, “Guanxi and Networking: Distinctive Configurations of Affect- and Cognition-Based Trust in the Networks of Chinese and American Managers,” *Journal of International Business Studies* 40 (2009): 490-508, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.columbia.edu/~pi17/guanxi.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ Nolan 60.
- ¹⁵ William H. Mott, “Philosophy of Chinese Military Culture, Shih vs. Li,” (Gordonville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.
- ¹⁶ “Victory Over War,” *Denma Translation Group*, 2011, accessed March 22, 2016, <http://www.victoryoverwar.com/chapters2.html>.
- ¹⁷ Mott 12.
- ¹⁸ Robert Farley, “What Scares China’s Military: The 1991 Gulf War,” *The National Interest*, November 24, 2014, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-scares-chinas-military-the-1991-gulf-war-11724>.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Schelling notes that transparency can effectively deter adversaries by clarifying a nation’s “capabilities, intentions, and consequences.” See: Thomas Schelling, “Arms and Influence,” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966). However, Schelling also states that the “threat that leaves something to chance” can deter an opponent from taking a specific action. See: Thomas Schelling, “Strategy of Conflict,” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960). While U.S. traditions of deterrence portray transparency as a benefit to effective deterrence, Chinese policymakers largely focus on manipulating uncertainty to deter adversaries. See: Jing-Dong Yuan, “Sino-US Military Relations Since Tiananmen,” *Parameters* 33 (Spring 2003): 59-60. Different PLA views on transparency may stem from the PLA’s position of weakness relative to the United States. Although the PLA’s capabilities are rapidly increasing, China still cannot match U.S. military capabilities. Hickey and Lu argue, “limited military cooperation protects the PLA from exposing all of its weaknesses, military strategies, and intelligence to the United

States.” One PLA official confirmed this, stating that, “transparency is a tool of the strong to be used against the weak.” See: Sujian Guo and Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, “‘Harmonious World’ and China’s Foreign Policy,” (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2008), 230, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://bit.ly/1QcD0Jg>.

²⁰ Nolan 63.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nolan 61.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kenneth Allen, Testimony before the U.S. – China Economic and Security Review Commission, “The U.S. – China Relationship: Economics and Security in Perspective,” February 2, 2007; According to Kenneth Allen, “only four out of eleven Chiefs of Staff of the Army, five out of eleven Chiefs of Staff of the Air Force, and five out of eleven Chiefs of Naval Operations have visited China since diplomatic relations were established in 1979.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kenneth Allen, “The Top Trends in China’s Military Diplomacy,” *China Brief* 15, no. 9 (2015), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43866&cHash=c7f46db8e3bb22ebf26d43e3ea09f6af#.VoAKphUrLWI.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Author’s Skype interview with Tom C (Navy, NSA, State Department), October 1, 2015.

³⁰ Nolan 73.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Pomfret.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Randy Forbes, “Letter to Chuck Hagel and Robert O. Work,” *United States Congress*, December 10, 2014, accessed March 15, 2016, http://forbes.house.gov/uploadedfiles/china_mil.pdf.

³⁵ Randy Schriver, “Bound to Fail,” *Washington Post*, July 25, 2011, accessed March 22, 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/jul/25/bound-to-fail/>.

³⁶ Harold 108.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Schriver.

³⁹ “Editorial: Draw a Line in the South China Sea,” *The Japan Times*, February 25, 2016, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2016/02/25/editorials/draw-line-south-china-sea/#.Vuiy6pwrLWJ>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Joseph A. Bosco, “Entrapment and Abandonment in Asia,” *National Interest*, July 8, 2013, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/entrapment-abandonment-asia-8697>.

⁴² Michelle Maiese, “Confidence Building Measures,” *Beyond Intractability*, September 2003, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/confidence-building-measures>.

⁴³ Lubold.

⁴⁴ Marcel A. Green, “China’s Growing Cyberwar Capabilities,” *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2015, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/chinas-growing-cyberwar-capabilities/>; <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/china-sharply-boosts-cyber-warfare-funding/>.

⁴⁵ Ge Juchang.

⁴⁶ Wallace “Chip” Gregson (Lt. General, *USMC*) in discussion with the author, December 28, 2015.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ann Scott Tyson, “Navy Sends Destroyer to Protect Surveillance Ship After Incident in South China Sea,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2009, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/12/AR2009031203264.html>.

⁴⁹ Harold 111

⁵⁰ Schriver.

⁵¹ Harold 108.

⁵² Kurt Campbell and Richard Weitz, “The Limits of U.S.-China Military Cooperation: Lessons from 1995–1999,” *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005–6): 169–86.

⁵³ Shannon Tiezzi, “A New Type of Military Relations for U.S. and China,” *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2014, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/a-new-type-of-military-relations-for-china-and-the-us/>.

⁵⁴ Harold 112.

⁵⁵ Harold 113.

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- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Harold 114.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Gregson.
- ⁶⁰ Robert M. Gates (U.S. Secretary of Defense) 2011, *Media Roundtable with Secretary Gates from Beijing, China*, press release, U.S. Department of Defense, Beijing, China, January 11, 2011, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4751>.
- ⁶¹ Charles Freeman, "The U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue," Center for Strategic and International Studies, (2009) accessed February 2016, <http://csis.org/publication/us-china-strategic-and-economic-dialogue>.
- ⁶² Charles Freeman and Bonnie Glaser, "The U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (2011) accessed February 2016, <http://csis.org/publication/us-china-strategic-and-economic-dialogue-0>.
- ⁶³ Freeman
- ⁶⁴ Freeman and Glaser.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Freeman.
- ⁶⁷ Kedar Pavgi, "Here's One Way the U.S.-China Relationship is Improving," *Defense One*, August 4, 2015, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://www.defenseone.com/politics/2015/08/heres-one-way-us-china-relationship-improving/118865/>.
- ⁶⁸ Shannon Tiezzi, "U.S. Admiral: 'Very Interested' in RIMPAC 2016," *The Diplomat* August 27, 2015, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/us-admiral-china-very-interested-in-rimpac-2016/>.
- ⁶⁹ Shannon Tiezzi, "The Softer Side of China's Military," *The Diplomat* August 8, 2014, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/the-softer-side-of-chinas-military/>.
- ⁷⁰ Travis Alston and Eric Coffey, "U.S., China Conduct Anti-Piracy Exercise," *America's Navy*, December 12, 2014, accessed February 16, 2016, http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=84858.
- ⁷¹ "Maritime Joint Anti-Piracy Drill of Chinese and American Navies Concluded," *Ministry of National Defense The People's Republic of China*, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2014-12/15/content_4557875.htm.
- ⁷² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, Public Law 106-65, 106th Congress. (1999), accessed February 16, 2016, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-106publ65/pdf/PLAW-106publ65.pdf>, P270; The FY2000 NDAA limits military contacts with the PLA in the following 12 operational areas: 1) force projection operations, 2) nuclear operations, 3) advanced combined-arms and combined combat operations, 4) advanced logistical operations, 5) chemical and biological defense and other capabilities related to weapons of mass destruction, 6) surveillance and reconnaissance operations, 7) combined warfighting experiments and other activities related to transformations in warfare, 8) military space operations, 9) other advanced capabilities of the Armed Forces, 10) arms sales or military-related technology transfers, 11) release of classified or restricted information, and 12) access to DoD laboratories. Exceptions can be granted only to search and rescue or humanitarian operations or exercises.
- ⁷³ Leonard David, "U.S.-China Space Cooperation: Is it Possible, and What's in Store?" *Space.com*, June 16, 2015, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://www.space.com/29671-china-nasa-space-station-cooperation.html>
- ⁷⁴ Yao Lei (姚磊), Chen Jun (陈军), and Zhang Shun (张舜), 空间作战的特点及发展趋势 [*Kongjian Zuozhan de Tedian ji Fazhan Qushi*] [Trends in the Development and Characteristics of Space-Based Warfare], *国防大学学报 [Guofang Daxue Xuebao]* [Journal of the Chinese National Defense University] no. 2 (2010): 115-118.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Nolan 76.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Gregson.
- ⁷⁹ Allen.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ⁸¹ Nolan 61.
- ⁸² Retired, senior PLA officials can maintain some degree of contact with active duty associates. For example, when the PLA announced its recent organizational reforms in early 2016, General Liu Yuan circulated a letter announcing his retirement from the soon to be reorganized General Logistics Department. This letter was disseminated to Luo Yuan, a retired PLA major general and posted on his social media account. See: Minnie Chan, "PLA to Announce Overhaul," *South China Morning Post*, December 20, 2015, accessed March 22, 2016,

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1893468/peoples-liberation-army-be-split-five-combat-regions>; Additionally, in 2015, the PLA Navy demonstrated that it can recall non-commissioned officers to active service, indicating that retired officials still have certain ties to the PLA. See: Leu Chan, "China recalls retired PLA officers for possible war with U.S., Japan other South China Sea claimants," *Manila Livewire*, June 22, 2015, accessed March 22, 2016, <http://www.manilalivewire.com/2015/06/china-recalls-retired-pla-officers-for-possible-war-with-u-s-japan-other-south-china-sea-claimants/>.

⁸³ Michael Glosny and Christopher Twomey, "Executive Summary: U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue Phase V," *Naval Postgraduate School*, prepared for Defense Threat Reduction Agency, October 22, 2010, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://edocs.nps.edu/npspubs/scholarly/TR/2010/NPS-NS-10-002.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Track 2 talks frequently involve senior retired officials. Academic institutions, non-profit organizations, and similar organizations often sponsor Track 2 events. On the other hand, track 1.5 dialogues can involve serving officials, active duty military officers, as well as retired officers, with the serving and active duty officials participating in unofficial capacities. Washington should evaluate the feasibility of expanding both types of informal dialogues.

⁸⁵ Office of the Spokesperson; Freeman and Glaser.