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New Century, New Partners:  
*Theater Security Cooperation with China*

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## *Abstract*

U.S. policy makers have questioned Chinese motivations for military relationships based on recent history. New evidence indicates that China is more committed to international military cooperation programs, yet remains opaque about their military spending and capabilities. In the larger context of a global insurgency, the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) should take advantage of the opportunity to reengage China's military in bold theater security cooperation plans. China can be a valuable partner with vast resources to participate in regional counterinsurgency operations. While the U.S. remains consistent on its policy towards Taiwan, it does not necessitate ignoring opportunities for the more immediate priority, the War on Terror. PACOM planners should create a clear roadmap in cooperation with the U.S. ambassador to walk carefully with China towards transparency and partnership.

### *Introduction*

Overall, the U.S. and Chinese military relationship has cooled since 2001 because of U.S. policies and only recently have there been positive trends. Analyses of the 2001 EP-3 incident and cooperation efforts in the late 1990s after the 1995-1996 Taiwan crisis led policy makers to back away from developing apparently unproductive military relationships with the Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Dramatic increases in Chinese military spending and capabilities have only exacerbated U.S. skepticism when coupled with the chill in the military relationship. The U.S. military response to this Chinese buildup will direct and shape the immediate future of the overall relationship.

The tendency to mirror image China as a Soviet-type threat is pervasive among many in the U.S. government who are comfortable with the Cold War paradigm. The U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) could respond to China primarily as a threat and begin to request capabilities to counter the growing Chinese capabilities, with an obvious emphasis on defending Taiwan. While all the U.S. policies are certainly priorities, one demands more immediate attention. The growing global insurgency is the U.S.'s greatest threat and biggest draw on resources. Consequently, the global counterinsurgency effort against Islamic extremists requires partnerships. PACOM does not have the capabilities needed to fight this war in its area of responsibility, as the effort requires all elements of power from international partners including their collective diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic might.<sup>2</sup>

Several indicators point to a new openness in Chinese policy including recent Chinese interest and participation in international military exercises. The time is ripe for PACOM to collaborate with the Chinese military in bold, new Theater Security

Cooperation initiatives to help shape the U.S. relationship in the hope of better solutions to the Global War on Terror and any future Chinese regional conflict. A deeper understanding of China's perspective will highlight the importance of the recent indicators.

### *China's Perspective*

Analysis of the Chinese perspective on its growing maritime power requires a review of both what China says and what it does. China seems determined to present a peaceful, yet strong presence.

Beginning with how Chinese see their own maritime history, the Chinese point to a great maritime hero to exemplify their peaceful intentions. Zheng He commanded the greatest Chinese military fleet of the middle ages. "Zheng He commanded seven voyages of trade and discovery in Southeast and South Asian waters (1405-1433) during the Ming Dynasty."<sup>3</sup> During these voyages, Zheng He remained primarily a diplomat, although he had great military might.<sup>4</sup> The ships were much larger than any European vessels. The goal of the expeditions was to gain "allies who acknowledged the Ming supremacy".<sup>5</sup> "The essence of Zheng's voyages does not lie in how strong the Chinese navy once was," declared XU Zuyuan, the Chinese government's vice minister for communication, 'but in that China adhered to peaceful diplomacy when it was a big power.'<sup>6</sup> China's long history has established a "long" memory within the culture of Chinese, such that many can relate to Zheng He. The Chinese have a strong sense of national pride directly tied to their military equipment. It is important for the PACOM planners to understand that China identifies its current military character as peaceful with emphasis on Chinese historical military diplomatic actions rather than kinetic actions.

China's recent military history has shaped how they see their present status. The Chinese witnessed a series of failures from the Sino-Japanese war through the Japanese occupation in World War II. The presence of the Soviet Union overshadowed the growth of China under communism, first strengthening and then ultimately threatening its strategic position. The present military growth appears to be, finally, China's return to glory. The current capabilities provide a sense of security to prevent past disasters. With that in mind, it does not appear likely that these capabilities support some grand strategic offensive other than sensitivities towards Taiwan, but rather a demonstration of strength and resolve to avoid the weaknesses of the recent past.

Chinese motivation for shrouding their military growth is difficult to determine. The lack of transparency in military spending presents the most alarming mystery of China's character to U.S. military analysts, despite the somewhat expected increases in spending. Regarding the current military spending, a close adviser to Chinese President Hu Jintao states:

“The concept for our military force is to focus on maintaining peace with other countries, even with Taiwan across the straits. We have no goal to catch up with other big countries that are spending so much more than us militarily or become a threatening or hegemonistic power. We only want to make sure of our right to exist as a nation and our development rights...our goal is only to obtain the basic defenses needed to protect our population and border. China is working hard alongside the U.S. to try to realize a nuclear-free Korea ... Today if there is any country in the world that does not support spreading nuclear weapons, its China and I think that's good.”<sup>7</sup>

China's information minister, Cai Wu, recently pointed that military spending is still only one per cent of the U.S. and directed mainly to quality of life and pay improvements for soldiers.<sup>8</sup> China's military spending has been increasing at double-digit growth rates since 1996.<sup>9</sup> This growth has outpaced the economic growth but not the government spending

growth.<sup>10</sup> “China’s military modernization has focused on expanding its options for Taiwan contingencies, including deterring or countering third-party intervention.”<sup>11</sup> The 2006 QDR states,

“China is likely to continue making large investments in high-end, asymmetric military capabilities, emphasizing electronic and cyber warfare; counter-space operations; ballistic and cruise missiles; advanced integrated air defense systems; next-generation torpedoes; advanced submarines; strategic nuclear strikes from modern, sophisticated land- and sea-based systems; and theater unmanned aerial vehicles for use by China’s military and for global export.”<sup>12</sup>

Much of Chinese military spending is hidden, yet current regional capabilities are impressive. If Department of Defense analysis is correct, then the Chinese spending and buildup do not seem to coincide with public Chinese statements about their intentions.

Many view this apparent deception with great suspicion, yet in the Chinese perspective, deception is clever and wise. Chinese strategy is stated as, “Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.”<sup>13</sup> As planners, PACOM should recognize this as Chinese operational security. China sees itself as a smaller asymmetrical force husbanding its capabilities.

Yet there appears to be much common ground with China’s perspective on North Korea and global threats. China demonstrated this in the Six-Party Talks with North Korea. Additionally, China made efforts in “peace operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief”.<sup>14</sup> Finally, it has “has worked peacefully to address long-standing territorial disputes with Russia, Vietnam, India, and Central Asian countries”.<sup>15</sup> China may be presenting this front as another form of deception in order to attain its economic ties with particular nations, but that is a matter for the grand strategists. At the operational level, these common interests present opportunities for cooperative military efforts.



China is sending signals that it desires military-to-military relationships. The deputy chief of General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) recently commented, "We are happy to continue high-level visits with the U.S. military, actively expand common interests and cooperation, and build upon stable development of the mil-to-mil relations."<sup>16</sup> In August 2005, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) worked with Russia in an exercise larger than any recent multilateral PLAN exercise.<sup>17</sup> In March 2007, the multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) conducted a joint anti-terror military exercise in Russia.<sup>18</sup> The group of six nations includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>19</sup> China also reengaged its military relationship with Japan in September 2006, which had cooled because of China's distaste for the actions of the previous Japanese Prime Minister.<sup>20</sup> In November 2006, China initiated the "first sub cabinet-level defense talks (with Japan) in nearly two years".<sup>21</sup> In September 2006, the U.S. and China conducted the first Sino-American combined Search and Rescue (SAR) exercise along with a port visit by two Chinese ships to San Diego.<sup>22</sup> In the exercise, the USS Shoup, a U.S. destroyer worked with the Chinese destroyer, Qingdao.<sup>23</sup> "The exercise off the coast of California is to be followed by a more complex search and rescue exercise off the coast of China", Admiral Fallon said. "But there is a long way to go to build strong ties."<sup>24</sup> PACOM planners must carefully navigate the way ahead as there are limited options because of policy restrictions on military cooperation with China.

### *U.S. Perspective*

Congress and the State Department are sending careful messages to China that encourage Chinese transparency by limiting military cooperation. The State Department

states, “U.S.-China military-to-military dialogue is proceeding, with a goal of advancing transparency and reciprocity to strengthen regional security and stability and to improve understanding of China’s military modernization”.<sup>25</sup> “Congress has also imposed restrictions on the scope of military exchanges, forbidding contacts that would enhance the Chinese military’s combat, logistical or surveillance capabilities.”<sup>26</sup> The intention is to reduce the limitations as China becomes more open about its military spending.

After the EP-3 incident, the Department of Defense backed away from a closer military-to-military relationship with China because of congressional recommendations. “They contended that military exchanges failed to reduce tensions (evident in the EP-3 incident), lacked reciprocity, and provided military-useful information to the PLA (Peoples’ Liberation Army).”<sup>27</sup> The Chinese response to U.S. diplomatic efforts only amplified this perspective.

“Admiral Prueher said that ‘I remember wishing I had your telephone number,’ in response to a PLA naval officer’s question about Prueher’s thinking during the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995-1996. After becoming ambassador to China in December 1999, Prueher was nonetheless frustrated when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PLA would not answer the phone or return phone calls in the immediate aftermath of the EP-3 collision incident.”<sup>28</sup>

At the time, the crisis had effectively shut down communication between the two militaries.

An examination of recent Chinese military projects reveals a surprising lack of transparency and poor U.S. intelligence. One of the recent surprises includes a new class of diesel submarines.<sup>29</sup> The other was the acknowledgement of a well known but denied fourth generation fighter aircraft. “The move coincides with a decision by Beijing finally to acknowledge formally the existence of the indigenously developed J-10 fighter (or Jian-10). The government confirmed late last month that the J-10 is now in operational services

with the air force.”<sup>30</sup> Both platforms represent significant advances in military technology and the unwillingness of the Chinese to disclose their capabilities, except belatedly in the case of the J-10.

The evidence indicates that both the U.S. and China are ready for increased military cooperation. China desires to demonstrate its pride, build regional respect, and to learn from U.S. experience. The U.S. should desire the strong partner China could provide in the Global War on Terror or a Korean crisis, as well as fostering Chinese trust and good will. If Korea collapses or operational intelligence indicates Al Qaeda threats in the region, PACOM could work with China to combine military capabilities for common objectives.

### *Counterargument*

Some would say that the Chinese military would use the military-to-military relationship to gain intelligence on U.S. capabilities, benefiting China more than the U.S. A recent RAND study pointed out that many military members believe that the transparency of the U.S. will only aid China to “develop countermeasures to U.S. technology or counterstrategies to U.S. methods of warfare.”<sup>31</sup> The PLA witnessed real exercises like Red Flag and elite units like the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division conducting live-fire demonstrations.<sup>32</sup> This kind of exposure, even on an unclassified level, has improved PLA understanding of U.S. technology and capabilities.

In addition, the China military does not operate with the authority of PACOM. Military cooperation would not benefit the U.S. unless China becomes more transparent. The relationships built are irrelevant because the decision making structure is different. James Mulvenon is an expert on the Chinese military.<sup>33</sup> He stated, “The Chinese value

strategic dialogue, but we can't hope that these connections can be used in crisis. Their system is structured differently. The counterpart of Admiral Fallon would not feel comfortable having independent communication with Pacific Command."<sup>34</sup>

The counterargument would also point out that China has little incentive to be transparent. If China feels that it has developed asymmetrical capabilities, it will rely on surprise and stealth to take advantage of these and its proximity to regional conflicts.

### *Rebuttal*

However, on the first point, whatever intelligence China gains about the U.S. military through cooperation exercises is available through open sources. In the scenario of an opaque Chinese military interacting with a transparent U.S. military, the transparent military stands to gain more. "At the operational level, a hypothetical closing of the attaches would diminish the ability of the U.S. military to collect intelligence information."<sup>35</sup> So, the U.S. military benefits from cooperation exercises even without full transparency because they provide access that is not otherwise available.

The U.S. should use all elements of national power in its dialogue with other nations. As the relationships grow, so will the comfort level and dialogue. The development of dialogue between senior officers may "provide a mechanism to avoid armed conflict."<sup>36</sup> The Chinese military may not be structured like U.S. Combatant Commands, but neither are many of our partner nations. While it appears true that "in the Chinese construct, cooperation is the result of mutual trust whereas cooperation in the American construct is a pathway to build trust",<sup>37</sup> preferences do not always take precedence in relationships. In other words, the U.S. does not have to meet Chinese expectations on a top-down first approach. This method could be employed in

synchronization with the U.S. preference of mid-level staff contacts. While the senior officer visits increase, mid-level officer dialogue would develop around exercise planning. The more pertinent discussion is how to create an effective security cooperation plan with China that incorporates exercises and relationship-building events. There is evidence that this structure may already be changing. A top Chinese admiral visited Norfolk in April 2007.<sup>38</sup>

“The visit was initiated by the former head of the Pacific Command, Adm. William J. Fallon, who now heads Central Command, to improve relations between the two navies, Mullen said. In a televised presentation before the Brookings Institution on Tuesday, Mullen said he wants to be able to pick up a telephone and directly call the Chinese military leader when a potential emergency needs prompt attention.”<sup>39</sup>

Currently, China enjoys military-to-military relationships with over 150 countries and established offices in 107 of them.<sup>40</sup> Further evidence of this willingness to cooperate is the participation in a multilateral maritime exercise in the Arabian Sea in March 2007.<sup>41</sup> Pakistan led a combined naval exercise including Bangladesh, China, France, Italy, Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey, the Britain, and the US.<sup>42</sup> The emphasis was counterterrorism.<sup>43</sup> While PLA officers may not currently have the authority to engage at diplomatic levels that U.S. combatant commanders do, they are expanding military cooperation efforts and relationships.

China does have incentive for transparency and PACOM planners can lead China towards transparency if they provided a clear roadmap. China desires a U.S. military relationship to improve modernization efforts.<sup>44</sup> The PLA would like to learn more about U.S. capabilities and equipment because they respect the U.S.<sup>45</sup> Admiral Keating has recently recommended an international agreement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, which he compared to the “Incidents at Sea” protocols with the Soviet

Union.<sup>46</sup> Going further than this, a roadmap agreement between the nations' military could spell out specific transparency requests with follow-on military cooperation exercise or programs to follow.

### *Analysis*

The evidence indicates opportunities exist for security cooperation with China. The primary concerns for operational planners might involve Chinese hard power answers to regional conflicts including the collapse of Korea, South China Sea territorial disputes, or Taiwanese independence. The soft power concerns involve Chinese development of regional relationships to strengthen China's access to economic resources. While all of these contingencies will draw greater U.S. attention to China's lack of transparency, PACOM can engage indirectly with Chinese civilian leadership through a specific cooperation roadmap with its military. Exercises will be critical to this cooperation roadmap because, more than relationship-building events, they reveal capabilities.

China seeks to establish regional military leadership. U.S. multilateral exercises in the region should emphasize building upon the Sino-Japanese relationship and include China in leadership positions in exchange for roadmap milestones.

Any roadmap could influence U.S. policy. The roadmap will be limited by the current restrictions on cooperation. A series of successes in Chinese transparency could open the door to more in depth exercises and exchanges between the countries. There has already been a dramatic increase within the past several years. Some examples include a "series of Chinese defense white papers, activities for attaches, open arms expositions, bilateral and multilateral exercises, vigorous military publishing, and a good official

website”.<sup>47</sup> With successful trends like these, PACOM can directly affect the language of congressional direction.

### *Roadmap Recommendations*

Any theater security cooperation plan with China must include a series of goals that support U.S. policy and the U.S. ambassador while increasing the scope and scale of the programs. The first goal of the roadmap would be to communicate clearly the level of transparency requested. The specific spending and capabilities questions of the U.S. should be included with cooperation program plans but not immediately revealed. PACOM should execute a measured disclosure, as full disclosure would appear as a daunting challenge to overcome diplomatic hurdles. Therefore, the execution of the plan should include a stair-stepped approach to disclosing the long-term transparency goals to the Chinese with the understanding that the Chinese will be reluctant to disclosure. The second goal of the roadmap would be to increase the scope and scale of programs on a timeline matched to specific milestones. This would have the added benefit of sequencing the programs with proper diplomatic growth between each stage of the cooperation plan. The momentum generated by each successive success would contribute to make greater requests for transparency. The key to synchronizing efforts will be to maintain close coordination with the U.S. ambassador to China.

The first level of theater security cooperation with China would be to increase port visits. The evidence shows that they value this as a diplomatic tool and does contribute to the overall theater-strategic dialogue with China. PACOM should schedule port visits from Chinese ships in conjunction with exercises. The Chinese perspective of Zheng He’s adventures indicates that the visit itself may be more valuable to the Chinese than the

exercise. PACOM could increase the port visits in scale by number of ships to visit, days in port, and by ship visits per calendar year. Eventually, PACOM would invite the Chinese to national events like the San Francisco Fleet Week. The exposure to the U.S. public would contribute to the overall relationship by allaying U.S. fears of Chinese military strength. The Chinese may not be immediately amiable to visits by U.S. warships but may favor U.S. Coast Guard visits. The Chinese may also approve the USNS Mercy into Chinese ports. Both types of visits would help to improve U.S. military relationships with the PLAN. Maritime visits provide a more palatable military exchange than other components because of their perceived mobility and lack of immediate threat. Exchanges between the air forces of each country would be more difficult to coordinate logistically and less effective in reaching a broader military audience. Visits by several aircraft would not have the same amount of exposure, as fewer individuals would be involved. Yet in order to reach the elite branches of the PLA, it would be necessary to include niche exchanges.

The next level of cooperation plans includes military exchanges. The easiest to coordinate would also provide immediate profit. Visits by senior officers build relationships and start dialogues that offer human value when conflicts arise. The time spent building social ties can be invaluable when time is not available. “In addition to enhancing communication, the building of bilateral contacts would give both sides a healthy respect for each other’s capabilities, thereby reducing the chance of dangerous miscalculations.”<sup>48</sup> The Asian culture especially values relationships over business agreements and the latter is only a written expression of the former. In the western culture, the written agreement usually forms the basis for a growing relationship.



Exchanges also should include mid-level officers attending a U.S. War College. The program provides the ideal combination of valuable education and a relationship-building environment. The commitment to nine months is not overly cumbersome for a few officers from China to attend. The benefit of explaining the U.S. policy-making mechanisms will help to further understanding between militaries, especially as these officers grow in authority. The Chinese students would develop relationships with U.S. and foreign military officers in their class. These relationships will continue to improve the overall dialogue and understanding between the militaries. The more difficult problem would be to develop policy for balancing Taiwanese exchanges. Both exchanges should not occur during the same academic year. Policy makers should recognize the limited interoperability gains of a Taiwanese exchange versus the larger and strategic priority of a PRC exchange. The other challenge would include finding a U.S. officer who could speak Mandarin to attend War College in China. The longer-term goal would include a Chinese exchange student at each of the U.S. undergraduate Academies. The greater commitment of four years would require a closer relationship between the countries and would not be disclosed until policy-makers had seen sufficient progress in transparency.

Search and Rescue (SAR) exercises would also be a first level cooperation plan executed in synchronization with port visits. PACOM has done this already and should increase the scope and frequency of exercises. A long-term plan might include the SAR exercise within a larger exercise involving a war game scenario. This has the added benefit of encouraging Chinese participation in a more kinetic exercise that might include platforms that are more capable.

PACOM should plan multilateral humanitarian relief exercises with increased Chinese participation. The goal of these exercises would focus more on developing combined capabilities as well as relationships. In this new mission area, the Chinese already demonstrated an interest. The added benefit of these exercises is the ability to emphasize or deemphasize different components-land, sea, or air, as necessary. PACOM could engineer the exercise such that the Chinese bring the only capability in a particular component, to highlight the value of their partnership.

As the Chinese become more transparent about spending and capabilities, PACOM could plan bilateral or multilateral combat exercises with China, depending on their comfort level. This would be the last stage of the cooperation plan. China may take the lead for planning which would help PACOM assess the Chinese comfort level and avoid establishing the U.S. in a paternalistic role. PACOM should schedule these exercises with a view towards reciprocity. After each demonstration of U.S. capability in a Chinese exercise, U.S.-led exercises should be planned to demonstrate Chinese capability.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, PACOM could use a strong partner with capabilities as China has. The Global War on Terror demands the partnership of many nations using all elements of their power in synchronization. China has significant military capability to exert regional force. The strategic issues with Taiwan remain an element of Cold War legacy to observe as they are still in effect, yet are not a priority in the PACOM area of responsibility when compared to the immediate demands of a global insurgency.

China has demonstrated interest in enhanced military exercises and relationships. U.S. policy limits PACOM planners to construct specific theater security cooperation plans

that would not enhance Chinese “combat, logistical, or surveillance”<sup>49</sup> capabilities. This will require careful and structured events towards the goal of transparency, improved military-to-military dialogue, and understanding of each other’s capabilities. The clearest path to this end is the development of a roadmap to transparency.

The roadmap will contain elements explicit and implicit for different audiences. The Chinese will be able to see the immediate benefits and short-term plan. To avoid being offensive and to build trust, PACOM planners will not push larger transparency goals initially. Policy makers and planners will examine and tool the plans based on the progress in transparency goals.

Eventually the Chinese will come to realize that they need to partnership with the U.S. military for other than intelligence purposes. The global economy has inextricably tied the livelihood of both nations to unimpeded commerce. Terrorist acts will have adverse effects on both. Deputy Secretary of State, Rob Zoellick, recently challenged China to become a “stakeholder” in the world economy.<sup>50</sup> The Chinese had some difficulties interpreting this word and chose four characters that meant “betting on both sides.”<sup>51</sup> Rather than a competitive process, like the Cold War efforts between the Soviet Union and the U.S., a more diplomatic solution is already available because China has opened the door. In the process, the U.S. and China will develop strong military partnerships and trust. Common experiences and time spent working together will effectively shape the relationship between the militaries for any future regional conflicts.

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