

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 15-05-2014		2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE "Can SOF assist USPACOM in building a stronger link to China's PLA?"				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) LCDR Stig Sanness Paper Advisor (if Any): David Gutschmit				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited. Reference: DOD Directive 5230.24					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the Naval War College faculty in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
14. ABSTRACT Can SOF assist USPACOM in building a stronger link to China's PLA? The U.S. has made it very clear in both public statements by senior policy makers and in strategic guidance documents that the Asia-Pacific region will receive increased prioritization of resources. The overall U.S. objective for the Asia-Pacific region is normally framed in terms of continued security and stability underpinned by U.S. leadership for the sake of continual global economic growth. Sustainable and substantive military to military relationships with China is seen as a major effort in reaching this goal. U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) has an opportunity to engage China's military leadership on establishing a recurring, bilateral SOF exchange focused on basic skills sets associated with counter piracy and counter terrorism mission sets. This SOF exchange would fall into an area of mutual interest for both the U.S. and China, and by initially being scaled to basic skill sets would limit security concerns by both parties. Both countries' SOF units possess the required capacity, competence and equipment to take part in this type of training event. Such an exchange would positively contribute to establishing a more transparent and robust military to military relationship between the U.S. and China.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS SOF, China, capacity building, theater security cooperation					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 29	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Chairman, JMO Dept
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-3556

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Can SOF assist USPACOM in building a stronger link to China's PLA?

by

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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.

Signature: _____

15 May 2014

UNCLASSIFIED

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Paper Abstract

Can SOF assist USPACOM in building a stronger link to China's PLA? The U.S. has made it very clear in both public statements by senior policy makers and in strategic guidance documents that the Asia-Pacific region will receive increased prioritization of resources. The overall U.S. objective for the Asia-Pacific region is normally framed in terms of continued security and stability underpinned by U.S. leadership for the sake of continual global economic growth. Sustainable and substantive military to military relationships with China is seen as a major effort in reaching this goal. U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) has an opportunity to engage China's military leadership on establishing a recurring, bilateral SOF exchange focused on basic skills sets associated with counter piracy and counter terrorism mission sets. This SOF exchange would fall into an area of mutual interest for both the U.S. and China, and by initially being scaled to basic skill sets would limit security concerns by both parties. Both countries' SOF units possess the required capacity, competence and equipment to take part in this type of training event. Such an exchange would positively contribute to establishing a more transparent and robust military to military relationship between the U.S. and China.

Can SOF assist USPACOM in building a stronger link to China's PLA?

Introduction

U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) should leverage U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) to establish a bilateral training exchange with China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) SOF in order to enable a stronger military to military relationship that assists in preserving security and stability in East Asia. Such an effort would be perfectly in line with policy goals provided by the President and the Secretary of Defense for a transparent, substantive and sustainable relationship with China.¹ SOF's small footprint, wide range of mission areas and low public profile when desired lends itself well to an USPACOM effort to establish a new link with PLA leadership. Recent events such as the Vietnamese – Chinese confrontation over a drilling rig in the South China Sea, the establishment of a Chinese air defense interception zone (ADIZ) encompassing the Japanese administered Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands in China), the Chinese – Philippines stand-off in the South China Sea over resupply of a small detachment of Filipino Marines and Kim Jung Un's generally erratic leadership in the Democratic Republic of North Korea (DPRK) have continued a trend of increasing tensions in East Asia. This decreasing stability and increasing uncertainty in a region home to the world's second and third largest economies (China and Japan, respectively) highlights the immediate need for increased awareness and understanding between the largest powers in the region, China and the U.S.²

¹ Chuck Hagel, *Quadrennial Defense Review, 2014* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 42014), p. 17.

² Andrew Bergmann, "World's largest economies", *CNN Money*, available at http://money.cnn.com/news/economy/world_economies_gdp/, accessed April 27, 2014.

USPACOM faces a complex security situation in East Asia, but does benefit from a U.S. policy decision to prioritize U.S. interests in Asia over other global interests.³ This rebalancing of U.S. resources should allow USPACOM to access more U.S. SOF capacity than has previously been available. This is especially true if the projected decrease in U.S. SOF allocated to stability and sustained combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan takes place. Given the worsening stability trends in East Asia, coupled with the incredible importance of the region to U.S. interests, it stands to reason that USPACOM would benefit from a low public exposure, low risk, low cost attempt to directly engage Chinese SOF with U.S. SOF through bilateral exercises. Such an exchange could serve as a catalyst for a stronger military to military relationship with the PLA. Ideally this SOF exercise regime would grow into a sustained effort that would allow more senior U.S. and PLA leadership an opportunity to build trust and transparency for the benefit of both countries' decision making processes. Trust, transparency and more informed national decision making processes should lead to increased stability in the region.

U.S. interests in Asia and goals for the relationship with China

President Obama's "rebalancing to Asia" policy clearly reflects the increased priority placed on U.S. interests in Asia. Then Secretary of State Clinton was among the first senior policymakers to clearly signal a shift in U.S. policy with her "America's Pacific Century" comments in October 2011.⁴ President Obama followed this up by clearly stating this shift in U.S. resource prioritization during his speech to the Australian Parliament in November,

³ Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament" (speech to Australian Parliament, Canberra, Australia, November 17, 2011), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>, accessed February 15, 2014.

⁴ Hillary R. Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy* (October 11, 2011), available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century, accessed April 23, 2014.

2011.⁵ These public statements have been followed up in 2014 with similar affirmation of the shift in the U.S. strategic direction and prioritization by both President Obama and Secretary of Defense Hagel during their recent visits to Asia.⁶ U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) strategic guidance documents follow these public statements with specific guidance to the U.S. military enterprise. This guidance directs reprioritization and specific actions for meeting U.S. objectives in East Asia. A review of DoD strategic guidance follows below, and it shows that a bilateral SOF exchange is in support of U.S. policy goals for East Asia.

Highlights from key strategic documents defining U.S. goals in East Asia and China

The senior DoD strategic guidance document, the Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG), or as it is published: “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense”, clearly lays out objectives for the DoD enterprise in East Asia. The DSG succinctly sums up the changing global situation facing the U.S., leading to a transitioning from sustained combat and stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to a prioritization of U.S. objectives in East Asia.⁷ The primary U.S. policy goals for East Asia are security and stability in order to continue to foster regional and domestic U.S. economic growth.⁸ This goal is to be met by prioritization of efforts in the following areas: emphasis on existing relationships with Allies and partners in the region, building relationships with new partners in the region such as India and finally, building a cooperative bilateral relationship with

⁵ Barack H. Obama, “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament”.

⁶ Barack H. Obama, “Press conference with Japan’s Prime Minister Abe” (remarks made during joint press conference, Tokyo, Japan, April 24, 2014), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/04/24/president-obama-holds-press-conference-prime-minister-abe-japan#transcript>, accessed April 27, 2014, and Chuck Hagel, “Press conference preceding travel to Asia” (remarks made during press conference prior to travel to Asia, Washington DC, March 13, 2014), available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5399>, accessed April 27, 2014.

⁷ Leon E. Panetta, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, January 2012), pp. i-iii.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2.

China.⁹ The document also specifies certain other focus areas that are relevant to the security and stability in East Asia. Some of these are: peace on the Korean Peninsula, avoidance of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and unrestricted access to the global commons and a promotion of a rules based international order. The DSG specially singles out pursuit of low cost, innovative and small footprint solutions for building partnership capacity as the preferred option in to meet security objectives.¹⁰ The DSG explicitly calls for increased efforts in establishing a bilateral relationship with China, so an effort by USPACOM to start a SOF exchange with China is in line with strategic U.S. guidance.

The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), published 4 March 2014, advances the strategic direction for DoD set forth in the DSG.¹¹ Similarly to the DSG, the QDR leads with a strong note on the changing security environment and the necessary change in policy direction in order to ensure U.S. interests are met.¹² While much of the document is concerned with detailed shaping decisions for the Joint Force, it does clearly identify U.S. policy goals and direction for East Asia. The overarching U.S. national goals are listed as core national interests in the QDR. They are to be pursued by the entire U.S. government, including DoD. The four core interests are:

- (1) security of the United States, its citizens, and U.S. allies and partners;
- (2) a strong, innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity;
- (3) respect for universal values at home and around the world;

⁹ Leon E. Panetta, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 1-3.

¹¹ Chuck Hagel, *Quadrennial Defense Review, 2014*, pp. IV-V.

¹² Ibid, p. III.

(4) and an international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.¹³

These core national interests are to be met by DoD through a three pillar strategy. The first pillar is “Protecting the Homeland” and encompasses the capability to deter and defeat attacks on the U.S. This is DoD’s number one priority as described by the QDR. This part of DoD’s strategy includes support to U.S. civil authorities with capabilities to protect U.S. airspace, shores and borders, as well as domestic disaster relief.¹⁴ A USPACOM effort to start a SOF exchange with China only indirectly contributes to this strategic pillar. Indirectly, a SOF exchange would ideally lessen the chance of a major power conflict that would certainly threaten the U.S. homeland and global interests.

The second pillar, “Build Security Globally”, is significant as it directly relates to the topic of USPACOM using U.S. SOF to engage the PLA. This element of DoD’s strategy focuses on global engagement to deter and prevent conflict while assuring U.S. allies and partners of U.S. commitment to global security and stability. Global outreach and engagement is also a mechanism to ensure U.S. leadership and influence.¹⁵ Building global security takes place through the presence of U.S. military forces overseas where they are deployed to conduct training, exercises or other forms of military to military activities. In order to build global security in East Asia, the QDR specifically calls for upgraded and enhanced security alliances with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines and Thailand. Increasing the capacity of these longstanding alliances will allow the U.S. and its

¹³ Chuck Hagel, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, 2014, p. 11.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

allies to meet evolving challenges in the region more effectively.¹⁶ The QDR calls for strengthened defense relationships with new and newer partners such as: Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia and India. This is again in an effort to strengthen regional capabilities to meet developing challenges in the region.¹⁷ The QDR finally calls for continued building of a sustained and substantive relationship with the PLA to build a foundation that enables better cooperation in areas such as counter-piracy, humanitarian assistance / disaster relief (HA/DR) and peace keeping operations.¹⁸ This part of the QDR relates directly to the thesis of this paper, and a SOF exchange is a very plausible effort to start with in order to better cooperation in the mission areas previously mentioned.

The third pillar of DoD's strategy lined out in the QDR is "Project Power and Win Decisively". This part specifically deals with DoD's ability to deter acts of aggression in one or more theaters and this capability is listed as fundamental to the U.S. role as a global leader. The QDR highlights that power projection also encompasses DoD's ability to provide timely and effective HA/DR to regions in need.¹⁹ An U.S. – China SOF exchange would only indirectly contribute to this pillar, similarly to the indirect contribution to the first pillar. A U.S – China SOF exchange could absolutely increase the credibility of U.S. deterrence in East Asia through increased PLA awareness through direct contact with U.S. SOF of potential asymmetric threat vectors in a conflict.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense' "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013" neatly nests with the previous two strategic guidance documents issues by DoD. This report to the U.S. Congress

¹⁶ Chuck Hagel, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, 2014, p. 16.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 12.

focuses specifically on issues related to U.S. strategy vis-à-vis China. It also provides additional detail to overarching guidance delivered in the DSG and QDR. As an example of what the DSG and QDR list as issues complicating the security environment facing the U.S. and its allies in East Asia, this report to Congress highlights China's inclusion of its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas as "core interests" that merit action if challenged.²⁰ The report also details recent advances in PLA's force structure. These changes in force structure are part of China's long term military modernization program designed to enable its military to project power over greater distances and win short duration high intensity conflicts in the information age.²¹

Finally, the report highlights China's pursuit of increased military to military engagement in order to increase its international prestige and image, improve relationships with foreign militaries and better its own modernization process through interaction, deployments and exercises.²² This detailing of Chinese military to military engagement efforts fits well with U.S. objectives laid out in the DSG and QDR. Those documents direct the DoD enterprise to build a military to military relationship with the PLA that is sustainable, substantive and encourages China to cooperate with the U.S. and its allies and partners in the delivery of public goods.²³ While most of this report is directly concerned with China's strategic goals and military advances, it does also detail the growing number of bilateral and multilateral exercises the PLA has taken part in recently.²⁴ This data will be useful when examining mission areas where U.S. and Chinese interests potentially overlap.

²⁰ Leon E. Panetta, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2013), p. 3, available at http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013_china_report_final.pdf, accessed September 26, 2013.

²¹ Ibid, p. i.

²² Ibid, p. 1.

²³ Ibid, p. i.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 61-65 and pp. 69-73.

USPACOM's strategy leads with the affirmation that the U.S. is rebalancing its efforts to Asia to meet uncertain and dynamic security challenges. This is very much in line with the DSG and QDR. USPACOM's desired end state is clearly stated as "the Asia-Pacific is secure and prosperous, underpinned by U.S. leadership and a rules-based international order".²⁵ USPACOM's strategy then list seven guiding principles that will assist in reaching its objectives and eventually set the conditions for meeting the desired end state. They are: International Rules, Partnerships, Presence, Force Projection, Unity of Effort, Strategic Communication and Readiness to Fight and Win.²⁶ Of these guiding principles, Partnerships, Presence and Strategic Communication are of particular interest when considering an U.S – PLA SOF exercise regime. While partnership and presence guidance is mostly concerned with activities designed to strengthen existing U.S. alliances or build new ones with emerging partners, USPACOM's strategy clearly echoes the previous three strategic guidance documents in directing increased focus on an U.S. – China military to military relationship.²⁷

This strategic document goes into further detail than the previous higher level documents. It lists the following as possible areas to pursue security cooperation with the PLA: HA/DR, counter piracy, non-proliferation, counter terrorism, non-combatant evacuation operations, military medicine and maritime safety.²⁸ USPACOM's strategy clearly allows for a SOF exchange, and provides a significant number of mission areas to explore for potential U.S. – China interest overlap. Especially counter piracy and counter

²⁵ Samuel J. Locklear III, "USPACOM Strategy", available at: <http://www.pacom.mil/about-uspacom/2013-uspacom-strategy.shtml>, accessed May 4, 2014.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

terrorism, SOF hallmark tasks, are two areas with great potential for interest overlap and tolerable as mission areas to explore for a SOF exchange.

U.S. Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) strategic guidance document titled "Special Operations Forces 2020: The Global SOF Network" lays out how U.S. SOF intends to transition from sustained combat in Iraq and Afghanistan to meet directed U.S. policy shifts in the face of a changing security environment. A major portion of this document is dedicated to USSOCOM's "Global SOF Network" initiative which is designed to provide the Secretary of Defense, Geographic Combatant Commands (GCC) and Chiefs of Mission with enhanced special operations capability through a global network of SOF, U.S. government partner agencies and partner nations.²⁹ A key part of this initiative is U.S. SOF's sustained presence forward, executing tasks in support of GCC requirements in more than 75 countries on a daily basis.³⁰

While detailed U.S. SOF force allocation planning is generally classified, some hints are available in recent remarks made by Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, the USPACOM commander.³¹ While the USPACOM commander's comments are general in nature, it is reasonable to expect that additional capacity will be available to USPACOM to support alliance and partnership development. Simultaneously, Admiral William H. McRaven, USSOCOM's commander, continues to lead the "Global SOF Network" initiative to maturity. This extra capacity would be usable for a USPACOM SOF exchange with China.

²⁹ William H. McRaven, *Special Operations Forces 2020: The Global SOF Network* (Tampa, FL: USSOCOM, August 2013), p. 4.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 2.

³¹ Samuel J. Locklear III, "Special Operations Command Pacific Change of Command" (USPACOM commander's remarks during change of command ceremony, USPACOM, HI, June 10, 2013), available at: http://www.pacom.mil/commander/10_june-13-socpac-change-of-command.shtml, accessed May 9, 2014.

A short review of USSOCOM's force structure and recent contributions in operations inside and outside of declared theaters of active armed conflict is merited to understand potential contributions U.S. SOF can provide to a USPACOM effort to engage the PLA. USSOCOM is comprised of special operations units from all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, with current end strength of more than 60,000 active duty, reserve, National Guard soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and DoD civilians.³² This expansive force structure, encompassing the full spectrum of skill sets available in the U.S. Armed Forces, combined with actual depth in units and personnel, allows for many possible vectors for USPACOM to tailor to a possible PLA engagement.

U.S. SOF contributions during sustained combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have been well published, with the raid to capture or kill Al-Qaeda's top leader Usama bin Laden in May 2011 a strong example of SOF executing a tactical operation with strategic effects. USPACOM can use U.S. SOF's proven competency in generating positive strategic effects with tactical actions as an incentive to entice China to join in a bilateral exchange. Perhaps more importantly for USPACOM is U.S. SOF's less exposed efforts in partner capacity building in areas of significant sensitivity and international relationship balancing. The U.S. SOF operations to train and equip partner forces in Pakistan and Yemen fall into this category. Both areas are fraught with difficult and often conflicting U.S. - host nation interests that require mature, professional and strategically aware SOF personnel to successfully execute their tasks.³³ A final note on sensitive training efforts, U.S. and Chinese

³² USSOCOM Home Page, available at: <http://www.socom.mil/Pages/AboutUSSOCOM.aspx>, accessed May 5, 2014.

³³ Julian E. Barnes, "US training of Pakistan Army to grow", *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 2009, available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/apr/29/world/fg-us-pakistan29>, accessed May 5, 2014. Eric Schmitt and Jane Perlez, "Distrust slows US training of Pakistanis", *New York Times*, July 11, 2010, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/12/world/asia/12training.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, accessed May 5, 2014. Missy Ryan and Mark Hosenball, "U.S. military trainers trickle back into Pakistan", *Reuters*, May 30, 2014,

naval units did execute a bilateral counter piracy exercise in 2012, so direct U.S. – Chinese military to military training is not without precedent. USPACOM can exploit these three points during negotiations with PLA leadership. A final benefit for USPACOM is USSOCOM’s special authorities provided by Title 10, United States Code, for joint combined exercises for training (JCETs) and partner capacity building.³⁴ This special USSOCOM authority allows for flexibility in pursuing a bilateral SOF exchange.

Summary of U.S. goals and capacity related to engagement with China’s PLA

The U.S. strategic goal for engagement with China is to build a sustainable and substantive military to military relationship that increases transparency and reduces potential for conflict in East Asia. The DSG, QDR and USPACOM’s strategy are completely synchronized in this regard, with DoD’s Annual Report to Congress on China providing additional details on recent Chinese developments and trends. This clear policy direction to the DoD enterprise is further enhanced by previously highlighted public statements affirming the U.S. policy shift by President Obama and Secretary Hagel.

U.S. SOF capacity for challenging partnership building efforts has been established as being resident in the force. Prioritization of U.S. efforts in Asia should guarantee actual unit availability. Given these facts it is very reasonable to expect USPACOM to consider it within U.S. interests to pursue a low cost, low public exposure, low risk outreach to PLA leadership via a bilateral SOF exchange.

available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/30/us-usa-pakistan-trainers-idUSBRE84T1IJ20120530>, accessed May 5, 2014. Missy Ryan, “U.S. to resume military training aimed at al Qaeda in Yemen”, *Reuters*, May 8, 2012, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/08/us-usa-yemen-trainers-idUSBRE8470XW20120508>, accessed May 5, 2014. Margaret Coker, Hakim Almasmari and Julian E. Barnes, “U.S., Yemen to restart training”, *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2014, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970204276304577265321207513952>, accessed May 5, 2014.

³⁴ Leon E. Panetta, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2013*, p. 73.

China's strategic goals for its relationship with the United States

China's strategic goals for its relationship with the U.S. are important to understand to determine if there is overlapping interests in both nations for a SOF exchange. China's interests are primarily extrapolated from DoD's "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013". Information from DoD's report to Congress is integrated with analysis of PLA's evolving doctrine and force structure for a final assessment on what China's strategic goals for its relationship with the U.S. are. Perhaps more important for a potential SOF exchange, the focus is on determining if such an exchange would be in line with Chinese interests.

China's strategic objectives are listed as: perpetuating Chinese Communist Party rule, sustaining economic growth and development, maintaining domestic political stability, defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and securing China's status as a great power.³⁵ Chinese leaders have indicated that a modern military is necessary to achieve great power status and the expansive PLA modernization underscores the high prioritization this has for China.³⁶ This military modernization has three major parts to it. One modernization part is increased Chinese desire to engage in bilateral or multilateral exercises in order to increase PLA capacity by learning from foreign military powers.³⁷ Changes to PLA's force structure and doctrine are the other two modernization elements. They will be discussed in detail to ensure understanding of potential areas of overlap with U.S. interests for potential SOF exchanges.

³⁵ Leon E. Panetta, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013*, p. 15.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 1.

*Changes in China's force structure that lends itself to a SOF exchange*³⁸

China's PLA has been undertaking a major modernization program for more than two decades. This has led to significant changes in air, ground and maritime capabilities. PLA SOF has also benefitted from modernization and become an essential part of Chinese war plans.³⁹ To understand China's modernization goals, examining the changes in PLA's estimation of future war requirements is advantageous. During the Cold War, PLA leaders assessed that the most likely conflict facing China was a protracted and manpower intensive unlimited war fought on Chinese soil. In this scenario China would use inherent advantages in manpower (force), time and space to defeat a technologically superior enemy.⁴⁰ SOF units were not prioritized in this ground centric scenario.⁴¹

After the Cold War, China drastically changed its view of what type of conflict was most likely. Invasion by a foreign power was determined to be less likely than a local, limited war fought over a unification and/or territorial (land/maritime) dispute.⁴² A commensurate change in PLA force structure and operational doctrine followed. The PLA's modernization goal is to field a smaller, more technologically advanced and mobile force,

³⁸ Stig Sanness, "What role does Chinese SOF play in an anti-access / area denial environment in PACOM?", (unpublished paper, Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, October 15, 2013).

³⁹ Michael S. Case, "Chinese Special Operations Forces: "Lessons Learned" and Potential Missions", *Jamestown Foundation*, Vol. 7, Issue 4 (February 21, 2007), pp. 1-2, available at http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=32512&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=197&no_cache=1, accessed September 28, 2013.

⁴⁰ Nan Li, "The PLA's Evolving Campaign Doctrine and Strategies – Chapter 8", in Mulveon, James C. and Richard, H. Yang, ed., *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age*, (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1999), pp. 146-147, available at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF145.html, accessed September 26, 2013.

⁴¹ Dean Cheng, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Special Operations", *Special Warfare* 25.3 (July-September 2012 issue), pp. 24-25, available at <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1033636830/140D0868CA86F67C002/1?accountid=322>, accessed September 29, 2013.

⁴² Nan Li, "The PLA's Evolving Campaign Doctrine and Strategies – Chapter 8", pp. 146-147.

capable of joint operations and regional power projection.⁴³ The “new” PLA is a force much more suitable for SOF, where capabilities such as mobility, flexibility, expertise and precision are highly emphasized. China has dedicated resources to SOF and now has a force capable of executing core SOF missions such as raids and reconnaissance. These mission competencies are required if PLA SOF is to have a strategic impact in a future conflict.⁴⁴ While the PLA obscures the actual numbers and capabilities of its SOF units, enough information is available in open source reporting to safely assume that China currently possesses enough SOF capability and capacity to engage in a meaningful exchange with the U.S.⁴⁵

Changes in China’s military doctrine that lends itself to a SOF exchange⁴⁶

While reshaping the PLA from a large low-tech static ground force to a smaller, mobile force capable of regional power projection, PLA leadership also began modernizing its operating principles. This part of the modernization process culminated in a doctrine for “local war under high-tech conditions”.⁴⁷ The doctrine appears to have been influenced by in-depth analysis of Operations Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Special interest was devoted to the strategic role played by U.S. and coalition SOF.⁴⁸ PLA’s “local war under high-tech conditions” doctrine focuses on three main strategies for successful

⁴³ “World Armies - China”, Jane’s World Armies, available at:

<http://www.ihs.com/products/janes/security/military-capabilities/world-armies.aspx> , accessed July 25, 2014.

⁴⁴ Scott J. Henderson, “In the Shadow: Chinese Special Forces Build a 21st-Century Fighting Force”, *Special Warfare* 19.4 (July-August 2006 issue), p. 30, available at

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/199404167/140D04ECA2C670DD504/1?accountid=322> , accessed September, 26, 2013.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 30-35.

⁴⁶ Stig Sanness, “What role does Chinese SOF play in an anti-access / area denial environment in PACOM?”

⁴⁷ Nan Li, “The PLA’s Evolving Campaign Doctrine and Strategies – Chapter 8”, pp. 146-147.

⁴⁸ Jane’s World Armies, “World Armies - China”.

implementation: “elite forces and sharp arms”, “gaining initiative by striking first” and “fighting a quick battle to force a quick resolution”.⁴⁹

The “elite forces and sharp arms” strategy emphasizes the concentration of elite forces to achieve local and temporary superiority in order to destroy the enemy in the most efficient manner. The key elements of this strategy are: available rapid reaction forces, effective logistics networks for strategic mobility and sustainment, comprehensive effects targeting the enemy utilizing tailored forces operating jointly and finally effective command, control and coordination by a joint headquarters.⁵⁰

“Gaining initiative by striking first” emphasizes the inherent military advantage of a first strike and the element of surprise. This strategy has two main themes: understanding the enemy’s vulnerabilities while simultaneously deceiving the enemy to PLA operations. Comprehensive intelligence on the enemy allows for the most effective first strike possible. Deceiving the enemy to PLA operations through diplomatic messaging, military deception operations and electronic measures allows for a level of surprise. With surprise and an effective first strike, the PLA should have the initiative in the initial battle of the campaign, which is the goal of this strategy.⁵¹

“Fighting a quick battle to force a quick resolution” is a strategy for the actual prosecution of the conflict. The goal is a localized and short duration conflict. A short conflict is seen as advantageous from mainly two perspectives: high-tech weapons are expensive and devastating to infrastructure and PLA superiority may only be attainable for short duration as a suppressed enemy could recover. The quick battle strategy relies heavily

⁴⁹ Nan Li, “The PLA’s Evolving Campaign Doctrine and Strategies – Chapter 8”, pp. 146-147.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 151-158.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 158-162.

on surprise attacks, information operations and deep/vertical strikes on enemy centers of gravity.⁵²

All three of the main strategies for PLA's "local war under high-tech conditions" doctrine rely heavily on concepts such as mobility, flexibility, expertise, surprise and precision. Those attributes are also typically associated with advanced SOF units. China now has the operational doctrine in place to deploy the capability its modernized SOF units provide to strategically impact a conflict in the information age. China's increase in bilateral and multilateral engagement to reach its modernization goals coupled with prioritization of SOF in its force structure and doctrine lends itself to advantageous conditions for a USPACOM effort to start a SOF exchange.

Summary of U.S. – Chinese overlapping interests related to a SOF exchange

Having established that a SOF exchange is well within U.S. interests, it can be assessed that such an effort would also be within Chinese interests. While an overt request by China for such an exchange is unavailable, it is reasonable to infer that a SOF exchange would be in line with Chinese interests based on its military to military engagement trends, modernization program and statements made by Chinese leaders. If China sees increased military to military contact with the U.S. as a stepping stone to "a healthy, stable, and reliable relationship", and this is indeed a Chinese strategic objective, SOF exchanges are a viable option for the same reasons they are for the U.S.; they are low cost, low visibility and low risk.⁵³ Another reason SOF exchanges with the U.S. should be of interest to China is its desire to field modern and effective military power on par with other Great Powers.

⁵² Nan Li, "The PLA's Evolving Campaign Doctrine and Strategies – Chapter 8", pp. 162-170.

⁵³ Leon E. Panetta, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013*, p. i.

Advanced SOF capabilities are part of a Great Power's repertoire. PLA's changing force structure and evolving doctrine supports evidence for increased reliance on SOF to generate strategic effects in a potential future conflict. Exchanges with the world's leading SOF units would only serve to increase China's own SOF capabilities. Finally, the 2014 highly reported terrorist events in Tiananmen Square and the Urumqi train station, 45 and 82 casualties respectively, underscores internal security challenges faced by China.⁵⁴ SOF skills learned by PLA units in an exchange with U.S. SOF could easily be transferred and applied to internal security issues. While this may be uncomfortable to U.S. policymakers, it is nevertheless an aspect to consider when gauging Chinese interest in a SOF exchange.

A key negotiating tool is that the actual nature of the SOF exchange is scalable. This allows both U.S. and Chinese leadership to settle on an exercise regime that is acceptable to both parties. At its most basic level, the exchange can be built around basic SOF skills such as small arms marksmanship, parachuting and patrolling. Or the exchange can be scaled up to encompass full spectrum mission areas such as counter terrorism or counter piracy operations. USPACOM likely stands to gain more access to PLA leadership from a more complex exercise regime, but at a commensurate risk in derailing the effort due to security concerns on both sides. Still, the U.S. military has already conducted bilateral counter piracy training with China, and has a robust precedent of working through sensitive negotiations to reach compromises in other areas of the world.

⁵⁴ Greg Bothelho, "3 killed, 79 hurt in blast, knife attack at China train station", *CNN*, May 1, 2014, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/30/world/asia/china-xinjiang-explosion/>, accessed May 6, 2014. Katie Hunt and Steven Jiang, "Five arrested in Tiananmen Square incident, deemed a terrorist attack", *CNN*, October 30, 2014, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/30/world/asia/china---tiananmen---arrests/>, accessed May 6, 2014.

Potential pitfalls for an U.S. – Chinese SOF exchange

Even though it appears to be clearly within both U.S. and Chinese interests to pursue a SOF exchange, there are several factors that will be difficult for USPACOM to overcome before a sustained exercise regime is in place. On both sides the desire for a meaningful military to military relationship has the potential to be overshadowed by a very real, if unstated, parallel great power competition. So while SOF is a low cost way to establish bilateral military relationship, perhaps labeling such an exchange low risk is problematic. This is because both U.S. and Chinese SOF are expected to contribute in a strategic manner if there is a future conflict in East Asia. The desire to keep this element of national power obscured from a potential enemy may be seen by either side to outweigh the potential benefits of an exchange.

A U.S. – Chinese SOF exchange may also adversely affect other valuable U.S. relationships in the region. It is uncertain how well long standing U.S. allies (e.g. Japan) or partners would react to a U.S. – Chinese SOF exchange given their competing security interests. Finally, it is uncertain that a SOF exchange in itself would generate anything beneficial in a highly complex U.S. – Chinese relationship. What is for sure is that a SOF exchange in itself will not be enough to alter the basic context of what is clearly a U.S. – Chinese competition for influence in East Asia.

USPACOM has multiple risk mitigation options available to address these potential pitfalls. The scalability of the exchange is in itself a risk mitigation tool. Limiting the extent of the exercise allows for control of what tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) are exposed. Unit and personnel selection for the actual exercise is another risk mitigation tool. If exposure to a potential enemy is of concern, selecting units or personnel that are expected

to play a lesser role in a potential conflict is a way to control exposure. Both the U.S. and China have enough depth in SOF units to be able to use this risk mitigation mechanism. Counter-intelligence and operational security training is a further drive too to drive down risk of exposure. Increased SOF training opportunities can be offered to allies and partners that may be ill disposed to a U.S. – Chinese SOF exchange in an attempt to minimize stress on other valuable partnerships. In summary, there are several tools available to leadership in both the U.S. and China to manage the risks of a SOF exchange so that the benefits outweigh the risks.

Conclusion and recommendation to USPACOM: “Go for it”

The increasing tension and uncertain security environment in East Asia coupled with the extreme risks to not just U.S. interests, but also global economic stability, should drive USPACOM to view the potential benefits of a SOF exchange with China as beneficial and worth the risk. Neither the U.S. nor China can afford to pass up opportunities to better understand the other’s strategic decision making processes. While a SOF exchange will not automatically get either country to where they have clear insight into the other’s decision making, a SOF exchange is a meaningful way to add to what has to be a multi vector approach to build the sustainable and substantive relationship both the U.S. and China have stated as a strategic goal. By generating more opportunities for U.S. and Chinese leaders to engage with each other for better understanding and trust, it seems a SOF exchange is exactly the type of action that is low cost and when managed correctly, low risk, to merit serious USPACOM consideration. *I recommend USPACOM engage PLA leadership on the possibility of establishing a recurring bilateral SOF exchange focusing on basic counter*

piracy and/or counter terrorism skill sets. Such an exchange would fall into both countries' interest areas when considering mission sets, but by starting at a basic skill level, minimize potential hesitation due to security concerns. This exchange could then serve as a vehicle for USPACOM to further expand its relationship with PLA leadership, allowing for progress towards a U.S. strategic goal of sustained and substantial relationships with China's armed forces.

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