



Copyright © 2006 TCS Daily. All rights reserved.

Can US and Chinese Military Forces Cooperate?

TCS Daily
3 November 2006

By Richard Weitz

This week a Chinese military delegation is conducting a five-day tour of U.S. military installations. They will visit the headquarters of the U.S. Pacific Command in Hawaii and tour a guided missile destroyer in San Diego. Last month, the Chinese and U.S. navies undertook their first joint search-and-rescue exercise. Early next year, the head of China's strategic missile units is scheduled to visit U.S. Strategic Command, which controls all U.S. nuclear forces.

Although these activities have raised hopes of considerably deeper defense cooperation between these two potential adversaries, we need to remain cautious regarding the likely benefits of these military exchanges. Recurring problems have derailed past efforts to establish a sustained Sino-American defense dialogue. These difficulties will continue to bedevil their future military cooperation.

Some senior American military officers advocate relaxing Congressional restrictions on bilateral defense contacts to widen the scope of these exchanges. One proponent of deeper military engagement is Admiral William Fallon, who has visited China three times since taking charge of U.S. Pacific Command less than two years ago. Admiral Fallon argues that, since "China isn't a clone of the Soviet Union," the U.S. military can safely conduct a broader range of ties with it.

Actually, several factors make the Chinese armed forces a *more* difficult dialogue partner than the former Soviet military. Whereas by the late 1980s Soviet officials and officers widely accepted the value of superpower arms control, Chinese leaders remain averse to genuine defense transparency and have long resisted American calls to provide more information about their military spending. When a U.S. military delegation visited China in March, their hosts showed them Cold War-era planes and warships rather than China's latest weapons.

Chinese policymakers fear that greater transparency could provide Americans with insights into their country's military vulnerabilities. They also adhere to a historical tradition that values strategic deception as a valuable tool against potential adversaries like the United States. Although the Chinese government has begun issuing white papers on its security and defense policies, these documents are rich in generalities about China's good intentions and sparse in specifics about its actual practices.



In contrast to the Gorbachev-era Soviet Union, Chinese leaders still view their country as a rising military power. For this reason, they do not want to codify existing disparities in military force capacities or operating patterns, which favor the United States. China has refused to join the Russian-American strategic arms reduction process on the grounds that Moscow and Washington must first make much deeper cuts in their larger nuclear arsenals. In addition, Beijing has proven reluctant to accept Washington's long-standing proposal to establish a direct hotline between the Pentagon and the Chinese Defense Ministry. Whereas U.S. officials believe this link could facilitate crisis management, China's political leaders want to ensure tight control over military communications during an emergency.

The Sino-American defense relationship has traditionally served as the proverbial canary in the coalmine—acutely vulnerable to external shocks. Adverse political events have repeatedly led China and the United States to curtail military contacts as a form of signaling or retaliation. Prominent incidents have included the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait missile crisis, the 1999 accidental bombing of China's Belgrade Embassy by NATO, and the 2001 collision of a Chinese warplane with a U.S. Navy surveillance plane in international airspace near China's Hainan Island. Despite their recently renewed military dialogue, another Taiwan confrontation, a flare-up in the Chinese-Japanese East China Sea dispute, or some other crisis could again cause Beijing or Washington to freeze defense ties.

The Soviet case does show that it can take years of sustained engagement to reshape the military practices of great powers such as China. Until then, American officials should hedge against the failure of U.S. shaping strategies towards China by reinforcing defense ties with Australia, India, and Japan. They also should continue to assess military exercises, reciprocal exchanges, and other defense activities with China on a case-by-case basis and with a jaundiced eye.

Dr. Richard Weitz is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Advanced Defense Studies (CADS), a non-profit, non-governmental national security group that applies the intent-centric paradigm to promote research, innovation and education in information sciences, cognitive studies and information security.

Please [click here](#) to read the original article on *TCS Daily*'s website.