

Statement on US-China Military Exchanges
Before the U.S. –China Economic and Security Review Commission
“U.S.-China Relationship: Economics and Security in Perspective”
COL Charles W. Hooper
Senior Lecturer
Naval Postgraduate School
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I would like to thank the Commission for inviting me here to participate on this panel. I must begin with the obligatory caveat that the comments that I will make today constitute my own personal views, and in no way represent the policies, positions or opinions of the Department of Defense or the Department of the Army.

On 26 October, only days before the arrival in China of the Commander, Pacific Fleet, a Chinese Song-class diesel-powered attack submarine shadowed the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk undetected and surfaced within five miles of the carrier.

On 11 January, China successfully launched an anti-satellite missile destroying the aging Chinese weather satellite target at 537 mi. altitude.

These recent incidents of apparent aggressive PLA behavior directed towards the U.S. have caused me, once again, to think about the nature of our bilateral military relationship; its focus, goals and objectives.

When talking to friends, I have often likened the cyclical nature of U.S.-China military relations to a monster roller coaster at a Six Flags theme park. The “ride,” like a new cycle of the relationship, usually starts from the dead stop of little to no military contact. It then begins the slow clinking ascent on the first incline, or in relationship terms, the initial bilateral negotiations to define the basis for, and number of, military exchanges. The crest of that first incline culminates with a senior-level bilateral summit, at the Minister of Defense-Secretary of Defense level, which validates the months of negotiations and begins the cycle of exchanges. The ride and the relationship then cascades downhill in a flurry of exchanges, visits, and activities. As the relationship negotiates the invigorating loops and turns, the “passengers,” Chinese and U.S. defense officials, “scream” with excitement. The question is: are they screaming with enjoyment, in the belief that the exchanges will contribute toward improving the overall bilateral relationship? Or are they screaming because they fear that the exchanges will offer the opposite side a military or security advantage in some future conflict?

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Finally, the roller coaster negotiates that last frightening, jolting loop or dip—the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, the 1995 Taiwan Missile Crisis; the 2001 collision of a Chinese fighter plane with a U.S. surveillance aircraft—and the ride, and the relationship cycle, arrive at an abrupt halt. After a brief pause, the ride and the cycle begin anew. Unfortunately, regardless of how long or invigorating the ride, the relationship—like a roller coaster— always seems to start and stop at the same point, having made little to no forward progress, at least as far as we are concerned. This begs the questions: “Why is this so?”, “Why should we continue with this apparently underproductive relationship?”, and, finally, “If we continue, how can the relationship be made more useful for the U.S.?”

Analysis of the Exchanges

During the 20-year course of the military relationship, those who were optimistic have felt that the exposure to U.S. military culture and values would influence the PLA leadership to advocate implementing these “professional” values into the Chinese military. This “professionalization” would, presumably, have a stabilizing effect on the PLA and make Chinese military aggression less likely. I have never understood how a **more** professional PLA would become **less** threatening. On the contrary, it seemed to me that a **more** professional PLA would be **more** effectively threatening. Regardless of this apparent contradiction, even if the PLA incorporated a value system that paralleled their U.S. counterpart, it would still be the Chinese military. Its officers would still be hard-nosed patriotic professionals, just as dedicated to protecting the national interests of their country as I am to protecting the interests of mine.

Some believe that the relationship will improve “mutual understanding” and that this understanding will reduce the possibility for conflict. As for myself, I believe that we have achieved this mutual understanding. The PLA have made it very clear through their military build-up, R&D priorities and actions such as the Kitty Hawk incident, that they consider the U.S. military to be their principal future challenge. We have made it very clear that we understand what they are doing. So, I guess we have achieved mutual understanding of a kind.

Others believe that the relationship might at least reduce the possibility for miscalculation and potentially forge lines of communication with the PLA leadership that could be used in time of crisis or potential confrontation. The recent Kitty Hawk incident and, more to the point, the April 2001 EP-3 incident, effectively dispelled any notion that this is possible in the near term. Although many might dispute this, no matter what we do it is likely that the only phone call that a PLA commander will answer in any present or future incident is the one from Beijing, not from the outside.

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Still others believe that we can use military exchanges to help shape Chinese strategic behavior in ways that do not threaten U.S. interests, but there is no indication over the past 20 years that this has taken place. As the 2006 DOD Report to Congress clearly states, and the recent ASAT test confirms, the PRC defense budgets continue to increase by double digits annually, the research and development of niche capabilities continues unabated and the PLA continues to methodically improve its military capabilities towards some, at this point, unknown end well beyond Taiwan reunification.

The hard-nosed pragmatists believe that military exchanges might at least deter current and future generations of PLA officers by exposing them to U.S military prowess and resolve. I would argue, anecdotally, that the exchanges may have had the exact opposite effect. Instead of returning home suitably impressed and cowed by what they see during their visits to the U.S., most PLA officers return home with a renewed resolve that the PLA must increase the resources and dedication necessary to challenge U.S. military superiority. If we have learned anything about the new security environment, it is that the most likely response to fear, or more accurately an attempt to instill fear, is anger and determination and not resignation and capitulation. Once again, I assume that my PLA counterpart is at least as dedicated as I am, and my response to the apparent superiority of my counterpart would be to return home and work twice as hard to beat the other guy, not put my tail between my legs.

Finally, it has also become apparent over the course of the relationship, that the PLA has done its best to gain as much as possible in terms of information and insights into U.S. military capabilities while carefully concealing its own intentions and capabilities. For the U.S., the twin issues of transparency and qualitative and quantitative reciprocity have been, and as far as I can see, remain a major point of contention in the relationship. I will discuss transparency in more detail shortly.

Given these beliefs, the question I ask myself is: “Where do we go with this military relationship, and what objectives can the U.S. realistically hope to accomplish that will support our interests?” Before I answer this question, I would like to explore and hopefully expel some myths that I believe have sometimes distorted the relationship.

The Myth of PLA Transparency

We are all familiar with the history of the transparency issue. While PLA delegations to the United States have received unprecedented access and exposure to facilities, equipment, and personnel, U.S. delegations to China have experienced much different treatment. In keeping with the secrecy and

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deception that are fundamental tenets of Chinese military strategy, and despite 20 years of almost non-stop requests and pressure on the PLA, U.S. delegations are given itineraries heavily weighted toward carefully choreographed “demonstrations of training”, “show” units, cultural tourism and generally short on relevant military content.

Inevitably, at the beginning of every exchange cycle, our senior officials are accorded a “first ever” visit to a previously “secret” installation, usually a regional or national-level headquarters building. While I would not diminish the political, symbolic and metric significance of these visits, it seems to me that if we were making any real progress, i.e., we had learned anything of significance concerning PLA capabilities or intent, we still would not be discussing this issue.

Some would point to the “first-ever” visits, new units visited, briefings given and exercises observed and say PLA transparency is increasing, but I can’t shake the feeling that we are being offered an *illusion* of transparency; a more carefully selected and choreographed set of activities than in days past, crafted to respond to our persistent demands. We can visit the headquarters now, but not the units in the field. We received a briefing, but it is from the political commissar or a senior staff officer, not an operational commander. We can see “demonstrations of training”, but not actual unit training. We can go to the school for foreign military students, but not the school for PLA students. This is not surprising. Physically, historically and culturally China is, and always has been a nation of walls—walled cities, walled villages, walled houses and a Great Wall—all hiding and protecting the secrets that lie within. One of the first lessons I learned about being in China was that if I, as a foreigner, was allowed to see something, there was a specific reason for me to see it, and the most likely reason was to keep me from seeing something else. Although we must continue to press hard for increased transparency, I am doubtful we will get beyond an increasingly realistic illusion.

The Myth of Obligatory Reciprocity

During the engagement era, DOD allowed PLA delegations wide access to U.S. bases, routine training, operational equipment, and unclassified information. In addition to promoting PLA trust in the U.S., one of the implied objectives of this effort was that U.S. military transparency would somehow encourage an obligation on the part of the PLA to increase their military transparency. In other words, the PLA would reciprocate our transparency with increased openness. There are some that still believe in what I call the myth of PLA “obligatory reciprocity”. I do not. The PLA has not reciprocated, will likely never reciprocate in a meaningful way and it will not be “guilted” into making its military more transparent.

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As I stated previously, secrecy, ambiguity and deception are fundamental tenets of Chinese military culture and “guilt-based” decision making is antithetical to Chinese cultural and strategic tradition. Given this cultural reality, the PLA will continue to accept the access and information offered by the United States, while carefully guarding access to their own military and security apparatus.

The Myth of the Personal Relationship

There is no doubt that in many cultures, a shared drink, a warm, firm handshake, or a frank and honest discussion does result in a personal connection that might be leveraged at some later date. Unfortunately, Chinese culture does not allow for this concept. Despite the best efforts of many U.S. military leaders to forge relationships with their PLA counterparts, there is no indication of any success. I would argue that the secretive and conservative culture of the PLA and the nature of domestic PRC politics would preclude meaningful relationships between senior PLA officials and their US counterparts. PLA leaders are polite and gracious, if superficial hosts to friend and foe alike, and their courtesies extended to U.S. guests, I believe, have sometimes been misconstrued as genuine camaraderie, and the establishment of a personal connection. The facts remain that in crisis, a top priority of most senior Chinese leaders—in addition to resolving the crisis—is assessment of how their involvement might impact or influence their future position and status, and the status of their faction, family, and close friends. Since no PLA leader would risk being labeled as a potential traitor in the aftermath of a potential Sino-U.S. crisis, regardless of the stakes or outcome, it is unlikely that they would reach out to a U.S. counterpart or that they would accept a telephone call from one. Despite all indications that this is the case, there are some who still believe that we can enjoy useful and productive personal relationships with Chinese military leaders. I do not.

Process Orientation versus Results Orientation

Quite simply, in the case of military exchanges, the PLA takes a process-oriented approach while the U.S. is results-oriented. For the PLA, the fact that exchanges and discussions are ongoing—regardless of how superficial or innocuous—is sufficient to declare the relationship as productive. Meetings with senior U.S. officials to convey the current political message on Taiwan or other security issues are considered important; the particular quality of the lower-level exchanges, in terms of access to facilities and information, is less important. As many others have said, for the PLA, “who” (i.e., senior influential members of DOD), is seen as far more important than the “what.” That is not to say that the PLA has not pressed for access to sensitive U.S. facilities, exercises, and information or taken advantage of every opportunity offered by the U.S. Having said this, the principal PLA objective of a military relationship with the United

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States is, to have a perfunctory military relationship with the United States that does not interfere with either their military build-up or strategic behavior. Period.

For the United States, “what” is seen—in terms of weapons, installations, and training being vehicles for providing that might provide insight as to the capabilities and strategic intent of the secretive PLA—is more important than “who” is seen. By definition, U.S. goals for the relationship are counter to the PLA’s strategic culture of concealing their military capabilities and maintaining strategic ambiguity. If the United States is successful, the PLA loses. The PLA understands this and actively pursues a strategy which restricts both U.S. access and the scope of the military relationship.

Finally, some discussion on a way ahead...

I would argue that what we want from our military relations with the PLA is to learn; to gather as much information as we can about not only their weapons, capabilities and intent, but about the men and women who will lead the PLA now and in the future. We also need to educate our military leaders about China and the PLA and expose them to as much of both as the market will bear.

These exchanges, even in their flawed state, offer us a rare opportunity to do something we have never had a chance to do in the past; gain an appreciation for a potential adversary before we may have to confront them. This past fall, I had an opportunity to observe a PLA delegation that passed through my school and I was able to learn things that I did not previously know.

Inherent in our desire to learn, is a continued effort to increase PLA transparency by sustaining pressure for access to “places, things and people”. Even if, as I argue above, the circumstances are restricted and choreographed, theater does sometimes provide glimpses of real life and it is possible to learn as much from what is not seen and why, as from what you are shown and why you were shown it.

The parameters of the relationship must adhere to the spirit and letter of guidelines listed in Section 1201 of the FY 2000 National Defense Authorization Act, put in place to reduce the ability of the PLA to benefit from the exchanges. Having said this, we can gain unilateral benefits from these exchanges and stay well within the guidelines of the law.

If we set aside the premise that military exchanges should influence the PLA or PRC strategic behavior in our interests and take a more U.S.-centric approach—that is objectives that are independent of the PLA’s response—we can improve

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the value of these exchanges. Exchanges should:

Communicating Strategic Intent. Senior-level military dialogue can serve as a medium for both sides to communicate their intent, share information, address outstanding security issues and state their positions. This would serve to reduce ambiguity and decrease the possibility of military miscalculation. It is not necessary that these meetings result in any general agreement; indeed, the majority will end, as they always do, with both sides agreeing to disagree. Their purpose is to ensure that each side knows the positions of the other.

Focus on “People” as well as “Places and Things”. Press the PLA for more opportunities for bilateral officer discussions at all levels from cadet through general and flag officer. We spend enormous time and resources, focused on “places” (bases and facilities) and “things” (weapons and technologies) but not as much on the people who manage these places and operate these things. There are many discussion topics such as military history and others that would provide no advantage to the PLA or risk of exposure, but would allow us to peer into the attitudes and thought processes of the rising generation of PLA leaders. An Su 27 is only as good as the person flying it, or the person leading the squadron. What makes him tick? How have the changes in Chinese society influenced his leadership style? What are his values? What is important to him? It is possible to learn all these things, and more, from properly crafted conversation about a seemingly innocuous subject.

Educating U.S. Military Personnel. Military contacts should be structured to inform and educate as many U.S. personnel as possible. It is a commonly accepted axiom among China watchers that the average Chinese knows more about the U.S. and Americans than the reverse. I have heard PLA officers quote “chapter and verse” whole sections of the Bill of Rights or the West Point accession process. At present, our cultural military education efforts focus on the Middle East and rightfully so. Having said this, China’s power continues to grow. Granted, given the PLA lack of transparency there will be limits as to what can be learned, but such a goal would insure a desperately needed increase in the general level of U.S. knowledge concerning China and the evolving role and capabilities of the PLA. Once again it will not be perfect, but never underestimate the influence that merely visiting a place can have on shaping accurate views of what challenges you may have to face.

Assuring Regional Actors of Stable U.S.-China Security Relations. Military relations could contribute to a more stable regional security environment through the dialogue and education described above. If nothing else, the “process” of conducting the exchanges continues to communicate to our allies that at least a

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perfunctory bilateral military relationship exists.

The objectives described above can produce direct benefits to the United States, independent of the actions or reactions of China. If the military relationship serves to influence PLA policies personnel and strategic behaviors, so much the better. Their value to the US, however, is not dependent solely upon the PLA reaction to them.

The military relationship cannot substitute for our other efforts to increase our understanding of evolving PLA capabilities and intent. However by dispelling the myths that cloud the relationship and focusing on objectives that produce unilateral benefit for the U.S., we can make the relationship more supportive of our national interests.