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U.S.-China Security Management

Assessing the Military-to-Military
Relationship

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Prepared for the United States Air Force

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Summary

U.S.-China military relations are at an important crossroads. Because of failures in the U.S.-China military relationship and the relationship's perceived lack of ability to produce tangible benefits, many observers have come to doubt its value and even argue that the relationship has harmed U.S. national security. In 2001, the Defense Department began a reassessment of its relations with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to determine the extent and appropriate nature of these contacts. This reevaluation of the U.S.-China military relationship led to a severe curtailment in military-to-military activities. Since the EP-3 incident in April 2001, all military-to-military activities with the PLA were reviewed on a case-by-case basis pending the completion of a policy review. The few exchanges that do take place are mainly military education exchanges and high-level dialogue. The completion of the policy review and the holding of Defense Consultative Talks in December 2002 have now opened the door for military-to-military contacts to expand.

This report examines the debate surrounding U.S.-China security cooperation and concludes that security cooperation between the United States and China has value. Because of the possibility of armed conflict over Taiwan, the United States needs to maintain a military-to-military relationship with China. The military relationship with the PLA is heavily constrained, however, in the benefits it can provide the U.S. military. Consequently, conducting the type and degree of military-to-military activities with the PLA that have been conducted in the past is not appropriate. This study argues that the

U.S. military-to-military relationship with China should not focus on security cooperation. Instead, it should focus on security management in which dialogue, information gathering, and limited cooperation take place to minimize misperceptions and the chances of conflict.

Different Approaches

A significant hindrance in developing U.S.-China military relations is the fundamentally opposite approach each side uses in pursuing cooperative relationships. The U.S. military prefers a bottom-up approach in which lower-level contacts build trust and identify areas of common interest. Once identified, these areas can be built upon with more in-depth cooperation. The PLA, on the other hand, prefers a top-down approach in which higher-level dialogue is employed to build trust, which is a stepping stone to identify and reach areas of agreement. Without this trust and agreement on strategic issues, the PLA is uncomfortable with further enhancing cooperation.

U.S.-China military relations are also constrained by significant policy differences between China and the United States over core security concerns, such as Taiwan and U.S. activism. The United States remains wary of China's refusal to renounce force to unify with Taiwan. China, for its part, resents the U.S. global force posture, use of force, and continued military assistance to Taiwan, which are seen as efforts to undermine China's sovereignty and security. As a result of these policy differences, each side regards the other side as a potential enemy. Consequently, the PLA has been reluctant to be equally transparent in its relations with the U.S. military, despite agreement on military-to-military activities at the presidential level. (See pages 80–86.)

Four Issues of Contention

The current debate in the United States on U.S.-China military relations has centered around four major issues of contention: the poten-

tial risk of U.S.-China military relations to U.S. national security, the potential benefits of the U.S.-China military relationship to the United States, the ability of the United States to influence China, and the relative levels of reciprocity and transparency in the relationship.

Benefits for the PLA?

Whether the PLA has benefited from its relationship with the U.S. military can largely be determined only through inference. Much information about U.S. military strategy and doctrine is available from open sources, including the Internet, making it entirely possible that considerable PLA knowledge of the U.S. military has come from a massive translation effort that has disseminated U.S. writings widely within the organization. It is also possible, however, that questions asked by PLA delegations to their U.S. interlocutors could have provided greater insight or cleared up misperceptions regarding U.S. doctrine. An additional measure of whether the PLA benefits from its interactions with the U.S. military is its own opinion of the value of the relationship. The PLA reportedly values its relationship with the U.S. military because it can draw lessons on how it should conduct reform. Thus, it must be assumed that the PLA has benefited to some extent from its relationship with the U.S. military. (See pages 43–47.)

Benefits to the United States?

In contrast, some observers contend that the U.S. military has not benefited from its relationship with the PLA because of the latter's penchant for secrecy and deception. Again, it is difficult to assess from open sources the benefit of the relationship for the U.S. military. Interlocutors, however, have provided specific examples of instances where information was gathered on the PLA through delegation visits or through the normal function of the attaché office, indicating that the U.S. military has benefited to some extent from its relationship with the PLA. (See page 47.)

Military-to-Military as a Tool of Influence?

A case study examination of the U.S.-China relationship in regard to military-to-military relations, intellectual property rights, and arms

control and nonproliferation indicates that the United States has limited influence over China. Influence over China has been better achieved with economic incentives and disincentives and international pressure than with unilateral U.S. pressure. The use of these measures within the military-to-military context appears inappropriate, however. Thus, a look at the evidence from several cases suggests that the U.S. military has very little influence over the PLA and the Chinese government. China is more influenced by international opinion than by U.S. pressure alone; economic incentives and disincentives have had a measured success in changing Chinese behavior; and the military relationship does not exist in a vacuum, but instead is primarily shaped by the tenor and atmosphere of the overall political and diplomatic relationship. (See pages 47–55.)

Reciprocity and Transparency

The most contentious issue is that of reciprocity and transparency. Chinese officials have long resisted efforts at greater transparency, arguing that “transparency is a tool of the strong to be used against the weak.” For its part, the United States can be said to want transparency at the operational level whereas China wants transparency at the strategic level. Thus, until China is comfortable with U.S. strategic intentions, significant obstacles to reciprocity will continue to exist. While all interlocutors agree that there is a gap in transparency between the U.S. military and the PLA, there is disagreement over its degree and significance. Analysis of military exchanges indicates that the discrepancy over reciprocity and transparency does not revolve around the types of bases visited and the frequency of visits; rather it revolves around the U.S. military not being shown operational training or realistic exercises, to which the PLA has had access, and to the content of functional¹ visits. In addition, inefficiencies in the U.S. Defense Department’s handling of its military relations with the PLA—inefficiencies in planning, conducting, and debriefing—have

¹ Functional refers to facility visits, student exchanges, and discussions of professional military topics. Activities are usually conducted between mid-level officers and officials.

limited the U.S. military's ability to properly exploit PLA transparency when it exists. (See pages 55–57.)

Overall Assessment and Policy Recommendations

Despite the problems encountered with carrying out the U.S.-China military relationship, there is value in continuing these activities. Although limitations in transparency and influence exist, the possibility of armed conflict between the United States and China warrants that a relationship be maintained to resolve differences and avoid misperceptions. This analysis recommends a three-part program of communication, information gathering, and limited cooperation. Communication can be conducted at the highest levels to signal strategic intent, clarify policy, and attempt to dissuade and deter China from taking actions inimical to U.S. interests. The relationship can also be used to gather information on the PLA to improve the U.S. military's understanding of PLA operations, doctrine, and role in the Chinese government. Finally, limited cooperation can take place when U.S. interests are at stake. Cooperation in the war against terror may be one prime example. Functional exchanges, however, like those conducted in the past to improve understanding will probably fail because of the lack of trust engendered by disagreements over strategic intent. (See pages 90–99.)