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RESEARCH BRIEF

Managing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship

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The United States and China have had a security relationship since 1971, when Henry Kissinger opened the door to cordial relations by sharing intelligence about the Soviet military. Recently, however, disagreements over key issues have led each country to regard the other as a strategic competitor and a potential enemy. For example, China views U.S. military assistance to Taiwan as an effort to undermine China's security and its claim to sovereignty over the island. China's failure to renounce the use of force against Taiwan—a policy opposed by the United States—has further elevated tensions and has even raised the possibility of armed conflict.

In 2001 the U.S. Department of Defense began to reassess the U.S.-China relationship to determine the appropriate nature of contact between the two militaries. A RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) study conducted in parallel with this effort recommends a program of security management with three aspects:

- **The United States should pursue communication between U.S. and Chinese senior defense and military officials** to prevent misperceptions, resolve differences, and deter China from taking actions that are hostile to U.S. interests. This approach would be consistent with China's preference for building cooperative relationships from the top down.

- **The United States should pursue improved methods of gathering information about China and its military.** In the past, China has been much less open than the United States in sharing information about its military. However, Chinese military strategy and doctrine are theorized and developed in the military education system before they are adopted. Therefore educational exchanges may provide useful insights into Chinese warfighting that will help the United States simultaneously avoid armed conflict and win if a conflict becomes inevitable. Researchers further recommend that properly planning visits to China (for example, choosing high-value bases and units and allowing enough time to negotiate the terms of the visits) will increase U.S. chances of gathering useful information.

- **The United States and China should continue to cooperate in the global war on terrorism.** China demonstrated strong, early, public support for the global war on terrorism. Continued intelligence sharing and other cooperative efforts with China in response to third-party threats—and even the sharing of some classified information about the identities and operations of terrorist groups—may benefit U.S. interests and be essential for U.S. national security. ■

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