

# WebMemo



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## U.S.–China Cooperation: Strengthening the U.S. Hand

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In the midst of the Obama Administration's effort to corral Chinese support for international action against Iran and North Korea, it has been widely recounted—including by no less than the Secretary of Defense himself—that the People's Republic of China (PRC) rebuffed his interest in visiting the PRC for consultations.

Speculation is that the Chinese decision not to meet with Secretary Gates is due to their continued pique with U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, although the Chinese themselves have simply relied on the oft-used phrase that such a meeting “is not convenient” (*bu fangbian*).

This incident suggests that military-to-military relations between the PRC and the United States remain at a low point despite efforts by the Obama Administration to “reset” Beijing–Washington relations. It also suggests that the Chinese view military-to-military talks and other U.S. interests as somehow irrelevant to their own. Taking back some of the concessions the Chinese have pocketed over the years would be a good way of rebalancing the relationship to U.S. advantage.

**So Where Is this Relationship Going?** At this point, the Obama Administration is confronted with the need to set priorities in its relationship with China. What is it that the Administration thinks the Chinese are *actually* prepared to do to assist the U.S. with regards to North Korea and Iran? Indeed, if all China will support in the face of North Korea's blatant attack on America's South Korean allies is a non-binding U.N. resolution, just what is Administration solicitousness toward China gaining?

If, on the other hand, there is a larger strategy behind Sino–American relations, the Administration needs to clarify what the goals are and where military-to-military exchanges would fit into this larger framework. Without that bigger picture, it appears as if U.S. efforts to cooperate with China are simply being dismissed out of hand.

In this context, military-to-military exchanges are not a boon granted by China to the U.S. but part of the larger fabric of U.S.–China relations. In general, one might conceive of two broad approaches to military-to-military exchanges. In one case, the purpose would be to institutionalize exchanges between senior defense officials—military and civilian—so that each side would have an opportunity to meet their counterparts and air grievances or raise concerns. Such meetings, once instituted on a regular basis, would not be lightly suspended, because of the political signaling that any cancellation would engender—on both sides. Conversely, such visits would not necessarily occur frequently—perhaps only once or twice a year.

In the second case, the objective would be to exchange actual information, through visits to actual units, on how each side conducts a variety of

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operations (e.g., the provision of logistical support, strategic lift, and communications in complex environments). This interaction might extend so far as to conduct exercises jointly. While ostensibly serving as a confidence-building measure, in fact, such an approach works only if both sides are equally transparent—a near impossible proposition under current circumstances. Past experience with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) suggests that Chinese officers would certainly welcome such interactions in order to learn as much as possible from the U.S. military but would not be as forthcoming with information themselves. Consequently, U.S. law strictly—and very wisely—proscribes certain types of information from being shared.

If the objective of military-to-military exchanges is to improve mutual communications, then regular talks aimed at avoiding inadvertent conflict and high-level protocol visits may well suffice. In which case, if the PRC is unprepared to entertain such interactions, perhaps the Administration might recognize that diplomacy is failing. Taking back some of the concessions America has already made to Chinese interests would demonstrate what is at stake for Chinese officials in the relationship and perhaps make them more amenable to more balanced cooperation in the future.

**Strengthening America's Hand.** To this end, Washington should take steps to indicate that, as the world's sole superpower and largest economy (three and a half times the size of China's), it has a range of both military-related and non-military options available if cooperation with China continues to come up empty. The U.S. should:

- *Proceed with the sale of F-16C/Ds to Taiwan.* Just as delaying the visit of the Dalai Lama sent the (wrong) signal that the U.S. was considering altering its interactions with the Tibetan leader, so continued delay on the sale of badly needed fighter aircraft to Taiwan will only mislead

Beijing into thinking it has more leverage on this issue than it does.

- *Dispatch cabinet secretaries to Taiwan on a more regular basis.* The last one occurred 10 years ago. Over the past year there has been talk of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki visiting the island. This would be a good start. The symbolism of a former Chief of Staff of the Army visiting the island would not be lost on either side of the Straits.
- *Seriously pursue a free trade agreement with Taiwan.* Such a measure would remind China that the U.S. has non-military levers at its disposal. Moreover, such a move would help the Administration attain its avowed goal of “doubling U.S. exports.” Unlike the PRC, Taiwan is also a potentially valuable high-technology trading partner, as Taipei's commitment to the protection of intellectual property rights is stronger than Beijing's.
- *Consider more regular interaction between U.S. and Taiwan defense officials.* Given the continued American defense commitment to Taiwan, greater familiarity between the relevant defense and military officials in Taipei and Washington is also essential. Likewise, there is no inherent reason to restrict Taiwan Ministry of National Defense visits to Washington to the “Vice Minister” level.

**A Reminder.** All of these recommendations are good ideas in their own right, not chips to be traded for China's cooperation on matters that should be of mutual concern, like North Korea's nuclear threat or military-to-military consultation. Proceeding with them, however, will remind Beijing that maintaining good relations with Washington is in the PRC's own interest and not a matter of China granting favors to a supplicant.

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