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U.S. Must Focus Military Talks with China

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U.S.–China military-to-military relations have a very rocky history over the past two decades. Mutual suspicion, as well as fluctuations in the broader U.S.–China relationship, has resulted in periods of relatively good relations alternating with nearly frozen military contacts.

This week's visit by General Chen Bingde of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) marks the most recent reset of Sino–American military-to-military relations. On the heels of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's December 2010 visit to China, as well as the January 2011 Hu–Obama summit and last week's Strategic & Economic Dialogue (S&ED), the visit by General Chen and a delegation of senior PLA officers is clearly intended to signal an improvement in Sino–American relations in general and military relations in particular. Chen and seven colleagues will be meeting Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary Gates, as well as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Michael Mullen, ostensibly to get U.S.–China military-to-military relations back on firmer footing.

A Serious Visit, with Different Goals. Chen's visit is significant. This is the first visit by a senior PLA officer since Sino–U.S. military relations were essentially frozen after the 2010 announcement of a \$6 billion U.S. arms sale to Taiwan.

Chen is a key actor in the Chinese military hierarchy. He is head of the General Staff Department (GSD) which, along with the General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and the General Armaments Department, manages the

PLA. As head of the GSD, he is senior to the heads of the Chinese navy, air force, and Second Artillery (essentially China's strategic rocket forces). His position means that he ultimately has responsibility for the development of war plans and control of PLA operations in the event of war.

Nonetheless, Chen's visit alone will not remake U.S.–Chinese military relations. This is not because military-to-military contacts in and of themselves are undesirable. The U.S. and China need to have open channels of communication if they are to have any prospect of managing routine incidental contact and bilateral crisis points. If talks between senior leaders can give each side a little more understanding of the other, that should be welcomed.

Unfortunately, it is not clear that even this minimal goal will be achieved. China and the United States have very different views of the purpose of military-to-military contacts. The American side seeks to create rules and norms, in order to make the two sides' actions more predictable. The American side also wants to have more direct contact between American operators, whether it is the captain of a Navy ship or the head of Pacific Com-

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mand, and their Chinese counterparts, in order to nip problems in the bud.

The Chinese side, by contrast, seeks to use such meetings to tackle strategic issues, such as American views of China as a threat or U.S. relations with Taiwan. The Chinese side sees the resolution of these big-picture issues as the way to avoid crises—if it can also fundamentally alter American behavior, it considers that a bonus.

In many ways, the two sides are going into these discussions talking past each other: The Chinese intend to play “go,” their equivalent of chess; the Americans intend to play baseball.

The Chinese Agenda. It should be emphasized that fundamental differences separate the U.S. and the PRC, and these will not be resolved through meetings. Sino–American suspicions are not simply the result of different perceptions and misunderstandings. This is reflected in the basic agendas for the two sides.

The Chinese are coming with a clear notion of what they want from the U.S., and it is not necessarily to improve transparency or mutual understanding. Instead, as Major General Qian Lihua, director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense, made clear in an interview with *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, General Chen is coming with three major items on his agenda: ending or curtailing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan; ending or reducing U.S. air and naval surveillance operations off China’s coast; and ending sanctions on sales of advanced technology to the PRC.¹

These goals are couched in terms of “mutual respect and mutual benefit.” But even these terms are loaded with specific meaning from Beijing’s perspective. As Major General Qian notes, “mutual respect” means respecting each other’s “core interests and important concerns,” which is equated with the three items on General Chen’s agenda.

By contrast, the American side seems to have far less sense of purpose. It would seem that the main American objective is to have more meetings in the

future. Some in the defense community would like to talk about China’s military space program or Chinese cyber intrusions and activities. And Beijing may well agree to talk about these things—but does the Administration expect China to actually give up its counter-space capabilities, stop its computer network exploitation and attack activities, or share anything about its capabilities in these areas?

Perhaps the Chinese side, too, is chasing impossible goals. Yet, one is left wondering why the Administration has still made no move to meet Taiwan’s legitimate defense needs—most notably by making available the new F–16C/Ds and F–16 upgrades they have expressed interest in. One can only wonder whether Chen’s visit will further delay Taiwan arms sales to the detriment of Taipei’s security. If so, the Chinese will have achieved one real goal in exchange for promises of future meetings.

The American Agenda. In order for military-to-military contacts to bear genuine fruit, the American side needs to develop more concrete goals and approaches:

- **Press the Chinese on transparency.** Part of the purpose of these talks is to reduce tensions and improve mutual visibility. China’s military expansion has made it the strongest regional military in the western Pacific. Ideally, it should therefore be more transparent, but the Chinese regularly claim that the weak (China) do not have to be transparent to the strong (U.S.). Still, China’s greatly expanded military capability has clearly made it stronger than its neighbors. Therefore, by its own reasoning, it is up to China to be more transparent to its neighbors, whether that means Japan, South Korea, the nations of Southeast Asia, or Taiwan. Washington should highlight this contradiction to press China for transparency towards its neighbors, if not to the U.S., especially on Chinese decision-making processes and ultimate military plans.
- **Reiterate America’s non-negotiable interest in freedom of the seas.** American surveillance activity off China’s coast is fully in keeping with

1. Zhou Feng, “Promote the Building of China-US New-type Military Relations—Interview with Qian Lihua, Director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense on Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde’s Visit to the United States,” *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, May 12, 2011.

customary international law and necessary for America's and its allies' national security needs. The American presence in the Western Pacific is welcomed by China's neighbors.

- **Don't neglect the details.** Restrictions on military-to-military contact and reporting requirements in the Fiscal Year 2000 National Defense Authorization Act have long been a target of Chinese lobbying. They are not bargaining chips. In fact, Congress has recently sought to put a similar fence around space cooperation.

Never Be Afraid to Talk. China's leadership is preparing for the 2012 U.S. transition. There is

little Chinese interest, during this time, in having instability abroad. Therefore, if the Chinese leadership should show interest in more substantive military discussions, Washington should be prepared to engage Beijing. The U.S. remains the strongest power in the Asia-Pacific region, and it loses nothing by being willing to engage. But it should never sacrifice support for friends and allies or abandon its principles in deference to a robust U.S.–China meeting schedule.

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