

The Limits of U.S.-China Military Cooperation: Lessons from 1995–1999

The United States and China began the 1990s with virtually no bilateral relationship. After the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square, Washington had suspended all defense contacts and military-related commerce with Beijing. By the end of the 1990s, the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) had ridden the proverbial roller coaster, with periods of intense dialogue and interaction coupled with times of profound tension and alienation. Military ties, which displayed the greatest volatility, remain one of the most intriguing dimensions of the Sino-U.S. relationship. During the past five years of the George W. Bush administration, military relations have lagged behind other elements of official state-to-state ties. The reasons for this relative inactivity and caution in bilateral security interactions are complex, including a legacy of spy scandals, differences in regional and global policy agendas, and the potential for a military clash over Taiwan.

The Bush administration's approach to military engagement with China undoubtedly also reflects some of the lessons learned during President Bill Clinton's administration. Bounded on one side by the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis and on the other by the May 1999 accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, this period provides an instructive case study on the impediments to securing and sustaining effective Sino-U.S. defense ties. From 1995 to 1999, senior U.S. civilian and military officials worked to create an integrated framework for security engagement with Beijing. Several events drove this endeavor, which initially enjoyed broad bipartisan and

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expert support in Washington. First, a series of near clashes occurred between forward-deployed U.S. naval forces and units of the Chinese navy. These incidents demonstrated to U.S. commanders the need to negotiate rules of the road for military operations in the western Pacific. Second, senior People's Liberation Army (PLA) officials persistently complained to their Washington counterparts about U.S. military aircraft flying precariously close to Chinese airspace. They claimed these flights deliberately sought to expose various Chinese air defense systems and protocols. Third, the heightened tensions resulting from China's provocative military moves during the Taiwan Strait confrontation led some in Washington to regret the lack of a deeper defense dialogue before the crisis, which would have helped communicate mutual red lines.

Finally, U.S. civilian and military leaders in the Pentagon naturally wanted to pursue better relations with their Chinese counterparts, given their country's growing military reach. The objective never was engagement for engagement's sake. Instead, U.S. policymakers sought to convince Chinese interlocutors of the correctness of the U.S. worldview on such issues as military transparency, international law, and China's need to participate more actively in multilateral security institutions.

Despite the widely reported problems regarding transparency, reciprocity, and espionage, these factors represented only some of the much more fundamental set of strategic misunderstandings that impeded realization of the administration's ambitious agenda for military engagement during the late 1990s. Why did both sides seek closer defense ties, and what were some of the resulting agreements? What were the missed signals, faulty assumptions, and strategic disparities that ultimately derailed efforts at Sino-U.S. military engagement? Today, as the Bush administration modestly considers revitalizing military ties and with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's visit to China in October 2005, the first during his current tenure in office, most of these lessons remain relevant. In particular, experience has shown that such military contacts alone have little effect on the overall U.S.-Chinese relationship. Although some believe that defense engagement improves bilateral relations, the Sino-U.S. experience shows that the inverse relationship is more common. Military-to-military ties typically become significantly more productive only after the broader bilateral relationship improves. The many deep-rooted sources of tension that persist between the two countries today suggest the need for modest expectations about near-term progress both in military ties and broader relations.

Promoting Sino-U.S. Military Cooperation

The U.S. and Chinese governments had several key motivations to improve military contacts during the 1990s. They included fears, at least on the U.S. side, that their forces could clash due to accidents or miscalculation; a desire to shape the other government's foreign and defense policies; hopes of learning more about the other's defense establishment and practices; and a broad desire to leverage favorable developments in the East Asian security environment.

AVOIDING MILITARY MISCALCULATIONS

The most pressing issue requiring enhanced military dialogue concerned maritime security. Since the early 1980s, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had been transitioning from a primarily coastal defense force into a blue-water fleet that operated more often beyond Chinese territorial waters.¹ As the PLAN entered areas regularly patrolled by U.S. warships, the Department of Defense decided to pursue an accord, modeled after the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement, designed to reduce the risks of an inadvertent maritime clash.² Defense Department leaders believed they could sell the PLA on the utility of such a confidence-building measure (CBM) and that, at a minimum, a Sino-U.S. dialogue on these issues could help avoid accidents and miscalculations between two navies that previously had rarely operated in proximity.

Several alarming maritime incidents spurred this U.S. (and subsequent Chinese) interest in regularizing naval interactions. In July 1993, the Central Intelligence Agency erroneously concluded that the *Yinhe*, a Chinese container ship, was transporting banned chemicals to Iran. Despite Beijing's vigorous denials, U.S. warships and military aircraft monitored but did not board the ship, which then was denied entry to a number of Persian Gulf ports. After 20 days, the parties to the dispute worked out a compromise through which Chinese and Saudi inspectors, advised by U.S. technical experts, examined the vessel. Finding it carried legitimate cargo, they allowed the ship to proceed to its original destination. The incident evoked fierce Chinese protests. Vice Premier Zou Jiahua said that the U.S. action violated China's sovereignty and freedom of navigation, inflicted major economic losses, and harmed the PRC's credibility.³ The Chinese government issued a formal statement accusing the U.S. military of violating international law.⁴

A potentially more serious incident occurred between October 27 and October 29, 1994, when the U.S. aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* and its accompanying battle group encountered a PLAN nuclear submarine in the Yellow Sea. On detecting the vessel about 200 miles away off the

Shandong peninsula, a region where PLAN submarines had rarely operated previously, U.S. S-3 aircraft dropped sonar buoys to track it. The Chinese responded by scrambling warplanes to the scene. During the tense three-day encounter, U.S. and Chinese fighter pilots repeatedly flew within sight of each other. Although neither side publicized the incident, PRC representatives reportedly told a U.S. military attaché in Beijing that Chinese forces would “shoot to kill,” should a similar confrontation occur.⁵

INFLUENCING EACH OTHER’S POLICIES

Both Washington and Beijing believed they could use bilateral military-to-military ties to shape the other’s behavior. The Clinton administration’s policy of “comprehensive engagement,” which sought to make China a constructive member of the international community, shaped its approach toward the Chinese armed forces. As Defense Department officials explained to Congress, “The PLA is an important decisionmaker in the PRC, and military engagement gives us the opportunity to affect the PLA’s decision-making calculus.”⁶ U.S. policymakers wanted to discourage Chinese military commanders, who were then displaying increasing capabilities and self-confidence, as well as China’s political leaders from underestimating Washington’s capacity and commitment to uphold its security interests in East Asia. Defense Secretary William Perry expounded on this logic in a 1994 then-secret memorandum. He justified the need to pursue comprehensive engagement, including the resumption of military contacts, on the grounds that “China is fast becoming the world’s largest economic power, and that combined with its UN P-5 status, its political clout, its nuclear weapons, and a modernizing military, make China a player with which the United States must work together.” Perry went on to explain that, to gain China’s cooperation, “we must rebuild mutual trust and understanding with the PLA, and this could only happen through high level dialogue and working level contacts. ... Let us proceed in a forward-looking, although measured, manner in this important relationship.”⁷

Chinese leaders similarly perceived the U.S. military and its civilian components as having a major impact on U.S. foreign policy. They appreciated that the United States remained divided about how to deal with the PRC.⁸ Chinese officials apparently hoped that better military-to-military ties might encourage Washington to adopt more favorable policies on such questions as Taiwan, export controls, and military sales to China suspended since 1989. By engaging in military exchanges, moreover, the Chinese sought to encourage the United States to see and treat the PLA as an equal partner.

PROMOTING BILATERAL MILITARY TRANSPARENCY

Both the U.S. and Chinese defense communities had an interest in learning more about each other. The Defense Department's 1998 East Asian Strategy Report (EASR) reflects the value that U.S. policymakers placed on enhancing security transparency: "Dialogue and exchanges can reduce misperceptions between our countries, increase our understanding of Chinese security concerns, and build confidence between our two defense establishments to avoid military accidents and miscalculations."⁹ During his four-day visit to Beijing in October 1994, Perry explicitly told his hosts they should make their military budget and planning more transparent to minimize misunderstandings.¹⁰ At this time, the PLA was becoming more professional, acquiring better indigenous and foreign military equipment, and consciously trying to adopt the best Western military practices.¹¹ For example, Chinese officers showed great interest in U.S. defense doctrines and manuals. Furthermore, they hoped to understand their potential adversaries better and perhaps acquire advanced U.S. military technology.¹²

Differing perceptions of the value of transparency contributed to the lack of reciprocity.

RESPONDING TO A TRANSFORMED REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

During the 1990s, many Asia-Pacific countries took steps to develop bilateral and, under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum, regional security cooperation and CBMs.¹³ In this context, China's neighbors urged Beijing to make its own foreign and defense activities more transparent. The Chinese government responded by publishing its first security White Paper in 1995 and its first defense White Paper in 1998.¹⁴ China also negotiated a number of bilateral CBMs with its neighbors, most prominently with all four adjoining former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. In July 1994, the Chinese and Russian defense ministers adopted a set of practices to forestall military incidents. In April 1998, China and Russia established a direct presidential hot line, Beijing's first with another government.¹⁵ Beginning with the April 1996 Shanghai Treaty, China also signed several operational arms control agreements that imposed restrictions on conventional military deployments and activity within a 100-kilometer-wide demilitarization zone along mutual frontiers with its four former Soviet neighbors. In addition, Beijing made joint security declarations or established consultative security mechanisms

with Australia, Japan, and other Asian countries.¹⁶ Seeing that Chinese leaders, given the proper conditions, were prepared to negotiate CBMs with other governments, U.S. policymakers sought their own bilateral security agreements with Beijing.

AGREEMENTS REACHED

In its approach toward China, Washington sought to model its military-to-military contacts on the U.S.-Soviet experience of the late Cold War. In particular, U.S. policymakers attempted to draw on CBMs such as the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement and the 1989 U.S.-Soviet Prevention of Dangerous Military Incidents Agreement and apply them to its emerging defense relationship with China. This strategy seemed reasonable. Russian-U.S. military ties were flourishing at the time, especially between the U.S. Pacific Command and the Russian Far East.¹⁷ Furthermore, U.S. hopes were bolstered by China's pursuit of CBMs with Russia and other countries, some of which also resembled the earlier U.S.-Soviet CBMs.¹⁸

Washington considered the January 1998 Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) its most important bilateral CBM with China. The MMCA aimed to promote a defense dialogue to avoid misunderstandings between U.S. and Chinese naval and air forces operating near one another. Working group meetings discussed such issues as communication between ships and aircraft, an urgent topic for two militaries that until then had rarely made direct contact in the course of their normal operations.¹⁹ Compared with the original U.S.-Soviet agreement, however, the MMCA was vaguer, lacking the detailed "rules of the road" provisions found in the earlier accord.

The Defense Consultative Talks, annual bilateral meetings between senior defense officials and officers that began in December 1997, represented another important CBM. Members of the Chinese and U.S. defense communities also expanded their visits to each other's facilities, where they received briefings on military doctrine, law, medicine, and other topics.²⁰ Further functional exchanges occurred through the two countries' military educational institutions. During Clinton's visit to Beijing in June 1998, both sides agreed to allow observers to attend some of each other's military exercises. Chinese defense representatives subsequently attended the Rim of the Pacific and Cope Thunder exercises, and a senior U.S. delegation observed a PLA exercise in the Nanjing Military Region.²¹ Another product of Clinton's June 1998 visit was a bilateral agreement not to target strategic nuclear weapons at each other. The 1998 EASR describes the measure as "an important symbolic action that reassured both sides and reaffirmed our constructive relationship." The agreement was largely symbolic, however, lacking

enforcement or verification measures. More meaningful was the direct communications link, or hotline, established between the U.S. and Chinese presidents in May 1998.

Finally, the Clinton administration considered bilateral military cooperation on environmental and humanitarian matters as potential CBMs. According to the 1998 EASR, “through this mechanism trust is established that may lead to easing of tensions and better understanding of different military cultures.” In September 1998, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen and Zhang Wannian, the Chinese Central Military Commission vice chairman, signed a joint statement authorizing bilateral military exchanges on environmental cooperation. Chinese and U.S. defense officials also discussed humanitarian issues such as disaster relief during some exchanges.

Bilateral defense ties suffered from Chinese officers’ limited knowledge and autonomy.

What Went Wrong

Between 1995 and 1999, the Clinton administration undertook an ambitious and sustained effort to engage the Chinese military on a wide range of important security topics. The Chinese government also seemed interested in deepening military-to-military ties. Nevertheless, a combination of factors prevented significantly improving defense relations, including a perceived lack of reciprocity, unrelated developments in the Sino-U.S. political relationship, mutual suspicions about intentions and behavior, and asymmetries in the two militaries’ capabilities and operational practices.

LACK OF RECIPROCITY

The growing sentiment within the United States about a perceived lack of reciprocity in defense relations represented the most visible impediment to deepening bilateral military ties. Prominent Americans increasingly complained that, although the United States sought substantive dialogues and concrete agreements while providing Chinese representatives with detailed briefings, copious publications, and special access to a diverse range of military facilities, the PLA made mostly symbolic gestures in return, taking U.S. visitors to tourist sites and Potemkin villages while organizing vacuous lectures on general topics. In a speech before the PLA National Defense University in May 1997, General John M. Shalikashvili, chairman of the U.S.

Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for “a more equal exchange of information with the PLA.”²² Chinese representatives claimed that they could not fully reciprocate U.S. initiatives because some of their units were embarrassingly backward, the PLA had only limited funds for such exchanges, and excessive transparency could expose Chinese military vulnerabilities to a potential foreign adversary.²³ One analyst argues that the main difference is that the

External political shocks repeatedly led one side or the other to suspend military contacts.

PLA cares most about whom they see, while Defense Department leaders value most what they see.²⁴ Although U.S. critics of the unequal exchange claimed that PLA representatives gained better access to U.S. military doctrine, technology, and facilities, U.S. defenders of the contacts argued they brought value to both sides despite the asymmetry.²⁵

Differing perceptions of the value of transparency contributed to this lack of reciprocity.

The United States valued military transparency as a means to avoid miscalculation and promote trust, but many Chinese strategists saw uncertainty, or the absence of transparency, as bolstering deterrence.²⁶ During the 1990s, although Chinese civilian analysts based in nonmilitary think tanks generally showed appreciation of the utility of military transparency, most government officials and PLA leaders did not.²⁷ The official adherence to preserving uncertainty appears to have set the foundation for Beijing’s initial opposition to efforts to expand military transparency. Instead, these strategists advocated the value of issuing mutual declaratory statements about countries’ peaceful intentions.²⁸ They also resisted repeated U.S. attempts to make China’s arms exports more transparent.²⁹ Beijing’s reluctance to remove uncertainties had perhaps its greatest impact on U.S.-led efforts to cultivate ties with China’s nuclear weapons establishment. Because of Beijing’s opposition, efforts at such a strategic dialogue, which had proven exceptionally profitable in the Soviet case, failed almost entirely. Besides a general lack of enthusiasm for enhancing military transparency, the Chinese likely did not want to draw attention to their strategic buildup and feared exposing vulnerabilities to a potential foe, particularly given Washington’s plans to develop ballistic missile defenses.

MILITARY ASYMMETRIES

Beyond these doctrinal differences, Sino-U.S. bilateral defense ties suffered from Chinese officers’ limited knowledge and autonomy. Many senior PLA commanders during the 1990s showed a lack of understanding of the intricacies of global politics. They had spent the bulk of their careers in regional

field commands in China's interior and had had little contact with foreigners.³⁰ Beijing's policy since the 1960s of not entering into formal military alliances meant that few in the PRC defense community had participated in combined training exercises with other countries.³¹ Ironically, their limited knowledge did not matter much for foreign military relations because their political leaders kept them on a short leash. For example, the civilians' determination to retain control of crisis communications wrecked attempts by the commander in chief of the Pacific Command to codify a more formal line of emergency communication with Chinese military officers.

Other asymmetries limited the applicability of the lessons learned from the U.S.-Soviet experience regarding defense engagement and CBMs to the U.S.-Chinese interaction. Whereas Soviet and U.S. military forces operated and had the potential to clash throughout the world, Chinese forces still remained close to their home territory. If anything, U.S. forces began to operate even more extensively in China's vicinity following the Cold War's end. U.S. submarines and reconnaissance flights, such as with the EP-3, conducted missions very close to the mainland, probing for reactions and weaknesses. Furthermore, U.S. carrier battle groups plied the disputed waters of the South China Sea, often raising consternation in Beijing. Asymmetries in the two sides' military operations complicated attempts to negotiate bilateral CBMs. Chinese officials rejected measures that would have endorsed operating practices that codified U.S. advantages. Although the two parties ultimately negotiated the MMCA, it merely created a mechanism for regular meetings between their navies. It did not place restrictions on military practices or specify procedures to govern how the two sides would interact if problems arose.

During the 1980s, the Soviet and U.S. militaries appeared to have approximately equivalent capabilities. In the 1990s, both Beijing and Washington recognized that U.S. forces were superior to Chinese forces, often by orders of magnitude, in weaponry, training, and systems integration. Given the profound power differential, Beijing could ill afford a direct military competition with Washington. Chinese officials therefore also wanted to avoid having the United States view them as a potential Soviet-type military antagonist, leading them to reject exchanges based explicitly on the East-West model. Another asymmetry lay in the apparently divergent trajectories of their power relationships. U.S.-Soviet CBMs and military contacts made the most progress during the Mikhail Gorbachev era (1985–1991), when most Soviet civilian and military leaders understood that they governed a country whose power was declining vis-à-vis the United States. In contrast, Chinese officials saw themselves as leaders of an ascending military power. Accordingly, they might have felt reluctant to freeze the status quo when asymmetries in military operations favored the United States. Similar con-

siderations appear to have motivated Beijing to abstain from negotiating reductions in nuclear forces. Chinese representatives have always publicly insisted that their involvement in the strategic arms reduction process would await much deeper cuts in the superior nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States. In the cases of structural and operational arms control, China might have anticipated acquiring a better bargaining position over time.³²

MUTUAL SUSPICIONS

Compounding these complications, the United States and the PRC each remained suspicious of the other's true objectives and behavior. Whereas Washington feared the Chinese were exploiting contacts to acquire military secrets, Beijing worried that the Clinton administration, for all its talk of engagement, ultimately hoped to subvert Chinese communism. Chinese leaders presumably felt especially threatened by the Clinton administration's public desire to transform China into a Western-style democracy. In their writings, PLA analysts interpreted the administration's commitment to engagement as merely a refined form of "soft containment."³³ Attacks in Congress and the media on the PRC's human rights, commercial, and other policies likely reinforced Chinese suspicions regarding U.S. intent. Despite Washington's best efforts, they probably interpreted the U.S. decisions to maintain its Cold War troop levels in East Asia, strengthen security ties with Japan, and back Taiwan in its confrontations with China as means of limiting the PRC's regional influence.³⁴

Beijing singled out Washington's military alliance with Japan as an object of concern. Since World War II, China had traditionally feared a revival of Japanese military strength under U.S. auspices, either through direct U.S. support or through a combination of Japanese craftiness and U.S. naiveté. Chinese leaders now worried that, with the demise of the Soviet threat, the alliance would be directed against them.³⁵ Chinese concerns became increasingly evident after the Clinton administration began to revitalize the U.S.-Japanese security partnership. In September 1997, Japan and the United States released a set of revised defense guidelines that provided for greater military cooperation during a crisis "in areas surrounding Japan."³⁶ After North Korea launched a Taepo-dong missile over Japan in August 1998, the two governments also began to collaborate more on theater ballistic missile defenses. Chinese representatives feared that these initiatives would encourage a joint U.S.-Japanese military response to any future regional crisis, including one involving Taiwan.

Although increasingly opposed to Washington's formal military alliances with Japan and other Asian countries, the Chinese most strongly contested

U.S. defense ties with Taiwan. Throughout the 1990s, Chinese representatives evinced alarm about the growth of pro-independence sentiment on the island. Beijing believed that Washington and Tokyo were encouraging separatist forces and impeding Taiwan's reunification with the mainland. Taiwan was no longer a formal U.S. military ally, but the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act had reaffirmed Washington's commitment to sell arms to Taiwan and take other steps to preserve the military balance across the strait. In a counterproductive attempt to discourage Taiwanese voters from supporting pro-independence politicians, the PLA conducted major military exercises, including missile launches, amphibious exercises, and live-fire demonstrations, in the military districts opposite Taiwan in 1995 and 1996. In March 1996, the Clinton administration responded by deploying the aircraft carrier USS *Independence* and its battle group near Taiwan. It also redeployed the USS *Nimitz* and its battle group from the Persian Gulf to the seas near Taiwan. In the end, the Chinese backed down and ended their threatening military activities.

The Bush team in the Pentagon is quietly exploring areas of engagement with the PLA.

Similar to other military confrontations, the Taiwan Strait crisis provided incentives for and impeded the achievement of Sino-U.S. CBMs. Chinese leaders complained bitterly about the U.S. military involvement and threatened to attack any U.S. forces intervening on Taiwan's behalf in the future.³⁷ Clinton reaffirmed his opposition to formal Taiwanese independence during his visit to Shanghai in June 1998. Most Americans sympathized with the Taiwanese, however, as long-standing U.S. partners and citizens of an emerging democracy that was refuting widely held assumptions about the incompatibility of Asian, especially Chinese Confucian, and democratic values. For their part, Chinese leaders felt that the Clinton administration had both precipitated the crisis by granting then-Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui a visa to visit the United States and then escalated matters by challenging Chinese efforts to preserve the status quo on the island. The confrontation convinced many U.S. officials, fearing that Chinese misperceptions of the U.S. commitment to Taiwan had contributed to the PRC's aggressive stance during the crisis, of the need for communication mechanisms and other CBMs to avert future misunderstandings.³⁸

The Chinese were certainly not alone in their suspicions of the other side's behavior and intentions. In the United States, both conservatives and liberals complained that the administration was too eager to engage the PLA, given Beijing's poor record regarding human rights, nonproliferation,

Expectations about near-term progress in military ties should be modest.

and other important issues. The so-called Blue Team, which sought to publicize China as a threat, warned that the PLA was using the exchanges to acquire valuable technologies or insights that they could exploit against the United States or its allies.³⁹ Following the report of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Com-

mercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China (the "Cox Committee") and the subsequent Wen Ho Li incident that seemed to confirm the report's accusations about Chinese nuclear espionage, Congress explicitly directed in Section 1201 of the FY 2000 Defense Authorization Act that the secretary of defense not authorize military contacts that might give the PLA inappropriate access to an itemized list of advanced U.S.

military capabilities. The bill also required the secretary of defense to submit an annual report assessing China's current and future military strength.⁴⁰

THE STATE OF POLITICAL RELATIONS

Against this background of profound mutual distrust, intermittent political shocks in the relationship exerted a decisive impact on the state of the two countries' defense ties. Adverse political-military events, including the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait missile crisis and the 1997 U.S.-Japanese defense guidelines revisions, have repeatedly derailed Sino-U.S. military engagement and impeded both the consolidation of existing CBMs and the development of new ones. External developments repeatedly led one side or the other to suspend military contacts as a form of signaling or retaliation, in effect holding them hostage to the larger political relationship. Ironically, although crises spur interest in CBMs, they also make them more difficult to achieve.

U.S. military ties with China often have served as the proverbial canary in the coalmine, acutely vulnerable to harmful changes in their environment. The record bears out the Chinese assessment that progress in defense transparency and other military-to-military ties requires corresponding, if not prior, improvements in political relations between countries.⁴¹ A PLA officer astutely remarked that CBMs indicate confidence as well as contribute to it.⁴² Chinese leaders insisted at the time that, as long as the United States viewed the PRC as a potential adversary or strategic competitor, significant military ties could not develop between the two countries, although the same logic requires the Chinese to alter their negative views of the United States. China's experiences with the United States in the 1980s and Russia in the 1990s also support the conclusion that better

security ties follow rather than precede improvements in underlying political relations.⁴³

A cursory review of Sino-U.S. relations during the 1990s underscores how the overall relationship affected military ties. In particular, both sides saw curtailing military exchanges as a readily available means to signal displeasure with some other aspect of the overall relationship. One obvious example was the collapse of defense ties at the beginning of the decade, following the Tiananmen Square massacre. Only after Chas W. Freeman Jr., the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, visited China in October 1993 did bilateral military-to-military contacts resume.⁴⁴ The dialogue deepened following the *Yinhe* incident, the Perry memo, Perry's visit to China in 1994, and the 1994 crisis over North Korea's nuclear program. The dialogue then stalled during the 1995–1996 crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Bilateral military engagement reached a high point following the October 1997 and June 1998 summit meetings between Clinton and then-Chinese president Jiang Zemin. The report of the 1998–1999 Cox Committee and the May 1999 accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade then led to the mutual curtailment of almost all military contacts for several years.⁴⁵ The April 2001 crisis resulting from the collision between a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft and a PLA warplane in international airspace near China's Hainan Island reinforced the Bush administration's disinclination to resume widespread military exchanges, a policy that only changed after the September 11 attacks diverted attention in Washington from China's rise as a potential unfriendly regional hegemon to the immediate challenge of defending the United States against further terrorist attacks.

Lowered Expectations and Results

The Bush team in the Pentagon is quietly exploring areas of engagement with the PLA, but these initiatives are likely to be modest and based on a more literal interpretation of reciprocity between the two sides. Contacts will largely be restricted to more senior and seasoned military officers and civilian Pentagon officials with deeper Asia backgrounds and responsibilities. There will, however, be continuing vigilance against exposing visiting Chinese military officials to high-technology U.S. systems and more sophisticated operational techniques. The result is likely to be a wary, lower-level engagement between the uniformed elite designed primarily to “check the box,” as one close associate of Rumsfeld confided. Clearly, no breakthroughs are in store, but there also will be less angst as some uniformed links between the two Pacific giants are at least nominally established.

The second Clinton administration tried to overcome the problems it faced by lowering its expectations and gradually redirecting the focus of its military-to-military policy toward China from one that emphasized engagement to one that reaffirmed the importance of deterring undesirable Chinese behavior. Initially, U.S. officials sought to transform the relationship into one in which Beijing and Washington cooperated to promote regional

Progress in military confidence-building will follow, not lead, better political relations.

security while managing their serious differences over nonproliferation, democracy, and other issues. Given the influence of active and former military officers in government, business, and other Chinese institutions, U.S. policymakers saw military-to-military relations as an essential component of such a transformation.

Unfortunately, Chinese military leaders experienced serious contradictions in their relations with the United States. On one

hand, dealing directly with their U.S. counterparts gave them prestige, both within China and internationally. It also provided opportunities to learn about U.S. military doctrine and practices and possibly to persuade Washington to reconsider permitting the sale of U.S. weapons and military technology to China. On the other hand, the PLA's senior leaders often manifested a visceral distrust of the United States. They saw Washington as the main impediment to China either reacquiring Taiwan or assuming its rightful place as East Asia's leading power. Furthermore, because highlighting a U.S. threat helped sustain robust defense spending, the Chinese military had an institutional incentive to sustain an unfriendly relationship.

Given that these latter considerations weighed more heavily on the Chinese side, the Clinton administration soon realized that, despite its best efforts, Sino-U.S. military relations would remain problematic. In addition, beginning with the Taiwan Strait missile crisis, concerns grew within the United States, especially in Congress, about the overall direction of relations with Beijing. As a result, the objective of deterrence, never absent, assumed an even more prominent role in determining policy in Washington. In particular, U.S. officials vigorously attempted to disabuse Chinese military and political leaders of any belief that the United States was in invariable decline or lacked the will or capacity to counter adventurism. Such misperceptions had been evident in some Chinese writings and speeches and may have contributed to the PRC's aggressive stance during the Taiwan Strait crisis.⁴⁶

The administration's revised, post-1996 approach appears to have been broadly successful. Beijing refrained from directly confronting Washington

over Taiwan, nonproliferation, or other issues. The decisive U.S. victory, under NATO's auspices, in the 1999 Kosovo campaign reinforced and amplified to Beijing the lesson of the overwhelming U.S. military triumph during the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War: the PLA should avoid direct conflict with the U.S. armed forces. Chinese leaders and commentators stopped assuming that the “correlation of forces,” a Communist term for an expanded notion of the balance of power, was rapidly and invariably moving in China's favor. The Chinese government refocused its energies on domestic economic reconstruction.

Since 1999, U.S.-Chinese military contacts have largely atrophied except for the occasional high-level visit. The Bush administration has tended to see Beijing in more adversarial terms than its predecessors, discouraging it from attempting to reinvigorate bilateral defense ties. Military contacts have resumed in recent years, but never with the high expectations and admittedly modest achievements of the late 1990s. Rumsfeld continues to require his personal approval for each exchange with the PLA, reflecting his concern and desire to keep the military-to-military program, which is still controversial in Congress, under tight control. The most recent Defense Department report on Chinese military power clearly articulates current U.S. anxieties about PRC military spending and strategic objectives.⁴⁷ In addition, PLA threats regarding U.S. policies toward Taiwan and Defense Department criticisms of China's missile buildup across the Taiwan Strait highlight that deterrence still weighs heavily in the relationship.

Although many reasons contribute to today's insubstantial defense dialogue, the lessons learned from the perceived failures and unfulfilled expectations of the 1995–1999 period are perhaps the most important. Both sides now recognize that the obstacles to better Sino-U.S. military ties involve more than just personalities or disagreements over particular issues. Instead, they reflect serious structural impediments that cannot easily be overcome. Today, although the overall Sino-U.S. relationship is satisfactory, the military-to-military dimension is largely missing. Yet, given the difficulties that invariably plague this area, the absence might not represent much of a problem. Indeed, it may reflect a mature recognition that progress in military confidence-building and related security ties will follow, not lead, improvements in the other facets of this very complex bilateral relationship.

Notes

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- tice: Material and Ideational Influences*, ed. Muthiah Afagappa (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1998), pp. 129, 145.
2. For the full text of the Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas, see <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/sea/text/sea1.htm>. For a review of the negotiations that led to the signing of the agreement, see Kurt M. Campbell, "The Dangerous Military Activities Agreement," *Security Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 109–131.
 3. Xinhua, September 25, 1993.
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