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US-CHINA TIES: Seeking Common Ground amid Mutual Suspicions

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US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates' recent visit to China concluded some arrangements, including a hotline between the two militaries. However, differences indicate that mutual suspicions remain.

US SECRETARY of Defence Robert Gates' three-day visit to China recently has left analysts wondering what exactly was achieved to advance US-China ties to a significantly higher level. In the November 4-6 2007 visit, he held talks with China's President and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Hu Jintao, China's Defence Minister General Cao Gangchuan, Standing Vice-Chairman of CMC General Guo Boxiong, and Vice-Chairman of CMC, General Xu Caihou.

There were some accomplishments: a principle to set up a hotline between the two militaries; continuing defence-related dialogues at various levels; conduct of humanitarian and sea rescue joint exercises; educational exchange for military schools and young officials; and cooperation between military archivists to resolve questions about missing American soldiers during the Korean War. Consensus was reportedly reached on high-level nuclear strategy talks, and working together to steer Iran away from its nuclear ambition.

However, some chronic differences remain. These can be illustrated by China's silence on its anti-satellite test in January 2007 when Beijing fired a missile to shoot down its aging weather satellite. Another manifestation is China's reluctance to give details of its rising defence budget, while the US would not back down from its established "One-China" policy over Taiwan issue.

Assessment of Accomplishments

General speaking, there is nothing new that was accomplished by the both sides.

The hotline issue attracted a lot of attention, and was hailed as a breakthrough. To some extent, this is not the case. In June 2006, the hotline issue was formally raised by Peter Rodman, then Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Affairs, in his visit to China for the annual Defence Consultative Talk (DCT). In April 2007, the US sent a team to China to talk about technical issues. In the annual Shangri-La meeting held in June 2007 in Singapore, Chinese representative Lieut-General Zhang Qinsheng pointed out that China would agree to set up a hotline in his September trip to Washington DC. However, the arrangement was temporarily slowed down in August after Gen. Zhang was transferred to become commander of Guangzhou Military Region. In other words, Secretary Gates' visit was to formally ink the hotline issue.

As for defence/military exchange, it has become rather routine. The annual DCT, which is tasked to

arrange military exchanges at various levels for the coming year, has been on-going; high-level military exchanges have continued, and a most recent instance was former US Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Mullen's visit to China to reciprocate Chinese Navy Commander Adm. Wu Shengli's visit to the US in April; US National War College's graduates also annually visit China as part of an overseas visit programme.

Joint exercises have been held by both sides. The Chinese navy held a joint humanitarian exercise with its counterpart in San Diego area in September 2006 as part of its port visit to the US, and this was the first time that both navies conducted joint sea rescue-related exercise; a similar one was later held in the South China Sea in November 2006. Both militaries have invited each other to observe military exercises, although this type of invitation can be further deepened.

Cooperation to help the US identify soldiers missing in the Korean War involves humanitarian assistance, and there is no reason for China not to provide this assistance. Let alone the fact that it has been more than 50 years since the outbreak of the Korean War. In general, those accomplished arrangements are more of a continuation of existed programmes.

Lingering Mutual Suspicions

Transparency has been the contentious issue between the two sides. The US allowed the Chinese military to know how the US military conducted its joint operations and related logistics during President Clinton's second term (1997-2000). This was part of the US-China military-to-military relations programme, with an expectation that China would reciprocate. However, this did not work, and transparency has since become a major issue as both sides view this differently.

What the US has been interested with is transparency at the operational level, with an attempt to know how China conducts operation planning and operations. For China, transparency is placed at a strategic level. On the other hand, US military doctrine and related documents have been posted on the US Department of Defence (DoD) website, making it very easy for Chinese military to get access to those documents.

Both sides have different perceptions with regard to transparency. To China, transparency is a tool used by the strong US against the weak China. With this perception, invitation to know how the US military conducted joint operations was interpreted as Washington's dissuasion of China from taking military action against Taiwan. This can be understood in the context of the 1995/96 Taiwan Strait crisis in which the US dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to the vicinity of Taiwan.

The perceived "unilateralism" of the Bush administration, along with various military policies, likely reinforced China's apprehension of US capability. For instance, the US decision to develop and deploy its missile defence system, and to accelerate the development of the space programme, forced China to develop countermeasures, with its anti-satellite programme being one of them. In this circumstance, it is very unlikely for China to be transparent, which will only inform the US of its anti-satellite programme.

Conclusion

What conclusions we can draw from the above observation? It shows that both sides carefully manage their military-to-military relations by pursuing common ground so that both sides can move ahead. This is particularly the case in the context of the rising political tensions in the Taiwan Strait as a result of Taiwanese President Chen Shui-Bian's campaign to join the United Nations under the name of Taiwan -- a move perceived by China as an major step toward seeking *de jure* independence.

However, mutual suspicions remain. The US will continue to keep a wary eye as China continues to

grow economically and militarily. China, on the other hand, continues to perceive US' attempts to constrain, if not contain, it. In this context, it seems more appropriate to use security management rather than security cooperation to describe US-China military-to-military relations.

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