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To cite this article: Phillip C. Saunders & Julia G. Bowie (2016) US–China military relations: competition and cooperation, Journal of Strategic Studies, 39:5-6, 662-684, DOI: [10.1080/01402390.2016.1221818](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1221818)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1221818>



Published online: 26 Aug 2016.



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US–China military relations: competition and cooperation

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ABSTRACT

China's efforts to build a 'new type of great power relations' and a 'new type of military-to-military relations' do not constitute a major turning point in relations with the United States. Political relations set limits on military cooperation, and the two sides have been unable to construct a sustainable strategic basis for relations. This has contributed to an 'on-again, off-again' pattern in military ties. Trends show a pattern of frequent disruptions in military-to-military relations from 2000 to 2010, followed by an increase in interactions beginning in 2012. Nevertheless, obstacles on both sides are likely to limit mutual trust and constrain future development of military-to-military relations.

KEYWORDS United States; China; military-to-military relations; strategic partnership; military cooperation

This paper examines recent trends in Sino–US security relations, with a particular focus on military-to-military relations and China's call for building a 'new type of military-to-military relations' with the United States. The paper is organized in three sections. The first reviews efforts by leaders on both sides to find a stable basis for political relations in a changing international environment, because the quality of bilateral political relations will determine what types of military-to-military activities are possible. This section concludes with an assessment of China's goals of building a 'new type of great power relations' (NTGPR) and a 'new type of military-to-military relations' and the extent to which they are accepted by the United States. The second section reviews the elements of US–China military-to-military relations and assesses trends over the last decade. The data show a pattern of frequent disruptions from 2000 to 2010, followed by a significant increase in military-to-military interactions beginning in 2012, coinciding with China's call for a 'NTGPR' and a 'new type of military-to-military relations.' The analysis argues that these increased contacts do not mark a fundamental

change in military relations. The third section considers factors on each side that will affect the future development of military-to-military relations. It notes significant obstacles on both the US and Chinese sides that are likely to limit the degree of mutual trust and constrain the future development of military-to-military relations.

Bilateral Political Relations and Military-to-Military Relations

In both the United States and China, military-to-military relations are subordinate to broader political relationships between countries. The Chinese military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is a party-army and responsive to the orders of the senior Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) civilian leader (in his capacity as chairman of the party's Central Military Commission). The US military receives orders from the President, in his capacity as Commander in Chief, and is also subject to budgetary and policy guidance from Congress. Both militaries formulate proposals for military-to-military relations with specific countries and enjoy a degree of autonomy in implementing specific military-to-military interactions. However, in both cases, the extent and nature of military-to-military contacts are shaped by the overall bilateral political relationship and civilian policy guidance. In the case of the US–China military-to-military relationship, analysts have noted that ups and downs in bilateral political relations have produced an on-again, off-again quality to military–military contacts that has inhibited building a deeper relationship or generating much strategic trust or sustained cooperation.¹

Since Nixon's opening to China in 1971, both US and Chinese civilian leaders have grappled for a stable strategic basis for bilateral relations and sought to use relations with the other country to pursue their own national goals. The strategic basis has changed over time as the international environment has been transformed, national policy goals have shifted, and the balance of relative power between the United States and China has changed. At times, each country's relationship with the other has become a contentious domestic political issue, complicating efforts to build a stable and productive bilateral relationship. As economic, cultural, educational, and people-to-people ties have deepened, managing the US–China relationship has become more complicated. Leaders in both countries have periodically sought to build a more durable strategic basis for US–China partnership, but

¹Kevin Pollpeter, *U.S.-China Security Management: Assessing the Military-to-Military Relationship* (Washington DC: RAND 2004); Kurt M. Campbell and Richard Weitz, 'The Limits of U.S.-China Military Cooperation: Lessons from 1995–1999', *Washington Quarterly* 29/1 (Winter 2005–06), 169–86; Christopher D. Yung, 'Continuity and Change in Sino-US Military-to-Military Relations', in Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Simon Shen (eds.), *Conflict and Cooperation in Sino-US Relations: Change and Continuity, Causes and Cures* (New York: Routledge 2015), 204–224; and Scott Harold, 'What Does the PLA Think about the "New-Type Military-to-Military Relationship"?' Forthcoming edited book based on the 2014 CAPS-RAND-NDU PLA conference in Washington, DC, Nov. 2014.

to date, these efforts have been frustrated even as trans-Pacific interactions have increased dramatically.

The initial US–China strategic rapprochement was based on shared fears of growing Soviet power and potential Soviet hegemony. This provided a limited but sufficient basis for strategic cooperation in the diplomatic, military, and intelligence spheres. China’s principal contribution was to tie down a large portion of Soviet military forces in the Russian Far East, keeping them away from the main front in Europe. The United States and China worked together to share strategic assessments and to frustrate Moscow’s efforts to expand Soviet influence and control. Both sides also engaged in limited military cooperation, including US sales of military helicopters and technical assistance in modernizing Chinese Air Force fighters. Intelligence cooperation included monitoring of Soviet ICBM developments and provision of Chinese weapons to Mujahedin fighters in Afghanistan.²

During this period, military-to-military relations were generally cooperative and focused on how the two militaries could work together to serve the common objective of resisting Soviet hegemony. Efforts to build economic, cultural, and people-to-people ties were viewed as supporting the strategic relationship. This important but limited strategic relationship allowed the two countries to work around profound differences in culture, political systems, values, and different levels of development. The perceived strategic value of the relationship allowed the US and Chinese leaders to compromise on the difficult issue of Taiwan’s status and the US desire to maintain unofficial relations with the government in Taiwan.³

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet military threat, coupled with the political impact of Deng Xiaoping’s decision to use the PLA to violently suppress peaceful Tiananmen protestors, destroyed the old strategic basis for US–China relations. It also produced congressional sanctions banning US arms sales to China and placing limits on military-to-military relations with the PLA. The George H.W. Bush administration regarded China as having continuing strategic value in its own right and with respect to a possible resurgence of the Soviet threat and also believed that the United States could exert positive influence on China’s future development. While regarding the United States with suspicion and fearing Western efforts to Westernize [*xihua*] and split up [*fenhua*] China, Chinese leaders regarded economic ties with the United States as important for China’s economic development. During this period, military-to-military ties were curtailed due to congressional pressure over Chinese human rights

²Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China: An Investigative History* (New York: PublicAffairs 1999), 284.

³Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China since 1972* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press 1992); Tyler, *A Great Wall*.

abuses and proliferation and the perception of many US policymakers that China had limited strategic importance.

China's return to rapid economic growth in the early 1990s convinced American elites, including US businesses and senior Clinton administration policymakers, that China was an important 'emerging market' and would be an important player in a globalizing world economy. At the same time, the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis revealed that ignoring Chinese strategic interests and failing to maintain robust political and military dialogue had the potential to lead to an unwanted crisis or military conflict. These concerns prompted Clinton administration efforts to increase military contacts with the PLA and eventually to articulate the goal of building a constructive strategic partnership with China. For their part, Chinese leaders sought to stabilize relations with Washington to maintain access to US and Western markets and investment and to limit potential US efforts to contain China's economic growth or subvert its political system.⁴

Efforts to build a US–China strategic partnership produced an upturn in military-to-military contacts, including policy dialogues, ship visits, and reciprocal high-level visits by senior military leaders and civilian defense officials. While both US and Chinese leaders articulated the goal of working toward a constructive strategic partnership at summits in Beijing in 1997 and Washington in 1998, domestic politics intruded on the US side. Accusations that the Clinton administration had allowed illegal transfers of space and missile technologies to China in exchange for campaign contributions produced a political scandal that damaged bilateral relations and led the Clinton administration to pull back from the goal of a partnership with China. Military-to-military relations became part of complaints about the Clinton administration's approach to China, with critics charging that the administration was giving China too much exposure to US military technology and operational practices and calling for restrictions on US–China military contacts. Although the allegations of *quid pro quos* were unfounded, complaints about the administration's approach to China were a background factor in the Republican attempt to impeach President Clinton. They also prompted the Republican-controlled Congress to pass legislation limiting US–China military contacts in 12 areas.⁵ The accidental US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in April 1999 infuriated Chinese leaders, who regarded it as deliberate, and led to a suspension of political dialogue and military-to-military contacts in areas of US concern as a means of signaling Chinese anger.

⁴James Mann, *About Face: A History of American's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1998).

⁵U.S. Congress, *Public Law 106–65—Oct. 5, 1999* (Washington DC: United States Government Publishing Office 1999).

The George W. Bush administration came into office with a much more skeptical attitude toward China, promising to treat it as a strategic competitor rather than a strategic partner.⁶ This attitude was reinforced by the 1 April 2001 accidental collision between a US EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a Chinese navy fighter, with the damaged US plane landing on Hainan Island in China. The PLA's claim that the United States' pilot was responsible for the collision and the Chinese government's decision to hold the US aircrew for 11 days damaged the bilateral relationship and led the US government to suspend most military-to-military contacts. For several years after the EP-3 incident, Chinese defense attaches were not allowed to enter the Pentagon. However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda reordered US security priorities and eventually resulted in increased US efforts to engage China on strategic and military issues. This produced a gradual exploration of areas of potential cooperation, including military-to-military contacts. For their part, Chinese leaders, alarmed at the potential for Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian to move toward Taiwan independence, sought to stabilize US-China relations and enlist Washington's support in restraining Chen from taking provocative actions.

Although Bush administration officials were wary of a partnership with China, they eventually acknowledged its growing economic and strategic importance by proposing a vision of China as a 'responsible stakeholder' that both benefits from and plays an important role in maintaining the current international system. This concept, elaborated in a 2005 speech by then Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, recognized China's increasing impact on the international system and sought to obtain Chinese support in sustaining the global institutions and norms that have helped enable its remarkable economic success.⁷ It tried to expand the scope of the US and Chinese common interests and place potential conflicts of interests within a larger framework of cooperation.⁸ Chinese officials and scholars welcomed acknowledgment of China's strategic importance but were suspicious that the United States wanted to impose binding commitments that might limit China's economic development and that Washington hoped to enlist Beijing in shoring up US hegemony. Nevertheless, the 'responsible stakeholder' concept served as a basis for discussing increased bilateral cooperation and provided a framework for new high-level dialogue mechanisms, including the Senior Dialogue initiated in 2005 and the Strategic Economic Dialogue that began in 2006.

⁶Condoleezza Rice, 'Promoting the National Interest', *Foreign Affairs* 79/1 (January/February 2000), 45–62.

⁷Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick, 'Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?' Remarks to National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York City, 21 September 2005.

⁸For an analysis, see James J. Przystup and Phillip C. Saunders, *Visions of Order: Japan and China in U.S. Strategy*, INSS Strategic Forum No. 220 (Washington DC: National Defense University Press June 2006).

During this period, Chinese civilian and military leaders viewed military-to-military ties as something that the United States valued more than China, and therefore as a potential source of leverage and symbolic means of showing China's dissatisfaction with US policy. Beijing regularly suspended or canceled planned military visits and activities in response to US arms sales to Taiwan or other activities that displeased China. This produced a pattern of on-again, off-again military contacts that remained at a relatively shallow level.

Obama Administration officials devoted significant early efforts to broadening and deepening US–China relations to better address regional and global challenges, citing the goal of building a new era of cooperation with emerging Asian powers, including China and India.⁹ Although the political need to rebrand policy precluded the use of the Bush administration's 'responsible stakeholder' language, the administration's view of China as a rising power with expanding global interests that was succeeding within the existing international system was very similar. Administration officials sought to engage China in cooperation on regional and global issues, including efforts to deal with North Korean and Iranian nuclear ambitions, address climate change, and mitigate the effects of the global financial crisis. Their expressed goal was a 'positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship' with China that allowed the two countries to work together on an expanded set of common interests. One of the instruments was the bilateral US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) designed to address a wider range of issues, improve US policy coordination, and bring the right actors (including the PLA) to the table. Obama Administration officials stressed the need for continuity in military-to-military relations to increase cooperation, manage differences, and reduce risk. As a 2010 Pentagon report stated, 'Sustainable and reliable US–China military-to-military ties are an important component of the overall bilateral US–China relationship and are necessary for the relationship to be comprehensive.'¹⁰

Obama Administration efforts to build a deeper partnership with China produced relatively meager results. Despite formal engagements through the S&ED, reciprocal summit visits, and periodic meetings on the margins of multilateral forums, Chinese leaders remained suspicious and reluctant to expand cooperation with Washington or take on more international responsibilities. Moreover, in the context of the unfolding financial crisis that damaged the US (and then the global) economy, Chinese leaders

⁹See James B. Steinberg, 'Remarks at National Bureau of Asian Research Conference Engaging Asia 2009: Strategies for Success', Washington, DC, 10 April 2009; and Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities', Honolulu, HI, 12 January 2010.

¹⁰Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense 2010), 53.

misinterpreted Obama Administration efforts to increase cooperation as a sign of US weakness and an opportunity to press Washington for concessions. The net result was intensified bilateral engagement, including in military-to-military relations, but engagement characterized more by process than tangible results. The period from 2009 to 2010 also saw a more assertive Chinese posture on a wide range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, including on maritime and sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea and in actions to interfere with US military ships and aircraft conducting lawful routine operations within China's exclusive economic zone. These Chinese actions stoked regional concerns that an aggressive China might destabilize Asia and calls for the United States to demonstrate its commitment to the region.

This political context – heightened concerns about Chinese behavior and regional demands for a stepped up US security role – formed part of the political rationale for the US 'pivot' or 'rebalance to the Asia-Pacific' announced in November 2011, although President Obama's intention to increase attention and resources devoted to Asia dated back to the beginning of his first term in office.¹¹ US officials stressed that the new strategy did not mean an abandonment of efforts to cooperate with China or to build a more stable Sino-US relationship and continued efforts to engage top Chinese leaders and other important Chinese actors, including the PLA. The broad US strategy of seeking to integrate China more fully within the current global order, while discouraging any efforts to reshape that order by the use of force, remained in place.

The official Chinese reaction was to express concern and skepticism about the stated US rationale for the rebalance to Asia, lament the 'lack of strategic trust' between Washington and Beijing, urge greater respect for Chinese 'core interests,' stress the negative consequences of the rebalance for Asian security (especially its purported role in emboldening US allies and partners to challenge Chinese maritime territorial claims) and redouble efforts to stabilize Sino-US relations.¹² Despite significant concerns about the impact of the US rebalance on Chinese interests, the most prominent element of China's response was increased efforts to build a stable relationship with Washington. In its Asia policy, Chinese policymakers talk about the need to maintain the proper balance between the competing goals of maintaining stability (*weiwén*) and defending sovereignty (*weiquán*).

¹¹See Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press 2012) and Phillip C. Saunders, 'China's Rising Power, the U.S. Rebalance to Asia, and Implications for U.S.-China relations,' in Mingjiang Li and Kalyan M. Kemburi (eds.), *China's Power and Asian Security* (New York: Routledge 2015), 85–108.

¹²This section draws primarily upon official Chinese statements and the author's interactions with Chinese officials, military officers, and scholars in a variety of settings over the period 2009–2012. Also see Michael D. Swaine, 'Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot', *China Leadership Monitor* 38 (Summer 2012).

Maintaining a stable regional security environment requires efforts to engage the United States and to reassure China's neighbors, while efforts to strengthen effective control over disputed maritime territories necessarily aggravates relations with other claimants.¹³ Under Xi Jinping, there has been more emphasis on pursuing Chinese territorial claims and on efforts to gradually diminish the US regional role and less concern about the negative impact on relations with China's neighbors.

With respect to the United States, China has sought to stabilize the bilateral relationship by calling for the establishment of a 'NTGPR' [新型大国关系, *xinxing daguo guanxi*] between the United States and China. Although this concept has antecedents dating back to then State Councilor Dai Bingguo's remarks at the first S&ED in 2009,¹⁴ it was not put forward as a goal for the US–China relationship until 2012.¹⁵ China's definition of the NTMPR evolved to include three elements: 'no conflict or confrontation, mutual respect [for core interests], and win-win cooperation.' For China, this formulation encompassed several desired goals, ensuring that China could continue economic development without the United States taking action to derail its rise, seeking US acceptance of Chinese core interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity (including Chinese claims to Taiwan and to disputed territory in the South and East China Seas), and cooperation on areas of common interest.

Obama Administration officials accepted some aspects of the Chinese concept, including the benefits of enhancing cooperation on areas of common interest, and the idea that China could continue its peaceful economic development without war between a dominant United States and a rising China (sometimes articulated in terms of the ability of the United States and China to avoid the 'Thucydides Trap').¹⁶ But they resisted accepting 'mutual respect for core interests' as part of the definition of a new US–China strategic relationship, rightly fearing that this implied an open-ended commitment to respect whatever interests Chinese leaders decided were vital.¹⁷ Instead, US officials sought to explore how a 'NTGPR' might be used to

¹³Phillip C. Saunders, 'China's Role in Asia: Attractive or Assertive?' in David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda (eds.), *International Relations in Asia*, 2nd edition (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2014), 147–72.

¹⁴The full text is in 'Remarks by H.E. Dai Bingguo, 'State Councilor of the People's Republic of China at the Opening Session of the First Round of the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogues, Washington, DC, 27 July 2009', in *China's Foreign Affairs 2010* (Beijing: World Affairs Press 2010), 584–586.

¹⁵Hu Jintao, 'Promote Win-Win Cooperation and Build a New Type of Relations between Major Countries', (Address, Opening Session, Fourth Round U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogues, Beijing, 3 May 2012)

¹⁶Graham Allison, 'The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?' *The Atlantic*, 24 Sept. 2015.

¹⁷Language about mutual respect for core interests appeared in the joint statement at the 2009 summit, but received such criticism that the Obama administration avoided any such language in subsequent meetings and statements.

increase bilateral cooperation. However, US allies became alarmed that the United States was accepting a Chinese conceptualization of the relationship (and Chinese officials privately conveyed as much, warning US allies that Washington would eventually leave the region and be unable to protect their interests).¹⁸ As a result, US officials eventually dropped the term from US characterizations of US–China bilateral relations.¹⁹

The official endorsement of the concept of a ‘NTGPR’ by top Chinese leaders prompted a host of writings by Chinese scholars and think tank analysts who sought to provide a theoretical basis for the concept and define what it might mean in operational policy terms.²⁰ Seeking to find a role for the military in this leadership-endorsed concept, Chinese military officers and scholars began talking about a ‘new type of military-to-military relations’ in 2012, and the concept was officially tabled by Xi Jinping at the Sunnylands summit in early 2013.²¹

It is notable that the proposal to develop a ‘NTGPR’ with the United States was a Chinese initiative at a time when Chinese leaders worried that the US rebalance to Asia might signal a more confrontational US policy toward China. Chinese concerns about a possible US policy shift reflected worries about how Washington might respond to more assertive Chinese policies in Asia (especially on maritime territorial disputes) and a sense on both sides of increasing US–China strategic competition, both for influence in Asia and in the space, cyber, and nuclear domains.²²

The current US–China strategic relationship is a mix of cooperation and competition, with some significant shared interests and a number of areas of conflicting and competing interests. This complexity and ambiguity makes it difficult to build a consensus (both domestically within the United States and China and between the United States and China) that

¹⁸For one critique, see Andrew S. Erikson and Adam P. Liff, ‘Not-So-Empty Talk: The Danger of China’s “New Type of Great-Power Relations” Slogan’, *Foreign Affairs.com*, 9 October 2014. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-10-09/not-so-empty-talk>

¹⁹See then-NSC Senior Director for Asia Evan Medeiros’ remarks at Brookings Institution conference ‘35 Years of U.S.–China Relations: Diplomacy, Culture and Soft Power,’ 28 March 2014, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2014/3/28-us-china-relations/032814brookingschina_edit.pdf; author’s interview with former DOD policy official, September 2015.

²⁰See Wang Yi, ‘Exploring the Path of Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics’, *China International Studies* 41/4 (July/August 2013), 5–17; Yu Hongjun, ‘China and the United States: Building New Relations Between Major Powers’, *China International Studies* 42/5 (September/October 2013), 16–33.

²¹Among others, see Jin Canrong [金灿荣] and Wang Bo [王博], ‘How to Construct a New Type of Sino-U.S. Military Relations’ [如何构建中美新型大国军事关系], *Contemporary International Relations* [现代国际关系] (3rd Quarter 2015), 16–26; Da Wei [达巍], ‘A New Type of Sino-U.S. Military Relations: Conceptualization and Implementation’ [中美新型大国关系: 概念化与操作化], *International Political Science* [国际政治科学] 41 (1st Quarter 2015), 1–16.

²²A review of official U.S. and Chinese strategic documents from 2012–2015 provides ample evidence of strategic competition in important domains. See Michael Swaine, presentation at CNA-NDU roundtable on China’s defense white paper (June 2015; publication forthcoming) and Phillip C. Saunders, ‘Recent Changes in Strategic Environment and Policy Statements,’ presentation at 9th Sino-U.S. Nuclear Dialogue, Honolulu, Hawaii, 9 October 2015.

can serve as a basis for cooperation at the bilateral, regional, and global levels. Leaders in both countries are aware that a confrontational US–China relationship would have high costs for both sides and are attempting to build mechanisms that can support cooperation where possible, handle policy differences without confrontation, and manage crises and incidents effectively when they arise. The need to avoid disaster provides a compelling rationale for sustained and substantive military-to-military contacts and better crisis communications and management mechanisms. However, it also raises questions about whether this ambiguous relationship provides a sustainable basis for more extensive military cooperation.

Structure and Trends in Military-to-Military Relations

The United States conceptualizes and manages military ties with China in several distinct categories, including high-level visits and engagements, recurrent exchanges (including dialogue mechanisms), functional exchanges, academic exchanges, and exercises and ship visits.

- **High-level visits and engagements:** These typically involve interactions between top US civilian officials such as the Secretary of Defense and senior military leaders such as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the heads of US military services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines) and regional commanders with responsibilities for Asia (such as the US Pacific Command and Pacific Fleet Commanders) with their Chinese counterparts. According to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), ‘High-level contacts are an important means to exchange views on the international security environment, to identify areas of common perspective, to manage differences, and to facilitate common approaches to shared challenges.’²³
- **Recurrent exchanges:** ‘Recurring institutionalized events form the backbone of US–China defense policy discussions each year. They serve as a regularized mechanism for dialogue.’²⁴ These policy dialogues include security dialogues nested under the S&ED such as the Strategic Security Dialogue, regular senior policy dialogues at the Undersecretary of Defense level (the Defense Consultative Talks), lower level policy dialogues at the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense level (the Defense Policy Coordination Talks), and operational dialogues (the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement).

²³Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense 2015), 65, hereafter OSD 2015 Report.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 66.

- **Functional exchanges:** 'Reciprocal exchanges between functional officers, rising leaders, and institutions of professional military education build new areas of cooperation and develop a generation of leaders on both sides who are knowledgeable and adept at handling this increasingly complex and vital relationship. Increasing contacts between mid-level officers is an important objective for both militaries as they seek to build familiarity and mutual understanding between future leaders.'²⁵ These exchanges include activities in areas ranging from military medicine to peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) operations.
- **Academic exchanges:** Although academic exchanges between military educational institutions such as the two countries' National Defense Universities are classified as 'functional exchanges,' in practice, they are managed separately and are viewed by both sides as less sensitive areas for military-to-military cooperation.
- **Ship visits and exercises:** 'Ship visits and exercises promote trust between the two sides and build joint capacity to provide international public goods like including search and rescue, disaster relief, and counter-piracy.'²⁶ Most of these exercises have involved relatively low-level activities in nontraditional security areas. In 2014, China was invited to participate in the Cobra Gold multilateral exercise, which focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and parts of the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise; China's RIMPAC participation included a naval gunnery exercise.

Several studies of US–China military-to-military relations have highlighted the fragility of military ties and the tendency for both sides to suspend military ties as a means of expressing displeasure at the other side's actions.²⁷ Scholars have identified a number of underlying causes, including the changing and fragile strategic and political basis for defense contacts and exchanges discussed in the Bilateral Political Relations and Military-to-Military relations section. Kevin Pollpeter identifies cultural differences in the ways the United States and China pursue cooperation as an additional cause:

A significant hindrance in developing U.S.-China military relations is the fundamentally opposite approach each side uses in pursuing cooperative relationships. The U.S. military prefers a bottom-up approach in which lower-level contacts build trust and identify areas of common interest. Once identified,

²⁵Ibid, 67.

²⁶Ibid, 67–68.

²⁷Pollpeter, *U.S.-China Security Management*; Campbell and Weitz, 'The Limits of U.S.-China Military Cooperation', 169–186; Yung, 'Continuity and Change in Sino-US Military-to-Military Relations', 204–224.

these areas can be built upon with more in-depth cooperation. The PLA, on the other hand, prefers a top-down approach in which higher-level dialogue is employed to build trust, which is a stepping stone to identify and reach areas of agreement. Without this trust and agreement on strategic issues, the PLA is uncomfortable with further enhancing cooperation.²⁸

Additional causes including the PLA's reluctance to be transparent about its military capabilities, sensitivity to being embarrassed if its forces do not perform to an acceptable standard, and mutual suspicions and lack of mutual trust.²⁹ US concerns about lack of reciprocity, need to protect US advantages in technology and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TT&P), desire for tangible outcomes, and worries about negative reactions from allies and partners are other constraining factors.³⁰

Some of these US concerns are codified in the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act, which limits military cooperation with China that might provide 'inappropriate exposure' in 12 sensitive areas. Chinese military officers complain that the legislation discriminates against China and cite it as one of the 'three obstacles' inhibiting the development of US-China military-to-military relations (the others are US arms sales to Taiwan and US reconnaissance operations in airspace and waters near China). Although the legislation and the bureaucratic procedures to ensure compliance impose procedural delays on US military interactions with China that cause some opportunities for productive interactions to be missed, in this author's judgment, repeal of the restrictions would not produce a fundamental transformation of relations.

Empirical data on US-China relations generally support the findings of the studies cited above. The data presented below are collected from 2010–16 US DOD reports and from Shirley Kan's January 2015 Congressional Research Service report, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*.³¹ Although the data do not provide a complete record of US-China military-to-military interactions, they are sufficient to provide a sense of broad trends.

Table 1 and Figures 1–2 present the available data on US-China military-to-military relations. The period from 2000 to 2011 illustrates the 'on-again, off-again' pattern of military-to-military relations described in the literature. As Figure 2 illustrates, accidents like the EP-3 incident and actions like US arms sales to Taiwan could produce a decision by one side or the other to interrupt military contacts; conversely improvements in political relations could produce a corresponding improvement in military ties. The data from 2008 to 2010

²⁸Pollpeter, *U.S.-China Security Management*, xii; also see David M. Finkelstein and John Unangst, *Engaging DoD: Chinese Perspectives on Military Relations with the United States* (Alexandria VA: CNA Corporation 1999).

²⁹Yung, 'Continuity and Change in Sino-US Military-to-Military Relations.'

³⁰Pollpeter, *U.S.-China Security Management* and Harold, 'What Does the PLA Think about the "New-Type Military-to-Military Relationship"?'

³¹Shirley A. Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 5 January 2015)

Table 1. Total US–China Military-to-Military Exchanges (2000–2015).

Year	High level visits	High-level multilateral exchanges	Recurrent exchanges	Functional exchanges	Academic exchanges	Ship visits and exercises	Total
2000	9	0	6	3	4	3	25
2001	1	0	2	1	0	1	5
2002	2	0	3	1	2	1	9
2003	2	0	2	2	1	2	9
2004	3	0	3	1	0	2	9
2005	3	0	5	2	1	1	12
2006	4	0	5	7	2	4	22
2007	7	0	1	3	1	0	12
2008	2	0	4	5	0	0	11
2009	3	0	5	5	0	0	13
2010	0	0	4	3	0	0	7
2011	4	0	4	2	0	0	10
2012	5	0	5	2	4	1	17
2013	5	0	6	5	4	4	24
2014	6	2	7	8	8	8	39
2015	4	4	6	7	5	9	35

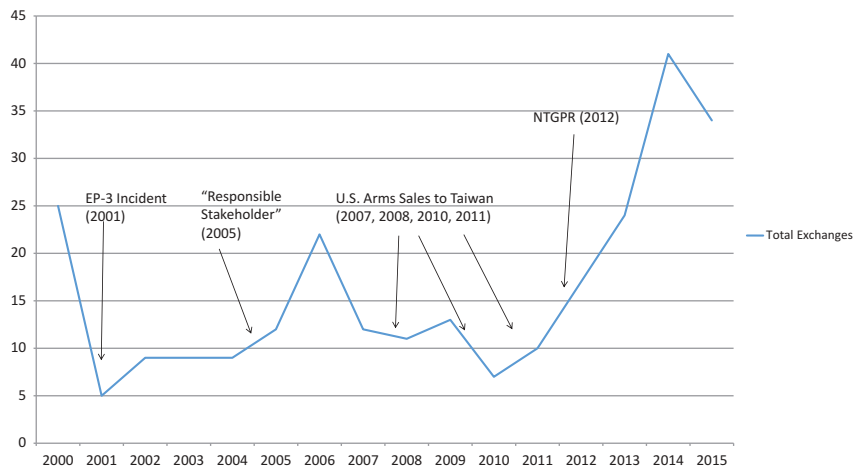


Figure 1. Total US–China Military-to-Military Exchanges (2000–2015).



Figure 2. High-level visits, recurrent exchanges, and functional exchanges (2000–2015).

reflect China's sense of increasing leverage in US–China relations. As the United States struggled to recover from the global financial crisis, a number of retired PLA officers argued that China should use its increased power to punish the United States for arms sales to Taiwan. Some also called for Chinese sanctions or boycotts against US companies selling arms to Taiwan.³² Despite threats, these sanctions did not materialize, but China could and did suspend military-to-military ties to demonstrate its unhappiness.

Based on interviews with PLA officers from 2011 to 2014, Eric Hagt found a shifting attitude toward military ties with the United States.³³ Some PLA officers found significant value in interactions with the US military, especially given the potential to learn from US experiences in conducting joint and expeditionary warfare and a range of counter-piracy, humanitarian assistance, and non-combatant evacuation operations. As PLA missions and taskings broadened to include more operations outside China's borders (such as counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and evacuation operations from Libya), the PLA had an increased appetite to learn from the United States and other advanced militaries. Moreover, improving PLA weapons and training reduced the risk of embarrassing mistakes and made the PLA better positioned to put what it learned from foreign militaries into practice. There was also a growing recognition within the PLA that military-to-military relations and confidence-building measures could help reduce risks as PLA ships and aircraft interacted more regularly with US military forces. The author's interactions with PLA officers during this period also found active duty and retired PLA officers resentful that the PLA was the one to pay the price (in suspending useful contacts) when it became necessary for China to respond to US arms sales to Taiwan and grappling for alternative means to punish the United States for arms sales.

The data in [Table 1](#) and [Figure 1](#) show a dramatic increase in US–China military-to-military interactions from 2012 to 2014, with a slight drop off in 2015. To some extent, the increase in contacts reflects sustained momentum in the relationship as scheduled engagements proceeded without interruption and it became possible to schedule more ambitious follow-on dialogues and activities. Some of the increase also reflects new actors seeking to become more active in US–China mil–mil relations. For example, military educational exchanges had long centered around the established relationship between the US and Chinese National Defense Universities, but other US military education institutions such as the Naval War College, Army War College, and Naval Postgraduate School became more active in seeking to

³²See Wang Te-chun, 'Rear Admiral Yang Yi: The Retaliatory Effect Will Become More and More Clear' [楊毅: 反制效應將越來越明顯], *Ta Kung Pao*, 5 February 2010 and Kristine Kwok, 'PLA Hawks Seek Curbs on US Over Taiwan Arms,' *South China Morning Post*, 8 Jan. 2010.

³³Eric Hagt, 'The Rise of PLA Military Diplomacy' in Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (eds.), *PLA Influence on Chinese National Security Policymaking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2015), 219–246.

establish exchanges with their Chinese counterpart institutions. The US Joint Staff established a new staff-talk mechanism with the PLA General Staff Department and the US Army established new contacts with the PLA ground forces. Sustained contacts also made it possible for US military leaders to seek to build stronger relationships with their PLA counterparts. Most notable was US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenart's efforts to build a relationship with PLA Navy Commander Admiral Wu Shengli, which included four meetings and a phone call in 2013.³⁴

Sustained military-to-military ties made some new interactions possible, including PLA participation in the Cobra Gold and RIMPAC exercises. The PLA had previously observed the Cobra Gold exercises but in 2014 and 2016 was a full participant. The United States, Australia, and China also participated in the small-scale Kowari trilateral exercise in Australia.

One major area of progress involved efforts to establish confidence-building and crisis communications mechanisms. This was a focus of the Clinton administration in the late 1990s, and eventually produced some useful mechanisms such as a defense hotline (which was activated in 2008). However, these embryonic mechanisms proved useless in managing the 2001 EP-3 crisis, when Chinese counterparts refused to answer phone calls and US military leaders were unable to leverage relationships with their Chinese counterparts to help resolve the dispute.³⁵

By contrast, in 2014 and 2015, the two militaries were able to establish a number of potentially important mechanisms. One was a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Notification of Major Military Activities. The MOU has a modular design that can incorporate new notification mechanisms via annexes. The initial agreement included two annexes: one covering strategy and policy announcements and one on the observation of military exercises. The United States has placed priority on completing an annex for ballistic missile launch notifications.³⁶

Reflecting US concerns about the risk of accidents resulting from aggressive PLA intercepts of US surveillance aircraft and ships, the two militaries also agreed on a MOU on Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters. Drawing on existing international agreements and practice, the two sides agreed on a framework MOU in November 2014 that included annexes with terms of reference and rules for surface-to-surface encounters. An additional annex governing air-to-air encounters was signed during Xi

³⁴Jeremy Page, 'As China Expands Its Navy, the U.S. Grows Wary,' *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2015, <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/as-china-expands-its-navy-the-u-s-grows-wary-1427769002>>.

³⁵John Keefe, *Anatomy of the EP-3 incident, April 2001* (Alexandria VA: Center for Naval Analyses 2002).

³⁶OSD 2015 report, 64; Department of Defense, 'Memorandum of Understanding between the United States of America Department of Defense and the People's Republic of China Ministry of National Defense on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism', 4 November 2014. <http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/141112_MemorandumOfUnderstandingOnNotification.pdf>, hereafter, MOU on Notification of Military Activities.

Jinping's visit to Washington in September 2015. The two militaries also reached agreement on crisis communications mechanisms that specified how they would use a new secure video link to communicate.³⁷

What explains this expansion of US–China military-to-military relations? Xi Jinping's call for a 'NTGPR' and concomitant calls for a 'new type of military-to-military relations' provided a positive political environment for expanded PLA interactions with the US military. PLA leaders were more interested in expanding military ties to learn from the United States than in the past and more confident that PLA units were capable of holding up their end in military interactions without the risk of embarrassing failures. Moreover, the lack of major US arms sales to Taiwan from 2012 until the end of 2015 meant that China did not face a hard decision on whether to sever or greatly curtail military ties in response.³⁸ (When the United States announced plans to sell two warships and anti-tank missiles to Taiwan in December 2015, China's official response was relatively restrained, and did not include a major suspension of military-to-military ties.³⁹)

The most important reason for China's desire to build a 'new type of military-to-military relationship' with the United States rests on the same strategic logic that underpins Chinese leadership efforts to stabilize US–China political relations: to prevent the United States from deciding to confront China. Given increasing military competition in the space, cyber, and nuclear domains and increasing air and naval interactions between the two militaries (with the risk of incidents or accidents that might escalate), Chinese leaders may have decided that the previous pattern of on-again, off-again military ties posed unacceptable risks.⁴⁰

Xi Jinping appears to have been personally concerned about the risks of military accidents and dissatisfied with the policy options the PLA produced for US–China military relations. He commissioned two studies on US–China military relations from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and Fudan University's Center for American Studies to generate independent assessments of the pros and cons of expanding military ties with the United States.⁴¹ A senior PLA officer stated privately that Xi Jinping

³⁷OSD 2015 report, 64–65; Department of Defense, 'Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters', 9–10 November 2014. http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/141112_MemorandumOfUnderstandingRegardingRules.pdf, hereafter, MOU on Rules of Behavior; Office of the Press Secretary, White House, 'Fact Sheet: President Xi Jinping's State Visit to the United States', 25 September 2015. <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/fact-sheet-president-xi-jinpings-state-visit-united-states>>

³⁸China did suspend an official dialogue on cybersecurity issues following the U.S. indictment of 5 PLA officers for involvement in the theft of U.S. intellectual property via computer network operations.

³⁹Michael Forsythe, 'China Protests Sale of U.S. Arms to Taiwan,' *New York Times*, 17 Dec. 2015.

⁴⁰See the remarks by Zha Xiaogang in Bai Tiantian, 'Beijing slams US arms sale to Taiwan,' *Global Times Online*, 18 Dec. 2015. <<http://english.sina.com/china/2015/12/17/874488.html>>

⁴¹Author's interviews with Chinese analysts, 2013–14.

had ordered the PLA to increase its military interactions with US military counterparts.⁴² Despite convincing evidence of civilian intervention into the military domain, the PLA appears to have been able to shape the direction of policy to pursue areas of interest (e.g., learning about joint operations from the US military) and to avoid unwanted commitments (e.g., binding arms control negotiations).⁴³ This pattern was also evident after Xi Jinping's September 2015 commitment not to 'militarize' the artificial islands China constructed in the South China Sea. PLA officers tried to interpret Xi's pledge as narrowly as possible so that it would not constrain deployments of weapons and troops to the islands.⁴⁴

Future Development of Military-to-Military Relations

Does the more positive PLA attitude toward military contacts with the United States mark a fundamental shift in China's approach that will lead to sustained and productive military-to-military relations in the future? Any answer is necessarily tentative. Unfortunately, our conclusion is that the shift in Chinese policy reflects a tactical desire to improve its ability to maintain a stable relationship with the United States rather than a strategic shift in approach. If China concludes that efforts to build a 'new type of major power relationship' with the United States will fail, the 'new type of military-to-military relationship' cannot last either. A number of factors support the pessimistic conclusion that the Sino-US military cooperation is likely to remain limited.

Increasing US-China Military Competition in Critical Strategic Domains

As discussed above, there is increasing Sino-US military interaction and competition in key strategic domains. The US military regards the ability to operate in the space and cyber domains as critical to its ability to fight and win wars. Chinese military strategists share the assessment that space and cyber are critical battlegrounds for the information dominance necessary to fight and win 'limited wars under conditions of informationization.'⁴⁵

⁴²Author's interview with a PLA flag officer, November 2014.

⁴³See Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, 'Introduction: PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking', in Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (eds.), *PLA Influence on Chinese National Security Policymaking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2015), 1–30; and Scott Harold, 'What Does the PLA Think about the "New-Type Military-to-Military Relationship"?'.

⁴⁴This effort was evident in the author's interactions with PLA officers in the October 2015 Xiangshan Forum in Beijing.

⁴⁵Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi (彭光谦, 姚有志) (eds.), *Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House (军事科学出版社) 2013); State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing: May 2015), hereafter, 'China's Military Strategy.'

PLA strategists have viewed US space and cyber superiority as a critical foundation for US military power, which they wish to both emulate (to build China's military power) and exploit (to target US military vulnerabilities). US military strategists see Chinese investments in counter-space capabilities such as anti-satellite weapons as targeting US satellites and are offended at successful attacks on US military and government computer networks that are credibly attributed to China. Bland denials that the PLA engages in any cyber operations and statements that Chinese weapons tests 'are not aimed at any country' are counter-productive: they destroy trust rather than providing assurance. US nuclear superiority has allowed the United States to have a relatively relaxed attitude toward China's modernization and expansion of its modest nuclear arsenal. However, once China's *Jin* class SSBNs begin deterrence patrols, the US Navy is likely to devote resources to tracking and monitoring them, just as it did with Soviet SSBNs.

Increasing US-China Competition in Asia

China's investment in a range of conventional military systems is challenging US military dominance in Asia. China's investment in domestic and Russian conventional submarines, warships armed with advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, improving aircraft, and a formidable array of increasingly accurate ballistic missiles will make it more difficult and costly for the US military to project power near and into Chinese territory.⁴⁶ Some Chinese systems, such as the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile, are specifically designed to target US aircraft carriers. The United States is likely to respond both with innovative systems (such as a new strategic bomber), technologies (under the third offset strategy), and operational concepts (such as AirSea Battle, now labeled the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons) that Chinese military analysts will regard as highly threatening. The competition goes well beyond military hardware, with US strategists believing that China seeks to erode US alliances and expel the United States from the region and Chinese strategists arguing that the United States is using its alliances and military forces to interfere with Chinese territorial claims. This increasing sense of military competition is not conducive to a positive military-to-military relationship, since it produces a tendency for each side to view each other's capabilities as threatening and promotes arms race dynamics. Moreover, the US military has little incentive to help the PLA improve its conventional war fighting capabilities given the potential for China to use those capabilities against the United States.

⁴⁶For an assessment see Eric Heginbotham, et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation 2015). <http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html>

Chinese Suspicion of US Political Objectives

Another obstacle is continuing Chinese suspicion that the United States seeks to overthrow the CCP and subvert its political control over the PLA. Indeed, the 2015 defense white paper flatly states that some country seeks to foment a 'color revolution' in China.⁴⁷ Articles and media appearances by active and retired PLA officers reveal little trust in the United States. A vivid illustration is the 2013 film *Silent Contest*, coproduced by the PLA National Defense University Political Department, which described the US push for closer military-to-military relations as a plot designed to corrupt Chinese officers.⁴⁸ PLA officers increasingly view the United States as the greatest threat to China, an attitude that obviously impedes constructive and cooperative military ties.⁴⁹

Declining US Confidence in the Ability of Military Contacts to Change Chinese Military Behavior

US policymakers have viewed military-to-military contacts as a means to learn more about Chinese military thinking and capabilities but also as a means to influence Chinese behavior, especially in a crisis situation. US senior officers get promoted to senior positions partly based on their ability to establish and employ good relations with their foreign counterparts, military peers, and subordinates. However, the Chinese system for managing military ties makes it difficult to build such relationships with active duty PLA officers. Moreover, even if US military officers can build personal ties, their PLA counterparts are not usually empowered to resolve a dangerous crisis situation. One recent research paper based on interviews with 11 retired US three and four-star flag officers with active duty PLA engagement experience concluded that personal relations with PLA officers have minimal operational value due to numerous individual barriers that prevent the building of trust between counterparts and institutional barriers that prevent the translation of relationships into operational value.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The situation is not as dire as the foregoing may suggest. China has a strategic imperative to avoid a hostile relationship with the United States, which is the most powerful country in the international system and uniquely

⁴⁷'China's Military Strategy.'

⁴⁸Jane Perlez, 'Strident Video by Chinese Military Casts U.S. as Menace', *New York Times*, 31 Oct. 2013.

⁴⁹Yawei Liu and Justine Zheng Ren, 'An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat: The United States According to PLA Officers', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23/86, 255–74.

⁵⁰James P. Nolan, 'Why Can't We Be Friends? Assessing the Operational Value of Engaging PLA Leadership', *Asia Policy* 20 (July 2015), 45–79.

positioned to facilitate or obstruct Chinese objectives. The United States also has strong incentives to maintain a cooperative working relationship with China and keep it as a 'moderately revisionist' country in the international system, as opposed to a country actively trying to overthrow existing international rules and norms. This suggests that the two countries will maintain an ambiguous relationship marked by a mixture of cooperation and competition. In this context, there will be space for military-to-military relations to continue and for the two militaries to engage in some cooperative real world activities.

Nevertheless, the factors discussed above are likely to limit the degree to which military contacts build a significant degree of trust between the US and Chinese militaries and suggest that bilateral operational cooperation is likely to remain fairly limited. However, even if expectations should be tempered, there can still be significant value in the US–China military-to-military contacts. Better understanding of how the other military thinks and operates can help avoid misperception and miscalculation. Common understandings about international rules of behavior can help reduce the risk of accidents and incidents, and better crisis management and communications mechanisms can help prevent escalation when they occur.

However, much will depend on how these measures are implemented. In a recent bilateral dialogue, a PLA officer stated that China had used the notification mechanism to inform the United States that it had *stopped* its island building activities in the South China Sea but remained silent when asked if it had used the mechanism to notify the United States when the activity *started*. This serves as a reminder that confidence-building measures that are not consistently implemented may actually undermine mutual trust. PLA officers have been ambiguous on whether the rules for air and maritime interactions will apply in the South China Sea, an area of increasingly contentious US–China operational interactions. The US Navy has increased its 'freedom of navigation' operations in the South China Sea, which are used to assert US maritime rights and to challenge excessive maritime claims. PLA forces routinely verbally challenge the US military's right to operate in waters that China claims and follow US Navy ships when they operate in the South China Sea. The potential for an accident or incident to escalate into a broader military crisis highlights both the increasing competitive nature of US and Chinese military interactions, and the importance of military-to-military relations in helping to manage these tensions.

Acknowledgments

Dr Saunders thanks Kevin Pollpeter, David Helvey, and Joel Wuthnow for useful comment on earlier drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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