

RESEARCH PAPER

GOING NOWHERE SLOWLY:
U.S.-CHINA MILITARY RELATIONS
1994-2001

by

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: Going Nowhere Slowly: U.S.-China Military Relations 1994-2001

FORMAT: Research Paper

DATE: 7 July 2006

PAGES: 39

The thesis of this paper suggests that the policy of military engagement with China, as originally envisioned by Secretary of Defense William Perry, and executed by subsequent defense secretaries failed to meet its stated objectives. The military relationship has not made a significant contribution to improved U.S.-China relations and has had little to no influence on Chinese security policies that conflict with the United States national security interests.

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GOING NOWHERE SLOWLY: U.S. - CHINA MILITARY RELATIONS 1994-2001

When talking to friends, I have often likened the cyclical nature of U.S.-China military relations to a monster roller coaster at a Six Flags theme park. The “ride,” like a new cycle of the relationship, usually starts from the dead stop of little to no military contact. It then begins the slow clinking ascent on the first incline, or in relationship terms, the initial bilateral negotiations to define the basis for, and number of, military exchanges. The crest of that first incline culminates with a senior-level bilateral summit, at the Minister of Defense-Secretary of Defense level, which validates the months of negotiations and begins the cycle of exchanges. The ride and the relationship then cascades downhill in a flurry of exchanges, visits, and activities. As the relationship negotiates the invigorating loops and turns, the “passengers,” Chinese and U.S. defense officials, “scream” with excitement. The question is: are they screaming with enjoyment, in the belief that the relationship will contribute toward improving the overall bilateral relationship? Or are they screaming because they fear that the relationship will offer the opposite side a military or security advantage in some future conflict? Finally, the roller coaster negotiates that last frightening, jolting loop or dip—the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, the 1995 Taiwan Missile Crisis; the 1999 U.S. air strike on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Embassy in Belgrade; the 2001 collision of a Chinese fighter plane with a U.S. surveillance aircraft—and the ride, and the relationship cycle, arrive at an abrupt halt. After a slow pause, during which participants on both sides come and go, the ride and the

cycle begin anew. Unfortunately, regardless of how long or invigorating the ride, the relationship—like a roller coaster— always starts and stops at the same point, having made little to no forward progress. This begs the question: why is this so and what, if anything, can be done to break this unproductive cycle.

Since the earliest Portuguese explorers landed on the south China coast in the fifteenth century, foreigners have traveled to China with the mission of changing the country and its people. Over the next five hundred years, those first pioneers were followed by successive waves of missionaries, businessmen, armies, and erstwhile allies all intent on molding China to meet their needs or interests. Despite their efforts, they eventually left, and China’s destiny continued to progress on its own rhythm; its historical path influenced, but never altered by external actors.

With our policy of military engagement with China in the 1990s, the United States joined those who had been attempting to control or “shape” China’s course and, like all of the previous efforts, this one too fell short. This paper seeks to examine the basis and execution of our military engagement policy with China—focusing on the 1994-2001 time period—to discuss the end result of the effort, and to explore ways of forging ahead.

A Short History of U.S.-China Military Relations

Given the contentious history of modern U.S.-China relations, the fact that there can even be a discussion on the success or failure of military engagement is remarkable. For most of the latter half of the twentieth century, U.S.-China military relations were non-existent. Following the 1949 victory of Communist armies over the U.S.-backed Nationalist forces, official U.S. governmental recognition and military support was transferred with the retreating Nationalist forces on Taiwan. Coming in the aftermath of the Truman Doctrine and the decision to contain the spread of Communism, Washington saw the “loss” of China as part of Soviet expansionism and reinforced U.S. hostility toward the new Communist regime.

The November 1950 attack by Chinese “volunteers” against MacArthur’s UN forces in Korea solidified the hostility. Following the 1954 Armistice, the United States began stationing troops in Taiwan and the U.S. Navy patrolled the Taiwan Strait to deter PRC aggression. In 1954, and again in 1958, U.S. naval forces intervened when PRC forces were threatening offshore islands controlled by Taiwan. This direct confrontation settled into a strategy of containment as the 1950s transitioned to the 1960s.

Relations with China in the 1960s were dominated by the United States involvement in Southeast Asia and driven by the “domino theory,” which assumed that China (and, ultimately, the Soviet Union) was behind the Communist insurgencies in that region. China’s 1965 emergence as a nuclear power also steeled U.S. resolve to confront and contain China. As the decade came to a close, the combination developments in the U.S.-USSR cold war

confrontation caused U.S. strategists to reevaluate relations with China. Most important was the realization that the Sino-Soviet split of 1960 was real, and that by 1969 relations between the two countries had deteriorated to the point where there were armed border confrontations between Soviet and Chinese forces in Manchuria. With this realization, the stage was set to create the conditions that would lead to the possibility of U.S.-China military engagement.

President Nixon's groundbreaking 1972 visit to China marks the beginning of the current chapter in Sino-U.S. relations. It was the Nixon-Kissinger doctrine of "triangular relations" which first proposed that relations with China could be used to "shape" the strategic environment. In its initial form, this policy focused almost exclusively on using China to place pressure on the USSR to modify its strategic behavior. As the decade progressed, however, relations with China stabilized. Obstacles to normal relations—most notably the United States' withdrawal from Indochina in 1975 and the end of internal upheaval in China resulting from the Cultural Revolution—were eliminated. The decade culminated in 1978 with the three Sino-U.S. Joint Communiqués and the official U.S. recognition of China. Thus, the stage was set for the advent U.S.-China military relations in the 1980s.

The eighties saw the first real U.S.-China military exchanges. These exchanges were still largely driven by the desire to use China as a hedge against the Soviet Union. In December 1980, the CIA secretly concluded a deal with

China to set up electronic intelligence facilities on Chinese territory to monitor Soviet missile testing.¹ The Reagan administration showed great interest in expanding strategic and military cooperation. In 1982 the two sides opened discussions of an arms transfer program. As a result of these discussions, the United States agreed to sell China artillery equipment and ammunition, anti-submarine torpedoes, artillery-locating radar, advanced avionics, and Blackhawk helicopters. There was discussion of Chinese cooperation in opposing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In addition, the two sides traded visits by military leaders and participated in numerous academic and operational related exchanges by personnel on both sides. While U.S. arms sales to Taiwan remained a contentious issue and periodically interrupted military relations, the two sides arrived at an uneasy agreement to set aside U.S. policy toward Taiwan, provided that the island did not assert its independence and that Washington's policy remained ambiguous. This first era of true military relations between the two countries came to a close with the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, which halted all U.S. military relations with the PRC.

The Basis for Military Engagement with China

The basis for the policy of engagement was found in the National Security Strategy (NSS). The 1999 NSS, like its predecessors, articulates the important role that the military plays in “shaping the international environment.” The document states that peacetime engagement activities “help to deter aggression

and coercion, build coalitions, promote regional stability and serve as role models for militaries in emerging democracies.” It goes on to say, “With countries that are neither staunch friends nor known foes (read: China), military cooperation can serve as a positive means of building security relationships today that will contribute to improved relations tomorrow.”²

The principles of engagement were further refined in the National Military Strategy (and echoed in successive Department of Defense (DoD) annual reports to the president and Congress), which outlines the role of military-to-military exchanges in our engagement policy. The document states that the objectives of military exchanges are to:

- Promote regional stability by facilitation regional cooperation, supporting democratization, and enhancing transparency with potential adversaries.
- Preventing or reducing conflicts or other threats by limiting the prevalence of military technologies, combating transnational regional threats, and providing security reassurance.
- Deterring aggression or coercion through clearly articulated policy and the maintenance of a credible military force.³

Having established a general understanding of the objectives of the engagement policy, what then were the objectives with respect to China?

Returning to the NSS, these objectives were:

“...sustaining the strategic dialogue...; enhancing stability in the Taiwan Strait through maintenance of our “one-China” policy; peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues and encouraging dialogue between Beijing and Taipei; strengthening China’s adherence to international nonproliferation norms, particularly in export controls on ballistic missile and dual-use technologies; restarting our bilateral discussions on arms control; achieving greater openness and transparency in China’s military; encouraging a constructive PRC role in international affairs through active cooperation in multilateral for a such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC); and improving law enforcement cooperation in such areas as counter-terrorism and counter narcotics.”⁴

It was Secretary of Defense William Perry who laid the groundwork for our 1990s China military engagement policy. Perry was the first secretary of defense to visit China after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. While not ignoring long-standing problems such as China's weapons sales abroad and its human rights abuses, he believed that the United States and China should cooperate militarily. With the visit of Assistant Secretary of Defense Chas Freeman to Beijing in November 1993, Perry initiated a policy of resuming dialogue and military exchanges with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In an April 1994 memo explaining the justification for renewing military relations, Perry wrote:

“The rationale is that China is fast becoming the world’s largest economic power, and that combined with its UN PermFive status, its political clout, its nuclear weapons and a modernizing military, make China a player with which the Unites States must work together. Our security posture dramatically improves if China cooperates with us. In order to gain that cooperation, we must rebuild mutual trust and understanding with the PLA, and this should only happen through high level dialogue and working level contacts.”⁵

Perry concluded his memo by saying, “The military relationship with China could pay significant dividends for DoD.”

After outlining his rationale for military engagement, Perry articulated the following objectives for military exchanges. These exchanges were designed for:

- Influencing China's security community on a range of issues of mutual concern, including proliferation and regional stability;
- Increasing mutual understanding and trust between the militaries;
- Promoting transparency within the PLA and gaining operational insights into the PLA that may assist in clarifying intentions, and;
- Encouraging Chinese participation in multilateral security arrangements that promote global and regional stability.⁶

It is clear that Perry’s intent in renewing military relations was to influence or “shape” the PLA in ways that would support U.S. interests. With minor changes, these points remained the objectives of the military engagement policy from 1993 until 2000.

Execution of the Engagement Policy

Under Perry’s leadership, DoD greatly expanded military relations with China. The May 1994 visit to the United States by PLA Deputy Chief of the

General Staff General Xu Huizi, was the opening salvo in what eventually became a continuous bi-directional flow of high-level visits. In April 1994, Admiral Charles Larson, the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) commander, visited Beijing, in the first of what would become a tradition of PACOM Commanders making semi-annual visits to China to confer with the PLA leadership. In November 1995, Secretary Perry visited China, and his successor, William Cohen, traveled to China twice, in 1997 and 2000. From 1997-99, the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Generals John Shalikashvili and Henry Shelton, visited China, as did the chiefs of staff of the Army and Air Force, and the Chief of Naval Operations. From China, Deputy Chiefs of the General Staff, Generals Kui Fulin, Wu Quan Xu, Qian Shugen, and Xiong Guangkai made trips to the United States. In 1996, PRC Minister of Defense, General Chi Haotian, visited the United States, followed in 1998 by PLA General Logistics Department Chief General Wang Ke and Vice Chairman of the PRC Central Military Commission, General Zhang Wannian. In 1997, the two countries initiated annual Defense Consultative Talks lead by a senior PLA official (usually General Xiong) and the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy , to institutionalize strategic dialogue. In addition to this high-level leadership exchange, there were numerous functional exchanges as Secretary Perry had envisioned. The national defense universities of the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding that facilitated numerous student and faculty exchanges. Memoranda of understanding and cooperation were signed in the areas of military medicine and military environmental protection. Secretary Cohen and

PLA General Zhang Wannian signed an agreement to exchange mid-grade officers as students in language, field medicine, and command leadership. There were numerous service-to-service contacts, functional and information exchanges in the areas of operations and training, logistics, military history, military law, dual-use technology transfer, military-civilian defense conversion cooperation, and multilateral exchanges and conferences (via the Pacific Command Theater Engagement Plan (TEP)). In 1998, both sides signed a Military Maritime Consultative Agreement to provide a mechanism for discussing air and maritime safety issues. U.S. ships made visits to Shanghai and Qingdao, and PLA ships visited Pearl Harbor, San Diego, and Seattle. Chinese military delegations were given extraordinary access to U.S. military bases, facilities, equipment, and leaders, the philosophy being that such exposure would decrease suspicions and increase mutual understanding. Implied, but not stated, was the belief that exposing the PLA to advanced U.S. capabilities would deter PRC military aggression and dissuade the PLA from a military competition with the United States.

Senior U.S. military leaders embraced the military engagement policy with China, and their commitment to the policy was reflected in their public statements at home, but especially during visits to China. In a November 1998 speech at Fudan University in China, the PACOM Commander, Admiral Prueher, a principal supporter and architect of the military engagement policy, stated definitively that, “[t]he U.S. Pacific Command aims to promote military-to-military

ties that bring us closer.”⁷ He went on to offer two suggestions for improving the military relationship: first, he suggested that the relationship was robust enough to sustain direct operational contact between senior U.S. military leaders and the PLA leadership, and recommended that this be implemented; second, he advocated expanding contacts for providing opportunities to bring younger, more junior U.S. and PLA military officers together.⁸ Similarly, in a July 2000 speech to students at the PLA National Defense University, Secretary of Defense Cohen stated, “[w]e want to create a relationship, not of distrust, but one of dialogue and above all, one that does not endanger but enhances the security of all of our citizens, our allies and our friends in the region.”⁹

Analysis of the Policy

The United States approach to military relations with China during this period could best be characterized as “pragmatic optimism.” Those that were most optimistic felt there was a possibility of forging a “strategic partnership” with China. Those slightly less optimistic felt that the exposure to U.S. culture and values would influence the PLA leadership to advocate implementing these values in the Chinese military. This would, presumably, have a stabilizing effect on the PLA and make Chinese military aggression less likely. Finally, the hard-nosed pragmatists believed that the policy might at least reduce the possibility for PRC miscalculation and potentially forge lines of communication with the PLA leadership that could be used in time of crisis or potential confrontation.

Given these beliefs, the question is: “what influence did this policy of military engagement ultimately have on the PLA?” Did the policy influence PRC strategic behavior in ways that supported U.S. interests? The best method of answering these questions is in analyzing the objectives that Perry established to determine whether or not they were achieved.

“Influencing China's security community on a range of issues of mutual concern, including proliferation and regional stability.” China's military modernization effort, initiated as one of the “Four Modernizations” in the 1980s, continued to accelerate during the 1990s. The performance of U.S. forces and capabilities during the Gulf War was a “wake-up call” for the PLA and initiated an era of unprecedented weapons acquisition and operational modernization. Since 1989, the Chinese defense budget has continued to increase annually at a double-digit pace. Between 1986 and 1994 alone, the official defense budget increased by about 159 percent.¹⁰ These increases continued through the height of U.S. military engagement. The 2002 PLA budget of 166 billion yuan (U.S. \$20 billion) is a 25.2 billion yuan increase over 2001; it was slightly below 2001's 17.7 percent rise, which was a record in real terms when considering inflation. These budgets did not include investments in weapons research and development or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). What is notable is that throughout this period of unprecedented increases, is the PLA complaint that these budgets were insufficient. It "doesn't satisfy the military's needs," said General Song

Qingwei, one of more than 250 legislators representing the PLA in China's National People's Congress when referring to the 2002 budget.¹¹

These budgets financed a series of major weapons purchases from Russia all aimed at enhancing China's power projection capability. The weapons included Su-27 and Su-30 fighter aircraft and Sovremenny-class destroyers. In addition, the PLA made significant strides in the areas of command, control and communications, air-to-air refueling, anti-ship cruise missile and anti-submarine warfare development, and amphibious operations.¹² China's missile arsenal also continued to grow during this period. In the early nineties, China had about twenty CSS-4 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with a range of over twelve thousand kilometers, and developed several new strategic missile systems, including two new road-mobile solid propellant ICBMs. Despite the flourishing military relationship, the PLA did not hide the fact that their ICBMs were targeted at the United States. In 1998, PLA Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General Xiong Guangkai remarked that China might consider trading Los Angeles for a Chinese city in a possible nuclear exchange.¹³ It was also during this period that China developed a short range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) inventory of approximately 350 missiles and continued to increase its arsenal by about fifty missiles per year. The accuracy, range, and lethality of this force was increased to the point where they could hit U.S. bases in Okinawa. In 1995 and again in 1996 China fired these missiles toward Taiwan in an effort to coerce Taiwan and influence their presidential elections. Finally, in open source

publications, Chinese strategists made no secret of their desire to develop narrowly-focused high-tech military capabilities, so-called “assasin’s mace” weapons, to counter U.S. military strengths. Area burst electromagnetic pulse (EMP) weapons designed to disable U.S. aircraft carriers are an example of the niche capabilities sought by the PLA.

Then, too, China continued to proliferate WMD components and technology to a number of countries with grave consequences for regional stability. In July 1997, a CIA report concluded that, in the second half of 1996, "China was the single most important supplier of equipment and technology for weapons of mass destruction" worldwide. The report also stated that, for the period of July to December 1996—that is, after China's May 11, 1996 pledge to the United States not to provide assistance to unsafeguarded nuclear facilities—China was Pakistan's "primary source of nuclear-related equipment and technology."¹⁴ Most analysts agree that Pakistan’s successful 1998 explosion of a nuclear device—and the resulting south Asian instability—would have been impossible without PRC support. In addition, during this period, China supplied Iran, Iraq, Syria, and North Korea with WMD hardware, missile components, and related technology. China also continued to be the one of the world’s largest conventional arms suppliers, providing low tech munitions to most of the developing world, including, as was discovered recently, the Afghan Taliban and the al Qaeda terrorist network.

Military relations with the United States did not prevent China from using military power to coerce and threaten Taiwan. In fact, annual training exercise in the PLA Nanjing Military Region, from 1995-2001 did not conceal the fact that PLA efforts to improve operational warfighting, combined arms operations, command and control, and amphibious operations were specifically targeted at Taiwan. As previously stated, in July 1995 and March 1996, China fired short range missiles in the coastal waters surrounding Taiwan. In response to the second incident, which became known as the 1996 Taiwan Missile Crisis, the United States dispatched two carrier battle groups to demonstrate its resolve to defend Taiwan. Similarly, China continued aggressively to assert its claims to the Spratly and Parcel Islands in the South China Sea, resulting in several armed confrontations and standoffs with Vietnamese and Philippine naval forces.

More important, it was during this same period, that the PLA strategic thinkers began openly identifying the United States as a “hegemon” and China’s most likely future military threat. In 1996, strategist He Xin of the Chinese Academy of Social Science wrote, “China must seek allies among all countries that could become America’s potential opponents today and in the future. He went on to say, “China should do all it can to warn and help these countries and prevent them from being destroyed by the United States as the Soviet Eastern European block was”.¹⁵ These same PLA strategists began openly writing about and modeling ways to defeat U.S. technological superiority. The PLA

National Defense University opened a study on the Chinese application of “asymmetric warfare” to defeat superior U.S. forces. As previously mentioned, particular attention was paid to defeating U.S. aircraft carrier battlegroups such as those used to intervene during the 1996 Taiwan Missile Crisis. Conclusion? Engagement did not appear to have any influence on either the shaping of China’s role in enhancing regional stability or in the diminution of its proliferation behaviors.

“Promoting transparency within the PLA and gaining operational insights into the PLA that may assist in clarifying intentions.” While PLA delegations to the United States received unprecedented access and exposure to facilities, equipment, and personnel, U.S. delegations experienced much different treatment. In keeping with the writings of Sun Zi, secrecy and deception are fundamental tenets of Chinese military strategy; the PLA, which evolved from a guerilla force, is one of the most secretive institutions in China. U.S. delegations were given itineraries heavily weighted toward cultural tourism (trips, for example, to the Great Wall) and short on relevant military content. Often, that military content was restricted to the most benign and innocuous activities. With very few exceptions, U.S. military delegations were steered toward military schools or PLA “show” units near major cities where they watched “demonstrations” of training as opposed to actual training. Such demonstrations routinely consisted of soldiers participating in martial arts drills or shooting at balloons. Tours were given of pristine barracks, providing no indication of soldier

activity, and of unit pig farms and kitchens. When there were demonstrations or displays of military equipment, it was usually obsolete, first generation tanks and aircraft that were displayed under tightly controlled circumstances. Such basic questions as to numbers of personnel in units, were frequently met with a stony silence from the PLA host. In one instance, a visiting U.S. Army general, who could hear the meeting room windows rattling from artillery fire nearby, was told by the base commander that no artillery training was available for him to see. There were no opportunities for observing actual training, much less military exercises or maneuvers that might provide the “operational insights” that Secretary Perry so desired.

Access to PLA personnel was similarly restricted. U.S. delegations in China rarely had opportunities to speak with anyone below the rank of lieutenant colonel, and then only under tight restrictions. Open discussions with common soldiers or junior officers were non-existent, and with the exception of intelligence officers assigned as escorts and translators, PLA delegations to the United States rarely included any officer below the rank of senior colonel (the equivalent of a U.S. brigadier general).¹⁶ Thus, the true working-level exchanges that Perry had hoped for could not take place.

PLA transparency had always been a problem in the military relationship going back to the 1980's. It was a topic of discussion at virtually every senior-level meeting. The PLA failed to address repeated requests for increased

access and when pressed, PLA leaders would claim, humbly, that they were embarrassed to show their “backward and undeveloped” facilities and equipment to foreign guests. The actual attitude was probably best summed up in a 1995 comment by a senior PLA officer during a dinner for a visiting DoD official: after a dinner punctuated by U.S. calls for increased PLA transparency, the PLA officer accepted his gift from the U.S. official and, seeing the opaque wrapping paper concealing the gift, the host smiled and remarked, “[t]his is Chinese transparency.”¹⁷ Conclusion? The engagement policy failed to increase PLA transparency.

“Increasing mutual understanding and trust between the militaries.”

During an early morning 7 May 1999 U.S.-led bombing raid of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, the Chinese Embassy was struck. Three Chinese nationals were killed and twenty wounded. The immediate Chinese reaction was one of anger and indignation, but the level and depth of anti-American sentiment expressed in the aftermath of the air strike surprised even the senior Chinese leadership. The United States accepted responsibility for the bombing, declaring that it was an accident caused by dated and imprecise maps. President Clinton called PRC President Jiang Zemin and offered a complete apology. Despite this, and after almost five years of military engagement, the universal Chinese belief—among the people, in the government and especially in the PLA—was that the bombing was a deliberate act. The U.S. Embassy in Beijing was besieged for five days by protestors who hurled rocks and paint at the chancellery under the watchful eye

of PRC security forces. According to a 20 May 1999 survey conducted by the *Beijing Youth Daily* newspaper, none of the eight hundred respondents believed that the bombing was a “tragic mistake” as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had explained. An 8 June article in *The People’s Daily* newspaper decried U.S. “gunboat diplomacy” stating, “[o]n May 7, NATO went so far as to launch a missile attack on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade resulting in the deaths of three Chinese journalists and the injuries of more that 20 Chinese diplomatic personnel and serious damage to the embassy building. U.S.-led NATO atrocities indicate its pursuance of a new gunboat policy.” Within the PLA, senior officers urged a tough reaction toward the United States in response to the bombing. The PLA Navy sent a flotilla of ten ships near the disputed Diaoyu Islands as a show of force. On 16 May, the *South China Morning Post* reported PLA General Li Desheng as stating, “[w]e cannot be negligent and not counter the U.S.-led NATO bombing of a sovereign country or the raid on our embassy in Belgrade.” Following the bombing incident, China ceased all military engagement activities, including U.S. Navy port calls to Hong Kong.

On 1 April 2001, a U.S. Navy EP-3 on a routine surveillance mission in international airspace collided with a Chinese fighter plane over the South China Sea. In the year prior to the accident, there had been a pattern of increasingly aggressive intercepts of U.S. surveillance aircraft by Chinese fighters, with the Chinese aircraft sometimes coming within 100 feet of the slower and larger U.S. aircraft. In December 2000, the U.S. government raised the issue of the

dangerous situation that these intercepts created, in a demarche to the PRC government. The PRC government did not respond. The Chinese fighter was lost at sea, but the crippled U.S. EP-3 managed to make an emergency landing at a military airfield on China's Hainan Island. Upon landing, the 24-person crew was detained by PRC military authorities, who denied U.S. Embassy personnel access to them. The U.S. Ambassador to China was Admiral Joseph Prueher, the same Admiral Prueher who had been one of the architects and major supporters of the military engagement policy and had stated that the military relationship was robust enough for direct leader-to-leader contact. Ambassador Prueher had met and had numerous discussions with many, if not all of the senior PLA leadership during his tenure as PACOM Commander. Despite this, April 2001 became known as "the day of phone calls not returned." Neither the PRC Ministry of National Defense (MND), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), or the PLA General Staff were answering the phone or returning phone calls from the Ambassador or any other U.S. official. It was not until 12 hours after the accident that Ambassador Prueher had his first meeting with a mid-level MFA official. At this meeting, the MFA official stated (based on reports from the PLA air units based in Hainan) that the EP-3 and Chinese F-8 had been flying on a parallel course approximately four hundred feet apart when the slower, larger EP-3 banked sharply to the left and rammed the smaller and faster F-8. The Chinese official went on to blame the United States and demanded that the United States accept full responsibility for the incident. Drawing on his experience as a navy pilot, Ambassador Prueher immediately characterized the

Chinese version of events as “physically impossible.”¹⁸ Throughout the diplomatic resolution of the EP-3 incident, the PLA never deviated from its version of the story, even after numerous international aviation experts determined that their explanation was just as Ambassador Prueher had characterized it. As in the case of the Belgrade bombing, all military contacts between the two countries terminated, including U.S. Navy port calls to Hong Kong.

Conclusion? The engagement policy failed to increase mutual trust. As for mutual understanding, some would argue that each side understands the other well enough to know that their security interests diverge far more than they converge.

“Encouraging Chinese participation in multilateral security arrangements that promote global and regional stability.” While vocally championing “multilateralism” as an alternative to “superpower” (read: United States) hegemony, China has historically opposed collective security arrangements. While it has signed a “treaty of friendship” with Russia, it does not actively participate in any regional or global security arrangements. In fact, it has routinely criticized U.S. bilateral and multilateral security arrangements (such as the U.S.-Japan Security Agreement) as attempts to “contain” China. It has not wavered from its position that the U.S.-Taiwan security arrangement, mandated by the Taiwan Relations Act, is interference in China’s internal affairs. China has

consistently and publicly criticized U.S.-led coalition military operations from the Gulf War through the Balkans peacekeeping missions, and has offered only cautious political support to the current counter-terrorism campaign. While it has been more active in UN-mandated stability operations, to date the PLA has only participated in one regional peacekeeping mission: sending a small engineering detachment to Cambodia in the early 1990s. In response to the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the militaries of Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Brunei, Canada, France, Switzerland, Germany, India, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, and the United Kingdom, in addition to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, dedicated a total of 90 ships, 64 aircraft, 84 helicopters, 25 medical teams, two logistics teams, and eight medical teams to the effort. Despite its commitment to combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States dedicated 25 ships, 40 transport aircraft, 54 helicopters, and 15,455 soldiers, sailors, and airmen to the relief effort. Every major nation in the region contributed military forces to the relief effort, but China did not. Contrasting with its reluctance to cooperate with regional militaries in humanitarian relief, in August 2005, the PLA conducted an eight-day joint military exercise with Russian armed forces.

Conclusion? The policy failed in this regard. While publicly advocating multilateralism, China continues to avoid involvement in multinational security activities, especially those in which the United States plays a prominent role.

Clearly, the evidence indicates that the United States' policy of military engagement with China fell well short of Secretary Perry's expectations. In fact, it appears that not one of the goals that Perry articulated in his 1994 memo was achieved. The question is why?

Perry made some basic assumptions: that U.S.-China security cooperation was not only possible, but also essential; that this cooperation would support U.S. security interests by dramatically improving our security posture; that the U.S. could obtain the trust and understanding of the PLA; and that high-level defense dialogue and working level military contacts would result in a better security relationship. Evidence suggests that these assumptions were flawed. First, security cooperation presumes that the two parties have common interests. Many analysts have made persuasive arguments that China and the U.S. do have common long-term interests. Colonel Neal Anderson, U.S. Army, a former attaché in Beijing, expressed this well when he wrote:

“The U.S. and China do share profound long-term interests. In the broadest sense, China's national goals are peace, security, and stability (particularly in the Asia-Pacific region), comprehensive development, and reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. U.S. national goals can be described as peace and security, economic prosperity, and the promotion of democratic principles abroad. Thus, while the U.S. and China share a most fundamental interest—peace and stability—differences in each side's approach to security and its other core objectives immediately give rise to tension in bilateral ties.”¹⁹

The critical caveat in Anderson's statement concerns approach. In the case of the United States and China, it is not the "what" (a common desire for peace and stability), rather, it is the "how" (the approach and respective core objectives) that would prevent security cooperation.

At its core, the policy of peaceful military engagement or "shaping" a strategic environment—or in the case of the China policy, the strategic behavior of a nation—is almost entirely predicated on the response of that nation to such efforts. In that respect, it is inherently passive; one must wait for the response of the subject before determining the success or failure of the policy. Second, and most important, the nature of the response is based on "mirror imaging" and a cultural arrogance presuming that "if I do this, then my adversary will do that." As a result, the policy of peaceful military engagement fails to take into account the simple fact that despite your most persuasive efforts, powerful sovereign nations tend to pursue policies that are in *their* own interest and for *their* own reasons, not yours.

There is no indication that the military engagement policy had any effect on China's strategic behavior. It continued to modernized its military, threaten Taiwan, proliferate WMD and missile technology to "rogue" nations, contribute to creating a potential nuclear confrontation in South Asia, oppose U.S.-led coalition operations and collective security worldwide, and aggressively assert territorial claims in the South China Sea. Clearly, even if you argue, as Anderson does,

that the U.S. and China have long term common interests, China's actions indicate that its approach diverges sharply from the U.S. approach.

This “mirror imaging” flaw is repeated again when attempting to use military engagement as a means of assuaging mutual suspicions and increasing trust between the two militaries. The policy seems to suggest that if the United States provides transparent access to facilities, equipment, and personnel, then the Chinese would do the same, despite the fact that such exchanges are antithetical to Chinese cultural and strategic tradition. China is, and always has been, a nation of walls—walled cities walled villages, walled houses and a Great Wall—all hiding and protecting the secrets that lie within. Given this cultural reality, isn't it to be expected that the PLA would be glad to accept the access and information offered by the United States, while carefully guarding access to their own military and security apparatus? Similarly, the notion of U.S. values being so attractive, that China—a nation with five thousand years of recorded history and military culture—would abandon its own values, aspirations, history, and national goals to adopt the U.S. model and U.S. interests, is illogical in the extreme. This concept also incorrectly presumes that the PLA is somehow less professional, less patriotic, and less committed to its nation's security interests than is its U.S. counterpart. Exposing the PLA to advanced capabilities may serve, in the short term, to deter military action or miscalculation. There is, however, clear indication that the PLA's exposure to U.S. military technology has served to fuel not only accelerated PRC military modernization, but also the

development of strategies specifically designed to counter the U.S. qualitative advantage. The EP-3 incident clearly illustrated that the military engagement policy did not, as Admiral Prueher had hoped, facilitate communication between the two militaries. During a post EP-3 discussion on U.S.-China military relations, a PRC diplomat observed that forging “lines of communication” should be an objective of the military relationship. When reminded of “the day of no returned phone calls,” he responded that the two governmental systems were very different and that even the most senior PLA officer would not dare contact his U.S. counterpart with permission of Jiang Zemin himself. How then, responded the US official could establishing lines of communication be a goal for the military relationship? The Chinese diplomat just stared in silence.²⁰ If the reactions to both the 1999 Belgrade bombing and the EP-3 incident are any indication, suspicion and mistrust of the United States, in China and in the PLA, run deep. Once again, there is no indication that the military engagement policy had any impact on reducing these uncertainties.

No analysis of any aspect of U.S.-China relations would be complete without a discussion of Taiwan. Some analysts argue that the Taiwan issue represents the only major obstacle to U.S.-China strategic and military cooperation. As the evidence shows, however, China has pursued non Taiwan-related strategic behaviors that do not support U.S. interests. In any event, the bottom line reveals no evidence that military engagement with China had any significant impact on China’s policy toward Taiwan.

The Two Myths and One Misperception of US-China Military Relations

No analysis would be complete without acknowledging two persistent myths and one misperception that obscured, and continue to hinder U.S. military relations with the PRC. In part, owing to the constantly shifting cast of key players on the U.S. side, these myths have remained unchallenged, have influenced the relationship since its inception, and continue to this day.

The Myth of the Personal Relationship

Most successful senior U.S. military officers, as well as their civilian counterparts, place a premium on personal relationships. Close relationships with mentors, commanders, and peers are keys to success not only in the US military, but in the private sector as well. These relationships often serve to facilitate results, despite administrative and bureaucratic inertia. It is not surprising that senior defense officials, when dealing with their foreign counterparts, would place the same premium on personal relationships, expecting that such relationships might make a difference in a difficult bilateral situation. There is no doubt that in many cultures, a shared drink, a warm, firm handshake, or a frank and honest discussion does result in a personal connection that might be leveraged at some later date. Unfortunately, Chinese culture does not allow for this concept. Despite the best efforts of many U.S. military leaders to forge relationships with their PLA counterparts, there is no indication of any success. The most obvious example, is the experience of Admiral, and later Ambassador Joseph Prueher.

As Commander, Pacific Command and later as Ambassador to China, Joseph Prueher had more direct contact with the PLA leadership in the 1990's than any other senior U.S. official in recent memory. He was helped by the fact that for most of his tenure in both positions, the senior PLA leadership remained essentially unchanged. Yet, despite his best efforts, he was unable to contact any senior PLA officers during the EP-3 Crisis. Most PLA analysts would argue, accurately, that the secretive and conservative culture of the PLA and the nature of domestic PRC politics would preclude meaningful relationships between senior PLA officials and their U.S. counterparts. PLA leaders are polite and gracious, if superficial hosts to friend and foe alike, and their courtesies extended to U.S. guests have often been misconstrued as genuine camaraderie, and the establishment of a personal connection. The facts remain that in crisis, a top priority of most senior Chinese leaders—in addition to resolving the crisis—is assessment of how their involvement might impact or influence their future position and status, and the status of their faction, family, and close friends. A history of “cultural” revolution, purges, “anti” campaigns, shifting loyalties, alliances, and ideologies has taught modern Chinese leaders to look beyond the crisis of the day and to envision how their *role* in the crisis will be reviewed, in its aftermath, by their peers and rivals. From their perspective, there have been, and will always be, wars, crises, and instability. Life, in the long view, will go on and preserving power and status for the future is paramount. Since no PLA leader would risk being labeled as a potential traitor in the aftermath of a potential Sino-U.S. crisis, regardless of the stakes or outcome, it is unlikely that

they would reach out to a U.S. counterpart or that they would accept a telephone call from one. Despite all indications that this is the case, successive casts of U.S. defense officials have persisted in believing that they will be the person or persons to break through cultural barriers and establish useful and productive personal relationships with Chinese military leaders.

The Myth of Obligatory Reciprocity

Throughout the history of bilateral contacts, the imbalance in transparency and reciprocity concerning access to military installations, training, and personnel has remained the primary obstacle to a meaningful relationship. During the engagement era, DoD allowed PLA delegations wide access to U.S. bases, routine training, operational equipment, and unclassified information. In addition to promoting PLA trust in the U.S., one of the implied objectives of this effort was that U.S. military transparency would somehow encourage an obligation on the part of the PLA to increase their military transparency. In other words, the PLA would reciprocate our transparency with increased openness. The problem is that the PLA has not reciprocated, and it will not be “guilted” into making its military more transparent. The Chinese understand the power of ambiguity and see no reason to reveal potential military weaknesses to the U.S. To the contrary, in response to U.S. pressure, the PLA leaders have become masters at providing the illusion of military transparency without committing to any genuine openness. The pattern is always the same: after a period of constant U.S.

pressure to open the doors of their military establishment, the PLA will arrange a “first-ever” visit for a senior U.S. defense official to a previously “secret” installation, usually a regional or national-level headquarters building; at the building, a generic briefing is given on the mission of the organization and a meeting is held with the commander or deputy commander of the organization; and there may even be a static display of some piece of fourth generation PLA military equipment that can be seen at any international arms or air show. While these events provide a highly visible “deliverable” and a convenient metric to measure progress in the relationship, they provide little or no insight as to the strategic intent or the military capabilities of the PLA.

Process Orientation versus Results Orientation

Quite simply, Chinese military culture is process-oriented and U.S. culture, especially U.S. military culture, is results-oriented. For the PLA, the fact that exchanges and discussions are ongoing—regardless of how superficial or innocuous—is sufficient to declare the relationship as productive. Meetings with senior U.S. officials to convey the current political message on Taiwan or other security issues are considered important; the particular quality of the lower-level exchanges, in terms of access to facilities and information, is less important. For the PLA, “who” (i.e., senior influential members of DoD), is seen as far more important than the “what.” Such meetings validate Chinese perceptions of self-importance as a rising regional and global military power. That is not to say that the PLA has not pressed for access to sensitive U.S. facilities, exercises, and

information or taken advantage of every opportunity offered by the U.S. In the Chinese calculus, denying the United States any material or informational advantage that could be gained through the relationship outweighs the PLA desire to gain an advantage through its contacts and visits with the U.S. military. In other words, *not* allowing the U.S. military to visit a Chinese weapons test facility is more important to the PLA than visiting a U.S. weapons test facility. Any signed agreement committing the PLA to a substantive strategic course of action, requiring consultation with the United States, or restricting security options, is avoided at all costs. The principal PLA objective of a military relationship with the United States is, to have a perfunctory military relationship with the United States that does not interfere with either their military build-up or strategic behavior.

Period.

The U.S. military, on the other hand, is results oriented. The goals of the relationship include achieving specific, measurable, objectives milestones that will serve to enhance and support U.S. security interests. For the United States, “what” is seen—in terms of weapons, installations, and training being vehicles for providing that might provide insight as to the capabilities and strategic intent of the secretive PLA—is more important than “who” is seen: U.S. military officials would rather view a genuine field exercise than have an office call and drink tea with a senior PLA official. An understanding of this fundamental cultural difference seems to elude U.S. military officials. By definition, U.S. goals for the relationship are counter to the PLA’s strategic culture of concealing their military

capabilities and maintaining strategic ambiguity. If the United States is successful, the PLA loses. The PLA understands this and actively pursues a strategy which restricts both U.S. access and the scope of the military relationship. As a result, any U.S. relationship strategy based on “shaping” the PLA or Chinese strategic behavior is doomed to failure.

In summary, it is clear that the U.S. policy of military engagement with China did not accomplish the objective of facilitating strategic behaviors that support U.S. interests. The final question is what purpose, if any, can U.S.-China military relations serve in support of U.S. interests?

THE WAY AHEAD

By abandoning the premise that the United States can influence PLA or PRC strategic behavior, and by taking a more U.S.-centric approach, military relations *can* serve and support U.S. security interests. They can do this by:

Communicating Strategic Intent. Senior-level military dialogue can serve as a medium for both sides to communicate their intent, share information, address outstanding security issues and state their positions. This would serve to reduce ambiguity and decrease the possibility of military miscalculation. It is not necessary that these meetings result in any general agreement; indeed, the

majority will end with both sides agreeing to disagree. Their purpose is to ensure that each side knows the positions of the other.

Educating Military Personnel. Military contacts should be structured to inform and educate U.S. personnel, versus being designed to shape and influence. A balanced and equitable bilateral effort to educate military personnel could serve, if not to “increase mutual understanding”, then at least to ensure both sides’ access to relevant and important information—which could serve to avoid conflicts of national interests and miscalculation. Granted, given the PLA lack of transparency, there will be limits as to what can be learned, but such a goal would guarantee a desperately needed increase in the general level of U.S. knowledge concerning China and the evolving role and capabilities of the PLA.

Assuring Regional Actors of Stable U.S.-China Security Relations.

Assuming that security cooperation is not feasible in the mid-term, military relations could contribute to a stable regional security environment through the dialogue and education described above.

The fundamental difference between this approach and military engagement is that the objectives described above can produce direct benefits to the United States, independent of the actions or reactions of China. If these military contacts serve to influence Chinese policies and strategic behaviors, so

much the better. Their value to the US, however, and to China for that matter, is not dependent solely upon the reaction of the other.

The failure of our military engagement policy toward China was not a condemnation of peacetime bilateral military relations. It is, however, a lesson on the limits of this policy. Military engagement alone cannot influence nations, achieve national security objectives, or shape the strategic environment. It is only through the application of all the elements of national power—economic, political, and informational—that these goals can be achieved.

If China continues along its current course in terms of its national security and national military objectives, it is likely to confirm its status as a strategic competitor of the United States. While the objective of a peaceful and stable Asia-Pacific region may be a common goal of both countries, the nature of that peace and stability (that is, which country will be the dominant power in Asia) has led both countries to pursue divergent paths to that goal. Neal Anderson very eloquently states the nature of the problem as:

“The core dilemma in U.S.-China security relations is mutual fear and uncertainty about the true, long-term intentions of the other side. In response to this underlying fear, political leaders and strategic planners on both sides "hedge" against worst-case scenarios which, in turn, feed the distrust of the other side. Americans are afraid that China will use its growing military power in pursuit of its vital national goals and interests. Beijing is afraid that the U.S. is trying to prevent China from achieving its full potential as a great power, including its legitimate defense capabilities. Efforts by both sides to allay the fear of the other have been only marginally successful and, as such, relations appear to

have reached a plateau, with no clear way to break out of this vicious circle of mutual distrust.”²¹

The simple fact of remains: the future of both countries lies in Asia. While there will be grounds for cooperation on some issues, competition rather than cooperation will be the order of the day. As such, peacetime engagement may not be the most effective policy tool. Some countries cannot be “engaged”: they must be dealt with.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Eden Woon, "China Arms Sales and U.S.-China Military Relations", Asian Survey, no. 29 (June 1989): 600-618
- ² William J. Clinton, A National Security Strategy for A New Century (Washington, DC: The White House, December 1999), 11.
- ³ John M. Shalikashvili, National Military Strategy: Shape, Prepare, Respond Now: A Military Strategy for a New Era (Washington, DC: The Pentagon, 1997), 12.
- ⁴ Clinton, 36.
- ⁵ Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, "U.S.-China Military Relationship", memorandum for Secretaries of the Military Departments, Washington, DC, August 1994
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Admiral Joseph W. Prueher, "Asia-Pacific Security and China: A US Pacific Command Perspective" speech delivered at Fudan University, Shanghai, China, 13 November 1998.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Secretary of Defense William J. Cohen, "Address to the Chinese National Defense University" speech delivered in Beijing, China, 13 July 2000.
- ¹⁰ General Accounting Office, National Security: Impact of China's Military Modernization in the Pacific Region (Washington, DC: US General Accounting Office, June 1995), 4.
- ¹¹ "China's Military Grumbles Over 17.6% Budget Increase", Associated Press, March 7, 2002. (FBIS)
- ¹² Department of Defense, 2001 China Military Power Report to Congress (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2001), 5.
- ¹³ Quoted in numerous sources.
- ¹⁴ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Nonproliferation Center, The Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced

Conventional Munitions, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), 5.

¹⁵ He Xin, China's Rejuvenation and the World's Future, (Sichuan, China: Peoples Publications, 1996) quoted in Michael Pillsbury, China Debates the Future Security Environment (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2000), xliv.

¹⁶ The treatment of US delegations by the PLA is drawn from the author's own experiences as an assistant attaché in China from 1995-1998.

¹⁷ Observed and overheard by author.

¹⁸ John Keefe, Anatomy of the EP-3 Incident (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, 2002), 5.

¹⁹ Walter Neal Anderson, Overcoming Uncertainty: U.S.-China Strategic Relations in the 21ST Century, Regional Security Series (USAF Institute for National Security Studies: USAF Academy, Colorado, October 1999), 5.

²⁰ Observed by author.

²¹ Anderson, 5.

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