

# Gates Visit Helps To Reset Military Ties

By William Jones

Jan. 13—The visit of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to China Jan. 9-12 has helped set the stage for a “reset” of U.S.-Chinese military relations, as Chinese President Hu Jintao arrives in Washington for an state visit on Jan. 19. Gates told reporters on Jan. 12, “I think that the discussions were very productive, and set the stage for taking the military-to-military relationship to the next level.”

The two militaries have never had a real working relationship, except for a short period in World War II, when President Franklin Roosevelt sent a U.S. Army Observer Mission to assist the Eighth Route Army of Mao Zedong, and to evaluate China’s fighting capabilities prior to a planned invasion of Japanese-occupied Shandong Province in northern China.

The military relationship is doubly important for China, whose military apparatus represents an independent power structure, a peculiar result of the historical circumstances of the formation of New China, in 1949. At the same time, it is this relationship that often proves the most vulnerable, as in January 2010, when a \$6.4 trillion sale of U.S. military equipment to Taiwan led the Chinese government to end military exchanges with the United States.

An attempt to reestablish the relations in 2010, including a planned trip by Gates to Beijing, failed to materialize. In March, the Korean Peninsula went into a tailspin, when an explosion sank a South Korean corvette, the *Cheonan*. In November, North Korea shelled Yeongpyeon Island off the coast of South Korea. Finally, as *EIR* reported last week, a combination of Chinese pressure on Pyongyang and U.S. pressure on Seoul defused the conflict. On his trip, Gates readily recognized the Chinese role in helping to bring that about. China’s crucial role in averting a new Korean war set the stage for the Gates visit, and reset the agenda for the Obama-Hu Jintao meeting in Washington next week.

## ‘Approaching Important Consensus’

In a meeting between Gates and Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Liang Guanglie in Hanoi in October, Gates accepted the invitation by Liang to visit Beijing the following year.

The Chinese were anxious to schedule the Gates visit before the state visit of President Hu to the United States. They undoubtedly thought that military-to-military relations had to be stabilized before the summit. Both Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton prioritized the Gates visit and the strengthening of the military-to-military dialogue, as a precondition for the summit.

While in Beijing, Gates held a two-and-a-half-hour discussion with General Liang Jan. 10. Gates told reporters, “We approached important consensus in the meeting.” Both sides agreed “that sustained and reliable military-to-military contacts will help reduce misunderstanding and miscalculation.”

The two leaders reaffirmed some of the decisions that had been taken in 2009, before the recent cooling of relations: continued high-level visits, institutionalized exchange programs, and military education cooperation. They also reaffirmed the regular exchanges of the Defense Consultative Talks, the Defense Policy Coordination Talks, and the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement discussions.

Gates had also proposed that a strategic security dialogue, similar to the Cabinet-level Strategic and Economic Dialogue, be established for defense. General Liang, noting that there were already a significant number of “dialogue formats,” said that the Chinese would “study and consider” this proposal.

Chinese reticence to participate in such a strategic security dialogue format is not surprising. The U.S. military and the Chinese military, after all, still view each other with a great deal of suspicion. The question of Taiwan, certain to cause irritation every time new weapons are requested by Taipei, and China’s various sea border disputes with its neighbors, some of which are military allies of the U.S., give the Chinese pause with regard to strategic security talks with the Americans.

While the Gates visit will help push the relationship in the right direction, other events, in the aftermath of the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, have given the Chinese leaders further reason for concern.

The large U.S. maneuvers conducted recently, with both the Japanese and the South Korean navies, some near Chinese waters, while ostensibly aimed at sending

a clear signal to Pyongyang, also had a not-so-subliminal message for China about the capabilities of the U.S.-South Korea and the U.S.-Japan military alliances. The upgrading of the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, the push by the U.S. to encourage the Japanese to expand their military role, and the attempt by the U.S. to bring about closer military collaboration between Japan and South Korea, are viewed with apprehension in Beijing—as are rumblings coming out of Washington think-tanks about bolstering the U.S. relationship with India, as a counter to China. The increased U.S. presence in Central Asia, from which China obtains much of its energy, also makes China wary. And yet, the guarded response by the Chinese Defense Minister to the Gates proposal may indicate willingness by to eventually accept it. At least, that was Gates’s impression.

Gates also met with:

- Vice President Xi Jinping, the vice chair of the all-important Central Military Commission, which is responsible for the PLA. Xi, who is slated to become President next year, is the first top Chinese leader to have been an officer of the PLA since Deng Xiaoping.
- Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi.
- President Hu, who underlined the importance of military-to-military relations as a part of the overall relationship. Hu said he hoped that the spirit of “respect, mutual trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit” would prevail.
- Gen. Jing Zhiyuan, commander of Chinese nuclear forces. Gates invited Jing to visit U.S. Strategic Command headquarters in Nebraska, and the general accepted.

The Gates visit will no doubt lead to an increase of U.S.-China military cooperation in a variety of fields, and more exchanges at the level of middle- and junior-grade officers, and of medical and other personnel. It will promote cooperation in disaster relief, medical assistance, rescue at sea, and similar operations where the two have cooperated.

China’s role in solving regional problems is vital, but its importance is by no means restricted to regional matters. China is one of the four key countries—along with Russia, India, and the United States—which, together, could push through the needed transformation from the present bankrupt London-based bubble economy to a fixed-exchange-rate credit system for reviving world trade and production. And for that four-power configuration, the relationship between China and the United States assumes the utmost importance.