

U.S.-China Military Ties Take Another Step Forward

by Carl Osgood

Aug. 26—Relations between the U.S. military and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) moved forward last week, with the visit to Washington of Gen. Chang Wanquan, the Minister of National Defense of the People's Republic of China. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel held a joint press conference with Chang at the Pentagon on Aug. 19, after three hours of talks, and then held further discussions over lunch. A two-and-a-half hour dinner later included an exchange of gifts.

Chang's visit came within the context of a raging battle in the Obama Administration, and within the larger Washington policy establishment, over China policy. The visit is part of an ongoing effort to counter the British anti-China policy, as expressed in the Obama Administration's so-called Asia pivot, with its intent to surround China with U.S. military bases, and by provocations like those by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), to take sides in the territorial disputes between China and some of its neighbors.

Prior to his arrival at the Pentagon, Chang paid a visit to U.S. Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii on Aug. 16, and the headquarters of the U.S. Northern Command and NORAD at Colorado Springs, on Aug. 18. In Hawaii, the general and U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) chief Adm. Samuel Locklear "discussed a wide range of developments in the U.S.-China military relationship during the visit, including humanitarian assistance, military medicine and multi-lateral collaboration and cooperation in regional security and stability," according to a posting on USPACOM's Facebook page. In Colorado, Chang met with Northern Command chief Gen. Charles Jacoby, and the two exchanged views on how the military provides support to civil authorities during man-made or natural disasters. "We were well received and experienced warm hospitality from the American people and from the officers and soldiers of the U.S. military," Chang said of these visits.

Hagel: Goal Is To Build Trust

At the Pentagon, Hagel and Chang both described their discussions as fruitful, and as moving the U.S.-Chinese military relationship forward. The matter of "trust" was at the center of both of their remarks to the U.S. and Chinese press. "One of the themes we emphasized today was that a sustained, substantive military-to-military relationship is an important pillar for this strong bilateral relationship," Hagel said. "The United States welcomes and supports the rise of a prosperous and responsible China that helps solve regional and global problems." He added, "Our goal is to build trust between our militaries through cooperation," and that he and Chang "affirmed that we will continue expanding our defense exchanges and joint exercises."

Hagel reported that the U.S.-China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement Working Group was meeting in Hawaii concurrently with the press conference "to discuss humanitarian assistance and disaster relief," and that on the weekend of Aug. 24-25, the vessels from the U.S. and Chinese navies would be participating in a joint anti-piracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden.

The high-level visits, notably by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey to Beijing last April, will also continue. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno will both visit China later this year, and commander of the PLA Navy, Adm. Wu Shengli, will visit the United States. Hagel noted that Dempsey has also extended an invitation to his counterpart, Gen. Fang Feng Hui, Chief of the General Staff of the PLA, to visit Washington.

Hagel also noted that Chang raised two initiatives that were first discussed between President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping during their summit in California last June: one, a way to notify each other of major military activities; and, two, rules of behavior for military air and naval activities. "I welcomed this discussion and noticed that the transparency that we've



DOD/Glenn Fawcett

The meeting between Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Chang Wanquan and U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in Washington last week took place amidst an intense conflict within the Obama Administration over U.S.-China policy. The two leaders are shown here, at a Pentagon press conference Aug. 19.

had is important to reducing the risk of miscalculation and avoiding unintended tensions or conflicts,” Hagel said. “Our staffs are exploring those initiatives and will continue discussing them.”

Building a New Model Relationship

General Chang echoed much of what Hagel said when it came his turn to speak. He said that he and Hagel “had a candid and deepened exchange of views over our national and military relations, international and regional security issues, and other issues of common concern,” and then announced the five agreements that the two of them had reached. They agreed that the U.S.-China military relationship “is an important component of our overall bilateral relations and that the current military relationship is gaining a good momentum.”

Secondly, they agreed to continue the high-level exchanges described by Hagel, including to set up an exchange mechanism between the PLA’s Strategic Planning Department and the Strategic, Plans and Policy Directorate (J5) of the U.S. Joint Staff.

Thirdly, “Both sides agreed to play a constructive role in regional affairs, promoting the positive interaction between the two militaries in this region,” Chang said. “We also agreed to strengthen coordination and cooperation under Asia-Pacific multilateral security dialogues, mechanisms, and frameworks. China will par-

ticipate in the Rim of the Pacific exercise in 2014, as invited,” he added.

Fourth, both sides “agreed to further enhance exchanges and cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and peacekeeping.”

And finally, they agreed to deepen military archives cooperation in relation to continuing U.S. efforts to locate the remains of soldiers missing in action from the Korean and Vietnam wars.

“At present, the China-U.S. relationship is in a new historical era,” Chang concluded. “Building a new model of China-U.S. mili-

tary relationship can help us to increase strategic trust to reduce strategic risks and to maintain world peace and regional stability. China is ready to work with the U.S. to seriously implement our presidents’ important consensus, to raise our military-to-military relationship to a new height by strengthening our dialogue, communication, and practical cooperation, and to properly handle our disputes and differences.”

Tensions Remain

A closer dialogue will provide opportunities to hash out significant matters of disagreement between the two sides; some of these came up during the joint press conference. Hagel made reference to the territorial disputes between China and some of its neighbors during his opening remarks. “With respect to competing maritime claims, I noted that while the United States does not take a position on sovereignty in these cases, we do have an interest in these claims being resolved peacefully, without coercion,” Hagel said. In the past, both Hagel and Dempsey have reminded the Chinese that the U.S. still has treaty obligations with certain other Pacific powers, which could come into play, particularly those with Japan and the Philippines, though this fact was not explicitly raised during the press conference.

In response to a reporter’s question, Chang reviewed the meaning of the Obama Administration’s policy of

“rebalancing” to Asia, for China. Chang noted that China welcomes the U.S. to play a constructive role in the Asia-Pacific region. He also noted the increasing intensity of U.S. military relations with other countries of the region, particularly with regard to joint and multi-lateral military exercises. “From a certain [perspective], this kind of intensified military activities further complicated the situation in the region,” he said.

“China is a peace-loving nation,” Chang continued. “And we hope that this strategy does not target a specific country in the region. And the development of China is not only conducive to our own country, to the entire region, but also to United States. Being together with all the Asia-Pacific countries, regional countries, including the United States, it is a common aspiration of all of the countries that we wish to have peace in the region. Therefore, it is our hope that this rebalancing strategy is a constructive one that could help the peace and stability in the region.”

In response to another question, Chang characterized China as a defender of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. “We always insist that related disputes be solved through dialogue and negotiation,” he said. “However, no one should fantasize that China would barter away our core interests. And no one should underestimate our will and determination in defending our territory, sovereignty, and maritime rights.”

McCain Stokes Territorial Dispute

Senator McCain was meanwhile doing his best to stir up tensions between the U.S. and China when, on a visit to Japan, he stoked the flames of the territorial dispute between Japan and China over the islands known as the Senkakus in Japan, and the Diaoyu in China. Despite the well-established principle that the U.S. does not (officially) take sides on territorial issues, McCain told a news conference in Tokyo Aug. 21, “The Congress in the United States’ resolution last year said that the [Senkaku Islands are] Japanese territory. That is our position as a Congress and as a government. I will continue to repeat that when I go to China.”

Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi met with McCain and Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) in Beijing on Aug. 23 and urged the United States to correctly understand the Diaoyu Islands issue, and be cautious with words and deeds. On China-U.S. relations, Yang told McCain and Whitehouse that the two sides should continue to work together to implement the consensus between Presidents Xi and Obama to build a new type

of “major power relationship” based on mutual respect and cooperation. McCain apparently backed down from his earlier statements in Japan, according to Xinhua, and said that he supports enhanced communication and coordination between the two sides to push forward cooperation in bilateral, regional, and international fields.

The PLA Responds

Chinese media coverage of the defense ministers’ meeting was generally positive. The Chinese Ministry of Defense placed the arrival ceremonies and the press conference on its website. One PLA commentator, Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo, in an interview with PLA TV, which was then published in the PLA’s *Liberation Daily*, explained how the U.S. “rebalancing to Asia” is effectively creating three major “imbalances.”

Firstly, it involves the increasing power projection of U.S. military might in the region, with arrangements for an increased basing of U.S. military forces in allied countries.

In fact, the U.S. military has been very active in recent weeks, moving toward that increased basing. Over the past week or so, the Obama Administration has been negotiating with the Philippines for increased access to military bases for U.S. forces. These would not be permanent garrisons, but rather rotational forces from other bases in the Pacific, and from the U.S. The U.S. Air Force and Marines are upgrading airports in the Mariana Islands, including Tinian, whence the atomic bomb missions against Japan were launched in 1945. These are to be used as secondary airfields in case other bases, including Guam, were to become unavailable. The contingent of U.S. Marines rotating through Darwin, Australia is slated to grow from the current 250 troops to 1,000 next year, and then 2,200 by 2015. The U.S. Air Force rotational presence in Australia is also scheduled to grow.

Gen. Herbert Carlisle, commander of U.S. Pacific Air Forces, told reporters at the Pentagon on July 29, that initially, the Air Force presence in Australia will consist of fighters and air-refueling tankers, but will eventually expand to include heavy bombers. B-52s from Guam have already visited Australia for exercises. Carlisle went on to describe how the Air Force is planning to increase its rotational presence all across the Pacific, to include Thailand, Singapore, India, and possibly even Malaysia and Indonesia. The idea behind this shift, wrote *Foreign Policy*’s John Reed, is to “ring

China with U.S. and allied forces, just like the West did to the Soviet Union, back in the Cold War.”

Secondly, PLO commentator Zhao says, the fact that the United States has indicated that the very announcement of this new policy has “heated up” many of the numerous regional border conflicts, which had been deliberately put on ice for years, in order to avoid conflict. The announcement of the “pivot,” later recast as “rebalancing,” has encouraged U.S. allies, such as Japan and the Philippines, to become more “assertive” over these conflicts.

And, thirdly, while the United States insists that the “rebalancing,” including its military doctrinal aspect “Air-Sea Battle,” is not aimed at anyone, its implementation is incontestably crafted with China in mind, and is understood as such in China. The doctrine also assures that American arms can directly target the Chinese mainland.

The PLA has agreed to continue working toward a closer military-to-military relationship with the United States after President Xi won a commitment from Obama in California that the two countries would work overall to build a “major power relationship.” What form such a relationship is to take is still not clear, with

some commentators foolishly treating it as an empty slogan. Unless it receives a positive content, however, the forward momentum in U.S.-China relations will be quickly reversed. If the United States and China are to avoid that much-discussed “Thucydides Trap,” so elegantly coined by analyst Graham Allison, they must look back, not to the conflict between Athens and Sparta, but to Europe after the period of religious wars of the 16th-17th centuries, in the crafting of the Peace of Westphalia (1648). At its foundation was the concept of taking into consideration “the benefit of the other” to achieve a lasting peace between nations.

While the Westphalian model has been denigrated by the likes of Tony Blair and Susan Rice, who are intent on using U.S. military might to build a new imperial model based on their interventionist “Responsibility To Protect” doctrine, it is only a Westphalian type of arrangement among sovereign nations committed to global economic development that can assure peace among nations in the Asia-Pacific, and especially between the two leading Pacific powers, the United States and the People’s Republic of China.

William C. Jones contributed to this article.



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