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Session V: Enhancing Transparency: Military to Military Cooperation and Strategic Dialogues

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Enhancing Transparency? U.S.-China Military-to-Military Contacts and Strategic Dialogues

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Introduction

This paper focuses on military-to-military contacts and strategic dialogues between the United States and China. This paper is divided into four parts. Part 1 provides a brief introduction into the rationale for military-to-military contacts and strategic dialogues. Part 2 provides an historical overview of U.S.-China defense contacts and cooperation from 1980 until 2008. Part 3 provides an analysis of military-to-military contacts and dialogues under the Obama Administration. Part 4 presents a summary and conclusion.

The United States has repeatedly sought to engage with China to better manage their bilateral relations. Currently, the U.S. and China have in place more than sixty annual official dialogue mechanisms to coordinate strategic policy issues including military-to-military contacts and strategic dialogues.¹

Senior Chinese officials stress that military-to-military contact serves to reduce “misunderstandings and miscalculation.”² The United States argues likewise that military-to-military contact and cooperation is necessary to reduce “miscalculations, and misunderstanding and miscommunications.”³ In January 2012, for example, the Obama Administration issued a new defense strategy that stated with respect to China:

Over the long term, China’s emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the U.S. economy and our security in a variety of ways. Our two countries have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a cooperative bilateral relationship. However, the growth of China’s military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intentions in order to avoid causing friction in the region.⁴

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¹ David Shambaugh, “The U.S. Engagement with Asia,” Presentation to Session II, Asia’s Security-Strategic Outlook, Regional Outlook Forum, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, January 5, 2012.

² Defense Minister Liang Guanglie, January 2011, quoted in Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “U.S.-China Relations: Pomp and Substance: Hu’s State Visit to the US,” *Comparative Connections*, May 2011.

³ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, remarks to media gaggle enroute to Beijing, January 2011 quoted in Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “U.S.-China Relations: Pomp and Substance: Hu’s State Visit to the US.”

⁴ *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (January 2012), 2.

At the recent 11th Asia Security Summit (or Shangri-La Dialogue) in Singapore, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced in his keynote address that by 2020 the United States would deploy sixty percent of its naval forces to the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time Panetta stated, “I’m personally committed to building a healthy, stable, reliable, and continuous mil-to-mil relationship with China... Our aim is to continue to improve the strategic trust that we must have between our two countries, and to discuss common approaches to dealing with shared security challenges.”⁵

During the question and answer period following his presentation, Panetta was asked by Senior Colonel Zhao Bao, the Deputy Director of the Foreign Affairs Office of China’s Ministry of National Defense, to “elaborate a little more on how U.S will develop its military-to-military relations with China.” In reply Panetta stated:

We think that a strong mil-to-mil relationship with China would be extremely important in dealing with the issues that both of our nations confront.

The way we are approaching this is to develop a series of high-level exchanges between our two countries...

In addition to that, we have discussed the ability to develop teams that can work together to focus on some of these more difficult areas such as cyber and what we can to exchange information and try to ensure that we develop perhaps some standards when it comes to the use of cyber...

In addition to that, obviously we will continue to have exchanges with our military commanders, our PACOM [Pacific Command]...

So the key here is to try to strengthen our mil-to-mil context so that we can have greater transparency between our two countries.⁶

The next sections provide an historical overview of the development of U.S.-China military-to-military contacts and the initiation of their first strategic dialogues from 1980 to 2008.

⁵ Leon Panetta, Secretary of Defense, United States, “The U.S. Rebalance Towards the Asia-Pacific,” Keynote presentation to the First Plenary Session, The 11th IISS Asia Security Summit The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 2, 2012.

⁶ First Plenary Session The U.S. Rebalance Towards the Asia-Pacific Q&A Session, Department of Defense Transcript, June 2, 2012. Available at: <http://www.iis.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2012>.

*Historical Overview, 1980-2008*⁷

Military-to-military cooperation between the United States and China was first proposed by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown when he visited Beijing in January 1980. In 1981, the U.S. removed the ban on arms sales to China. In September 1983, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger visited Beijing and the first commercial sale of military equipment to China followed soon after. Between 1985 and 1987 the U.S. agreed to four government-to-government weapon sales under the Foreign Military Sales program.

In sum, military-to-military cooperation comprised three areas: strategic dialogue, reciprocal exchanges in functional areas, and arms sales.

In February 1990, the United States suspended military-to-military contacts in response to the Tienanmen massacre on June 4, 1989. China retaliated by cancelling one of its arms contracts. In December 1992 President Bush terminated all four sales programs agreed to under the Foreign Military Sales program.

In 1993 the Clinton Administration initiated a new effort to engage China's leadership including senior People's Liberation Army (PLA) officials. The results were limited and progress was marred by a number of incidents including the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1995-96 and the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1999.

In 1994 and 1996 the United States and China exchanged high-level defense visits. Secretary of Defense William Perry visited China in October 1994 and General Chi Haotian, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission and Minister of Defense, paid a return visit in December 1996. During the meeting between the two defense ministers the U.S. provided a draft proposal for a bilateral agreement on maritime and air safety. The two defense ministers agreed to institutionalize formal contacts through Defense Consultative Talks (DCT) and to exchange regular visits by senior officials.⁸

The sections below will review progress in military-to-military contacts and strategic dialogues through three bilateral mechanisms: Defense Consultative Talks, the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement and the Strategic Policy Dialogue/Defense Policy Coordination Talks.

⁷ This section draws heavily on "Appendix. Major Military Contacts and Incidents Since 1993," in Shirley A. Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 10, 2012, 44-69.

⁸ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 48.

Defense Consultative Talks

In May 1997, General John Shalikasvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited China at the invitation of General Fu Quanyou, Chief of the PLA General Staff. General Shalikasvili urged his counterpart to complete its review of the U.S. proposal for an agreement on maritime and air safety. In October 1997 President Bill Clinton and President Jiang Zemin held a summit and agreed, *inter alia*, to hold regular Defense Consultative Talks and to conclude an agreement on military maritime and air safety.⁹

The 1st U.S.-China Defense Consultative Talks were held at The Pentagon from December 11-12, 1997. The U.S. was represented by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Walter Slocombe, China was represented by Lt. Gen. Xiong Guangkai, PLA Deputy Chief of Staff. This meeting witnessed the initialing of the draft agreement on military maritime and air safety (discussed separately below).

The 2nd U.S.-China Defense Consultation Talks were held in Beijing from October 20-21, 1998. The U.S. was represented by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Walter Slocombe, China was represented by General Chi Haotian, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission. They discussed global and regional security issues, defense relations in the Asia-Pacific, military strategy and modernization, and military-to-military cooperation in 1999. The Chinese side raised objections to the U.S. plan to field a theater missile defense system in the Asia-Pacific region. This was the first indication that China intended to politicize DCT meetings.¹⁰

Defence Consultation Talks were suspended following the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. They resumed in January 2000 when Lt. Gen. Xiong Guangkai, PLA Deputy Chief of Staff traveled to Washington to attend the 3rd DCT. The U.S. was represented by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Walter Slocombe. This meeting considered the program for military-to-military contacts for 2000. Slocombe and Xiong also discussed international security issues, U.S. strategy in Asia, China's missile buildup, Taiwan, missile defence, weapons proliferation and North Korea. General Xiong met with Defense Secretary William Cohen; General Henry Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; James Stienberg, Deputy National Security Advisor; Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering; and State Department Senior Advisor, John Holum.¹¹

Defense relations with China improved after Secretary of Defense William Cohen visited Beijing from July 11-15, 2000. The 4th DCT was in held in Beijing in late

⁹ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 50.

¹⁰ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 52.

¹¹ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 54.

November that year. The U.S. was represented by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Walter Slocombe and PLA Deputy Chief of General Staff Xiong Guangkai. The two sides discussed the program for military-to-military cooperation in 2001.

Plans to step up U.S.-China military relations suffered a major setback when, on April 24, 2001, a PLA Navy F-8 fighter collided with a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane in international airspace over the South China Sea forcing the EP-3 to conduct an emergency landing on Hainan Island. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld suspended military-to-military contacts with China, including social contacts and visits by ships and aircraft, on a case-by-case basis.

The U.S. suspension of military-to-military contacts remained in place for two years until December 2002 when Secretary Rumsfeld agreed to resume Defense Consultative Talks. The U.S. and China convened the 5th DCT in Washington at The Pentagon in December. The U.S. was represented by its Under Secretary for Defense Policy, while China was represented by the PLA Deputy Chief of Staff. At the request of the U.S., General Xiong Guangkai brought a proposal for military exchanges in 2003. After the meeting Under Secretary Rodman told the press he could not claim progress in gaining greater reciprocity and transparency in military-to-military exchanges from China. China characterized the DCT meeting as “defense consultations at the vice ministerial level.”

The 6th DCT was held in Beijing in February 2004. It was attended by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith and PLA Deputy Chief of Staff General Xiong Guangkai. The U.S. raised maritime safety issues and proposed a defense telephone link (DTL) or hot line. China raised Taiwan’s elections. Both sides discussed the program for military exchanges in 2004. China once again characterized this meeting as “defense consultations at the vice ministerial level.”

In April 2005, the 7th DCT was hosted in Washington by Under Secretary of Defense Richard Feith. General Xiong Guangkai attended. They discussed U.S. proposals for a hot line and an agreement on military maritime and air safety.

In October 2005 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited China - the first visit by a U.S. Defense Secretary since 2000. In his discussions with his Chinese counterpart Rumsfeld raised military exchanges and greater PLA transparency on budgetary matters. Two months later Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Peter Lawless visited Beijing to discuss the military exchange program for 2006 and military maritime safety issues.

The 8th DCT was held in Beijing in June 2006 but at a downgraded level. Assistant Secretary Peter Rodman represented the U.S. He met with Assistant Chief of the General Staff Major General Zhang Qinsheng to discuss military exchanges and other matters.

A year later, in November 2007, Defense Secretary Robert Gates made an official visit to Beijing for discussions with his counterpart Cao Guangchuan. Gates pressed for broader exchanges beyond the senior level and secured a commitment from Cao to set up a defense telephone link.

The 9th DCT was held in Washington in December 2007 under the shadow of China's decision the previous month to deny permission to U.S. ships to make a port call in Hong Kong. China's decision affected two minesweepers seeking to refuel in the face of an impending storm and a Thanksgiving Day holiday and family reunion for the crew of the USS *Kitty Hawk* aircraft carrier and its escorts. The U.S. was represented at the DCT by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman, China was represented by PLA Deputy Chief of Staff Ma Xiaotian. The two sides discussed, *inter alia*, the program of military exchanges in 2008, lower-ranking exchanges, and the hot line. The U.S. raised the issue of China's suspension of port visits to Hong Kong, while the Chinese side raised their objections to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and U.S. legislation restricting military contacts (discussed below).

On October 3, 2008 President Bush notified Congress of arms sales to Taiwan. China responded by suspending some military exchanges. In December 2008, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Sedney was dispatched to Beijing to sound out the PLA on the resumption of military exchanges. Sedney met with PLA Assistant Chief of General Staff Chen Xiaogong and did not receive a positive response.

Military Maritime Consultative Agreement

As noted above, the 1st DCT witnessed the initialing of the draft agreement on military maritime and air safety. The formal signing ceremony took place in Beijing in January 1998 during the visit of Defense Secretary William Cohen. This document is formally entitled Agreement Between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China on Establishing a Consultation Mechanism to Strengthen Military Maritime Safety; it is referred to colloquially as the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA).¹²

Article 1 enjoins the parties to encourage and facilitate consultations between the U.S. Department of Defense and China's Ministry of National Defense "for the

¹² "Agreement between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China on Establishing a Consultation Mechanism to Strengthen Military Maritime Safety," available at www.fas.org/nuke/control/sea/text/us-china98.htm. See also: Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 50.

purpose of promoting common understandings regarding activities undertaken by their respective maritime and air forces when operating in accordance with international law, including the principles and regimes reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

Article 2 provides for annual meetings of from two to three days “consisting of briefings and discussion on agenda items to be agreed upon by consensus” including “measures to promote safe maritime practices and establish mutual trust as search and rescue, communications procedures when ships encounter each other, interpretation of the Rules of the Nautical Road and avoidance of accidents-at-sea.” Annual meetings under the MMCA alternate between China and the United States with each side represented by a person holding the rank of admiral or general officer.

Article 2 also made provision for the setting up of working groups of subject matter experts and special meetings to be convened through mutual agreement.

Article 3 provides for the preparation of a summary of the proceedings to be signed by the heads of delegations. Article 4 specifies that consultations held under Article 2 “shall remain between the Parties” but the summary of proceedings can be made available to third parties.

In summary, MMCA was intended to set up a framework for dialogue to minimize the chances of accidents between U.S. and PLA forces operating in the sea and air. It did not include provisions for communications during crises or rules of engagement.

One study of the MMCA assessed the agreement in these words:

The 1998 Agreement between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China on Establishing a Consultation Mechanism to Strengthen Military Maritime Safety—or Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA)— was much more diplomatic in nature and tone than the classic INCSEA model, minimizing the role of operational experts and containing no provision for real-time tactical communication, as was to be tragically highlighted by the 2001 midair collision off Hainan. While annual meetings are useful to discuss incidents, they are not much help when events are unfolding rapidly on, over, or under the sea.¹³

In late April 1998 the U.S. Department of Defense and the Chinese Ministry of National Defense held the first preliminary discussion on the MMCA.¹⁴ Two months later (June 25-July 3), a summit between Presidents Clinton and Jiang Zemin agreed to convene the first formal meeting of the MMCA and to set up a hot line between defense ministries.¹⁵

¹³ David Griffiths, *U.S.-China Maritime Confidence Building: Paradigms, Precedents and Prospects*. China Maritime Studies Institute No. 6. Newport, RI: Naval War College, July 2010.

¹⁴ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 51.

¹⁵ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 51.

The first plenary meeting under the MMCA was held in Washington from July 14-15, 1998. Two working group meetings under the MMCA were held in 1998-99. In December 1998 talks took place between the U.S. Navy and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). China was represented by the Director of the PLAN Operations Department Captain Shen Hao. In May 1999, a U.S. Navy working group visited the port of Qingdao to discuss international standards for communication at sea.

On May 17, 1999 U.S.-led NATO forces mistakenly bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Although President Clinton tendered an apology, China responded by suspending all military-to-military contacts including ship visits to Hong Kong. The ban on port visits was lifted in September 1999 but no plenary meetings under the MMCA were held until May 2000. In an effort to kick-start a resumption of military-to-military contacts Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell visited Beijing in November 1999.

Campbell's visit was a success. In March 2000 a working group under the MMCA held a planning meeting in China. And in late May/early June the U.S. and China convened the 2nd plenary meeting under the MMCA. This meeting was hosted by the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) in Honolulu. The U.S. side was represented by PACOM's Director for Strategic Planning and Policy (J5), while China was represented by the PLA's Deputy Chief of Staff. This meeting reviewed a joint document entitled, "A Study on Sino-U.S. Maritime Navigational Safety, including Communications." A working group under the MMCA held a meeting in China in December 2000.

The April 2001 EP-3 incident resulted in the U.S. and China convening their first Special Meeting under the MMCA on Guam in September 2001. This meeting focused on how to prevent similar incidents. The U.S. raised the following issues: principles of safe flight and navigation for military services conducted on the high seas, international air space and Exclusive Economic Zone, and safety of ships and aircraft exercising the right of distressed entry. A working group under the MMCA met in Beijing in December 2001 to carry these discussions forward.

The atmosphere for U.S.-China military relations improved when the U.S. and China reached agreement for a visit to Washington by Vice President Hu. The 3rd plenary meeting under the MMCA was held in Shanghai in April. It was attended by the PLA Deputy Chief of Staff and PACOM's J5. Also in April, China's Vice President Hu Jintao made an official visit to Washington. He met with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Agreement was reached to hold a meeting of defense representatives to discuss the resumption of military exchanges. At this time China only approved military exchanges on a case-by-case basis. In June 2002, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman was dispatched

to Beijing to follow up on this understanding and to press the Chinese on transparency, reciprocity and consistency in military-to-military contacts.

Rodman met with General Xiong Guangkai, PLA Deputy Chief of State, and Minister of National Defense General Chi Haotian. Rodman was informed that China was prepared to resume military-to-military contacts. In August and December 2002, two Maritime and Air Safety Working Group meetings under the MMCA were held in Honolulu and Qingdao, respectively.

Despite lingering tensions arising from the EP-3 incident military-to-military contacts picked up after Secretary Rumsfeld lifted his ban on military contact with China. The 4th plenary meeting under the MMCA was held in Hawaii in April 2003 between PACOM's J5 and China's Deputy Chief of Staff. The Military Maritime and Air Safety Working Group under the MMCA met in Hawaii in August 2003 and in Shanghai in March 2004.

In July 2005, the U.S. and China PLA held their 5th plenary meeting under the MMCA in Qingdao. They discussed unresolved maritime and air safety issues. The 6th plenary MMCA session was held in Hawaii in August 2006 alongside meetings of MMCA working groups. The plenary reached agreement on three items: to establish communications protocols; to plan communications and maneuver exercises; and to draft plans for a two-phase search and rescue exercise. The first combined exercise under the MMCA, a search and rescue exercise (SAREX), was conducted in the Fall of 2006 after eight years of talks.

In February 2008, U.S. and China held their 7th plenary MMCA meeting - the first since August 2006. The U.S. side was led by PACOM's J5 and the Chinese side was led by PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff, Zhang Leiyu. China proposed amendments to the MMCA and requested details of planned future naval exercises. The U.S. objected to raising policy and planning matters at MMCA meetings.

Special Policy Dialogue/Defense Policy Coordination Talks

In late January-early February 2005, in light of the stalled MMCA discussions, China and the U.S. held their first Special Policy Dialogue to address defense policy issues not addressed under the MMCA. The U.S. was represented by Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless, and China was represented by the Director of the PLA's Foreign Affairs Office Zhang Bangdong. Lawless raised four issues: the agenda for the next DCT, the status of the February 2004 proposal for a defense hot line, negotiations to reach agreement on military maritime and air safety, and the program of military contacts in 2005.

In December 2006 the 1st Defense Policy Coordination Talks (DPCT) were held in Washington as an outgrowth of the Special Policy Dialogue held in 2005. The U.S. was represented at the level of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, China was represented by the Director of the PLA's Foreign Affairs Office. They focused their discussions on military activities in China's EEZ.

In February 2008, the U.S. and China held their 2nd DPCT meeting in Shanghai (the 7th MMCA meeting also met at this time, see discussion above). The U.S. was represented at the level of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, the PLA was represented by the Director of the PLA's Foreign Affairs Office. They signed an agreement to set up a hot line.

Between 1980 and 2008 the United States and China established two main mechanisms for military-to-military contacts, the DCT and the MMCA process. These mechanisms were repeatedly interrupted and suspended for political reasons. The United States suspended all military-to-military contacts in response to the Tienanmen massacre in 1989 and suspended the DCT for two years following the EP-3 incident in 2001. China suspended military exchanges in response to the crisis in the Taiwan Straits in 1995-96, and suspended meetings under the MMCA for a year following the bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in 1999. The next section will review U.S.-China military engagement under the Obama Administration and the development of new mechanisms for strategic dialogue.

Strategic Dialogue and Military to Military Contacts, 2009-2012

In 2009, the incoming Obama Administration quickly reached out to China to enlist its support to address pressing issues such as the global financial crisis and climate change. On April 1, Presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao met on the side lines of the Group of 20 financial summit in London and agreed to build a "positive cooperative and comprehensive" U.S.-China relationship and to raise bilateral relations to a new level by merging two previous but separate dialogues, the Strategic Dialogue and the Strategic Economic Dialogue, into a Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED). The two leaders further agreed on the importance of developing military-to-military contacts and cooperation.¹⁶

This section provides an overview of military-to-military relations under the Obama Administration followed by a more detailed assessment of three bilateral

¹⁶ Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Laying the Groundwork for Greater Cooperation," *Comparative Connections*, July 2009.

defense cooperation mechanisms: Defense Consultative Talks, Military Maritime Consultative Agreement and Defense Policy Coordination Talks.

Overview, 2009-2012

The 1st U.S.-China SE&D was held in Washington from July 27-28, 2009.¹⁷ The strategic track was co-chaired by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and State Councilor Dai Bingguo, while the economic track was co-chaired by Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner and Vice Premier Wang Qishan. In light of China's suspension of military contacts in response to the Bush Administration's arms sales to Taiwan, and Chinese harassment of U.S. Navy surveillance ships in March and May 2009, President Obama stressed the importance of developing military cooperation as a framework to diminish disputes.

The strategic track comprised four pillars: bilateral relations, international security issues (non-proliferation, counter-terrorism), global issues (health, development, energy and global institutions) and regional security and stability issues (Afghanistan/Pakistan, Iran and North Korea).¹⁸

Defense representatives from both China and the U.S. were included in the 1st S&ED. The U.S. was represented by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy and PACOM Commander Admiral Timothy Keating. China sent a lower level official, Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, Deputy Director of the PLA's Foreign Affairs Office. The military representatives held separate discussions at which they agreed to resume bilateral military exchanges (previously announced after the DCT talks in June). The U.S. proposed cooperation in military exercises, personnel exchange and humanitarian rescue.¹⁹ China accepted an invitation for General Xu Caihou, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, to visit the United States.

General Xu's visit had originally been scheduled for December 2008 but was postponed by China in response to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Xu's visit was rescheduled for October 2009 and he was received by Secretary of Defense Robert

¹⁷ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 66 and Bonnie Glaser, "Strategic & Economic Dialogue Sets Agenda for Cooperation," *Comparative Connections*, October 2009.

¹⁸ Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Strategic & Economic Dialogue Sets Agenda for Cooperation," *Comparative Connections*, October 2009.

¹⁹ Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Strategic & Economic Dialogue Sets Agenda for Cooperation," *Comparative Connections*, October 2009.

Gates at The Pentagon.²⁰ General Xu also met with National Security Advisor James Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, and Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg. He also paid a courtesy call on President Obama.

Xu and Gates reached agreement on seven points (dubbed the 7-point consensus):

Promoting high-level visits; enhancing cooperation in the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; deepening military medical cooperation; expanding exchanges between armies of the two nations; enhancing the program of mid-grade and junior officer exchanges; promoting cultural and sports exchanges between the two militaries; invigorating the existing diplomatic and consultative mechanisms to improve maritime operational safety.²¹

It was clear that U.S.-China military relations still had a long way to go. General Xu, for example, tabled four major obstacles that he claimed harmed bilateral relations:

The first and foremost obstacle is the U.S.-Taiwan military relationship... The Taiwan issue is related to the core interests of China and is a core issue that prevents the development of the U.S.-China military relationship. If the U.S. side can't handle this issue very well, a healthy and stable China-U.S. Military relationship will not be possible.

Second, U.S.-military aircraft and ships intrusions into China's maritime exclusive economic zone should be terminated. China hopes the U.S. military can observe UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and Chinese maritime legislation, and stop such acts which would threaten China's security and interests.

Third, there is some U.S. legislation which restricts the development of the China-U.S. military relationship. Most notably is the 2000 Defense Authorization Act passed in 1999.

Another obstacle is the United States lacking strategic trust in China.²²

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2000 prohibits the Secretary of Defense from authorizing any military-to-military contact with the PLA if that contact would "create a national security risk due to an inappropriate exposure" of the PLA to any of the following twelve areas: force projection operations, nuclear operations, advanced combined-arms and joint combat operations, advanced logistical operations, chemical and biological and other capabilities related to weapons of mass destruction, surveillance and reconnaissance operations, joint warfighting experiments

²⁰ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 66 and Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Obama-Hu Summit: Success or Disappointment?," *Comparative Connections*, January 2010.

²¹ "Chinese, U.S. military leaders vow to further cooperation," Xinhua, October 27, 2009 and Yang Qingchuan, 'Chinese, U.S. military ties face opportunity for new development', Xinhua, October 29, 2009.

²² This is a reference to the annual Defense Department report to Congress on *Military Power of the People's Republic of China*. The latest edition of this publication has been re-titled and toned down: *Annual Report to Congress Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2012* (Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2012).

and other activities related to transformations in warfare, military space operations, other advanced capabilities of the Armed Forces, arms sales or military-related technology transfers, release of classified or restricted information, and access to a Defense Department laboratory.²³

President Obama made his first official visit to China from November 15-18, 2009.²⁴ Whatever benefit derived from this visit was eroded two months later in January 2010 when President Obama notified Congress of arms sales to Taiwan.²⁵ In response, China suspended high-level military-to-military relations with the United States for ten months, including the bilateral MMCA. U.S. defense officials described China's actions as "continued politicization" of military-to-military contacts.

President Obama dispatched two high level envoys to Beijing in March to repair the damage, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and the Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council Jeffrey Bader. They succeeded and China's Foreign Ministry announced that President Hu Jintao would attend the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington in mid-April.

The 2nd SE&D was held in Beijing in May 2010 in the shadow of the announcement by President Obama four months earlier of a new package of arms sales to Taiwan and China's suspension of some military exchange in retaliation.²⁶ U.S. military representatives included PACOM Commander Admiral Robert Willard and Assistant Secretary of Defense Wallace Gregson. They met separately with Deputy Chief of General Staff, Air Force General Ma Xiaotian and Rear Admiral Guan Youfei. General Ma raised "three obstacles" - arms sales to Taiwan, close-in reconnaissance in China's EEZ, and restrictions contained in FY2000 NDAA.²⁷ The PLA turned down a U.S. offer to brief them on the Nuclear Posture Review and the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). According to one analyst:

discussions between military representatives on the margins of the formal meetings were tense... Rear Adm. Guan Youfei, a vice minister at the Foreign Affairs Office of the PLA, lectured about US mishandling of the Sino-US relationship, pinning the blame on the US for

²³ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 12-13.

²⁴ Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Obama-Hu Summit: Success of Disappointment," *Comparative Connections*, January 2010.

²⁵ Bonnie Glaser and David Szerlip, "U.S.-China Relations: The Honeymoon Ends," *Comparative Connections*, April 2010. President Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama on February 18 only further exacerbated matters.

²⁶ Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Cooperation Faces Challenges," *Comparative Connections*, July 2010.

²⁷ Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Cooperation Faces Challenges," *Comparative Connections*, July 2010.

all the bilateral problems. Guan accused the US of being a “hegemon,” scheming to encircle China with strategic alliances, and treating China as an enemy.²⁸

In June 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates attended the 9th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.²⁹ Enroute to Singapore Secretary Gates told the accompanying media gaggle that “The PLA is significantly less interested in this relationship than the political leadership of China.”³⁰ China’s foot dragging on developing military contacts led Secretary Robert Gates to admonish the PLA for its failure to follow up on the commitment of Presidents Obama and Hu in 2009 to advance military-to-military ties. After announcing his acceptance of an invitation to attend the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) in Hanoi,³¹ Gates aroused Chinese ire by calling for “open, transparent, and equal access to the global common,” including the maritime commons, “for security, for trade and commerce, and free passage.” He then pointedly directed his remarks to the South China Sea:

In this respect, the South China Sea is an area of growing concern. This sea is not only vital to those directly bordering it, but to all nations with economic and security interests in Asia. Our policy is clear: it is essential that stability, freedom of navigation, and free and unhindered economic development be maintained. We do not take sides on any competing sovereignty claims, but we do oppose the use of force and actions that hinder freedom of navigation. We object to any effort to intimidate U.S. corporations or those of any nation engaged in legitimate economic activity. All parties must work together to resolve differences through peaceful, multilateral efforts consistent with customary international law.³²

China expressed its displeasure by turning down a request by Gates to visit China.³³ U.S. South China Sea policy has remained an irritant in bilateral U.S.-China relations in general as well as military-to-military relations in particular.³⁴

²⁸ Bonnie Glaser, “U.S.-China Relations: Cooperation Faces Challenges,” *Comparative Connections*, July 2010.

²⁹ The Shangri-La Dialogue, formally known as the Asia Security Summit, is sponsored by the International Institute for Strategic Studies and has served as a forum for regional defense ministers since 2002. China first participated in 2007 but declined to send its defense minister until 2011. Secretary Gates and Defense Minister Liang met on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2011. The Chinese defense minister did not attend in 2012.

³⁰ Quoted in Bonnie Glaser, “U.S.-China Relations: Cooperation Faces Challenges,” *Comparative Connections*, July 2010.

³¹ The United States was the first of eight invited dialogue partners to accept.

³² Dr. Robert M. Gates. Secretary of Defense, United States, “Strengthening Security Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific,” presentation to the First Plenary Session, The 9th IISS Asian Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 5, 2010. IISS is an acronym for International Institute of Strategic Studies.

³³ Bonnie Glaser, “U.S.-China Relations: Cooperation Faces Challenges,” *Comparative Connections*, July 2010; and Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman, “Hopes and Plans Torpedoed; Strategies Outlined,” *Comparative Connections*, July 2010.

³⁴ For background see: Carlyle A. Thayer, “The United States and Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea,” *Security Challenges*, 6(2), Winter 2010, 69-84.

China quickly reversed its decision after President Obama raised this matter with President Hu Jintao in Toronto on the sidelines of the Group of 8 Summit on June 6. On July 1, General Ma Xiaotian, PLA Deputy Chief of Staff, publicly stated that China would welcome a visit by Secretary Gates “at a time that is convenient to both sides.” Ma tempered his announcement, however, by calling on the U.S. to respect China’s core interests and major concerns.³⁵

In September 2010, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Schiffer travelled to Beijing to discuss military-to-military relations with the Director of the PLA’s Foreign Affairs Office Major General Qian Lihua. General Qian informed Schiffer that regular dialogue and exchanges on military safety at sea and other issues would be resumed.³⁶ Nonetheless, the Chinese side also raised their concerns about U.S.-South Korean exercises in the Yellow Sea and U.S. policy in the South China Sea.

The following month Secretary Robert Gates and Defence Minister General Liang Guanglie held a fifty-minute bilateral meeting on the eve of the inaugural ADMM Plus meeting in Hanoi on October 11, 2010.³⁷ In a change of tune, General Liang invited Secretary Gates to visit Beijing early in 2011 thus ending the freeze on high-level defense contacts imposed by China in January 2010 in reaction to the sale of U.S. arms to Taiwan.

Secretary Gates visited Beijing in January 2011. His visit signaled the full restoration of U.S.-China military relations.³⁸ Secretary Gates proposed a “sustained and reliable” military-to-military relationship, a strategic dialogue, and implementation of the 7-point consensus. He also proposed the creation of a new joint civil-military Strategic Security Dialogue as part of the S&ED ministerial meetings. Gates also stressed the importance of continuing to meet under the MMCA to improve operational safety.

Defense Minister Liang Guanglie agreed that a healthy and stable military-to-military relationship was an essential part of the positive, cooperative and comprehensive relationship agreed by their two presidents to advance “common interests” and to reduce misunderstandings and miscalculation. He agreed on the value of military to military mechanisms such as the DCT, DPCT and MMCA. Liang,

³⁵ Bonnie Glaser, “U.S.-China Relations: Cooperation Faces Challenges,” *Comparative Connections*, July 2010.

³⁶ Audrey McAvoy, “U.S., China hold maritime security talks in Hawaii,” *The Jakarta Post*, October 16, 2010.

³⁷ Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “U.S.-China Relations: Friction and Cooperation in Run-up to Hu’s US Visit,” *Comparative Connections*, January 2011.

³⁸ Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “U.S.-China Relations: Pomp and Substance: HU’s State Visit to the US,” *Comparative Connections*, May 2011. This paragraph and the three following paragraphs are drawn from this source.

however, only agreed to study the U.S. proposal for a strategic dialogue on nuclear weapons, missile defense, space and cyber security as part of the SE&D.

In a significant development the two sides agreed on a new working group to develop guiding principles and a new framework for improving military-to-military cooperation. Future high-level visits were reviewed. The two sides pledged to sign an agreement at the next DCT and agreed to convene the DPCT as soon as possible in order to complete the program of military exchanges for 2011. They also agreed to hold a working group meeting under the MMCA in the first half of 2011 to discuss operational safety and expanded maritime cooperation. Other proposals were discussed but not included in the formal agenda. These included: combined military, maritime search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter piracy and counter terrorism exercises.

The 3rd S&ED was held in Washington from May 9-10, 2011.³⁹ Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell stated that one innovation was the inclusion of a senior PLA official. China's military was represented at the SE&D not by its most senior official but by its Deputy Chief of General Staff, Air Force General Ma Xiotian. Ma, nonetheless, was the first senior PLA official to attend these talks. China's Chief of General Staff pointedly paid a visit to the U.S. from May 15-22 only after the SE&D had concluded.

The 3rd S&ED established two new mechanisms for dialogue, the Strategic Security Dialogue (SSD) and the U.S.-China Consultation on the Asia-Pacific both led by foreign ministry/department of state senior officials. The 1st SSD was held alongside the S&ED.⁴⁰ The U.S. side included senior representatives from State and Defense: Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy and Vice Chairman of the JCS General James Cartwright. China was represented by General Ma Xiaotian and Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun. The SSD discussed maritime and cyber disputes. The first meeting of the U.S.-China Consultation on the Asia-Pacific was held in Hawaii on June 25, 2011.⁴¹

The upswing in U.S.-China relations was reflected in exchange visits by the PLA Chief of General Staff General Chen Bingde in May and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen in July.⁴² The atmospherics at the 2011 Shangri-la Dialogue were more positive than the previous year. Secretary Gates did not

³⁹ Bonnier Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "U.S.-China Relations: Friction and Cooperation Co-exist Uneasily, *Comparative Connections*, September 2011.

⁴⁰ Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "U.S.-China Relations: Friction and Cooperation Co-exist Uneasily, *Comparative Connections*, September 2011.

⁴¹ The 2nd U.S.-China Consultation on the Asia-Pacific was held in Beijing on October 11, 2011 and the 3rd consultation was held in Annapolis on March 12, 2012.

⁴² Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "U.S.-China Relations: Friction and Cooperation Co-exist Uneasily, *Comparative Connections*, September 2011.

mention the South China Sea in his public remarks. However, he reiterated the well-known position that the U.S. had a “national interest in freedom of navigation...” He also stressed the importance of customary international law as a guide for “the appropriate use of the maritime domain, and rights of access to it.”⁴³ China’s Defence Minister put on record his country’s commitment “to maintaining peace and stability in South China Sea.” He noted that, “at present, the general situation in the South China Sea remains stable.”⁴⁴

In September 2011, the Obama Administration confirmed its January decision to sell a \$5.85 billion arms package to Taiwan. This decision was a carefully calibrated one.⁴⁵ The U.S. chose to provide funding to upgrade Taiwan’s F-16 fighter jets but not provide more modern aircraft. Unlike the previous year, these arms sales did not precipitate a wholesale suspension of military-to-military exchanges.⁴⁶ China did suspend several scheduled exchanges however, including visits by the U.S. Army Band, PACOM Commander, and a military medical exchange. A joint U.S.-China counter-piracy exercise was also cancelled.

On December 7, 2011 the U.S. and China held defense talks in Beijing at deputy minister level. China’s representative, General Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of Staff, declared that the meeting demonstrated “both countries are being sincere about maintaining military exchanges. Hopefully both sides will make the best of this opportunity to expand common ground, keep risks under control and avoid misjudgment.”⁴⁷

The 4th S&ED was held in Washington from May 3-4, 2012. The strategic track was co-chaired by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and State Councilor Dai Bingguo. The strategic track discussed how to promote military transparency to avoid misunderstanding, to build trust and maintain mutual stability.”⁴⁸ The strategic track agreed to establish the U.S.-China Maritime Safety Dialogue between the U.S. Coast Guard and the China Maritime Safety Administration and to hold its first meeting in

⁴³ Robert M. Gates, “Emerging Security Challenges in the Asia-Pacific,” The 10th IISS Asian Security Summit the Shangri-La Dialogue, June 4, 2011.

⁴⁴ Liang Guanglie, “China’s International Security Cooperation,” The 10th IISS Asian Security Summit the Shangri-La Dialogue, June 5, 2011.

⁴⁵ Carlyle A. Thayer, “US Arms Sales to Taiwan: Impact on Sino-American Relations,” *China-U.S. Focus*, September 29, 2011. <http://www.chinausfocus.com/slider/us-arms-sales-to-taiwan-impact-on-sino-american-relations-2/>.

⁴⁶ Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “U.S.-China Relations: US Pivot to Asia Leaves China off Balance,” *Comparative Connections*, January 2012.

⁴⁷ Agence France Presse, “U.S., China Hold Military Talks,” December 7, 2011.

⁴⁸ Phillip Kurata, “U.S. and China Address Strategic, Economic Interests in Beijing,” IID Digital, U.S. Department of State, May 3, 2012.

China later in the year.⁴⁹ And it was agreed to hold the 4th bilateral Asia-Pacific Consultations in the second half of 2012.

The 2nd Strategic Security Dialogue was held at the same time. It was co-chaired by Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun. Acting Under Secretary of Defense James Miller and Deputy Chief of General Staff of the PLA General Ma Xiantian also participated. According to the Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of the dialogue the SSD discussed “strategic and comprehensive security of the two countries... and decided to continue working together to develop the mechanism to increase mutual trust and manage differences between the two countries...”⁵⁰

With the above overview, the following sections will review progress in the Defense Consultative Talks, Military Maritime Consultative Agreement and the Defense Policy Coordination Talks since 2009.

Defense Consultative Talks

The 10th DCT was held in Beijing from June 23-24, 2009 after a break of eighteen months. The U.S. was represented by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy, China was represented by Lt. Gen. Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff. According to a U.S. diplomatic account, both sides affirmed the commitment of their presidents in April to improve military-to-military relations.⁵¹ The agenda for the first session included the Taiwan issue, guiding principles for military-to-military relations and the program for high-level exchanges for the remainder of 2009.

General Ma spent considerable time on the Taiwan arms sale issue as an obstacle to improved military-to-military cooperation. He also reviewed four principles that the PLA had previously tabled to guide the relationship: mutual respect, mutual trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit. When General Ma asked for a response, Michael Schiffer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, proposed two further principles: continuous dialogue to ensure uninterrupted communication between the two militaries and mutual risk reduction based on the Defense Telephone Link and

⁴⁹ “Joint Statement on the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic Track May 3-4, 2012,” Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, Department of State, Washington, DC, May 4, 2012.

⁵⁰ “Joint Statement on the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic Track May 3-4, 2012.”

⁵¹ “2009 U.S.-China Defense Consultative Talks (DCT), Session 1: Military-to-Military Relations,” U.S. Embassy, Beijing, July 1, 2009. The discussion in this paragraph is taken from this source.

Military Maritime Consultative Agreement to reduce the potential for miscalculation or misunderstanding.

The 10th DCT also held a small group session to discuss sensitive issues.⁵² According to General Ma, these were issues “that are not convenient to talk about in the full DCT session.” In particular, General Ma raised three obstacles to a better military relationship: Taiwan, US reconnaissance operations in China’s EEZ, and the FY2000 NDAA which restricted U.S. defense interactions with the PLA.

On the second day of the DCT Flouroy briefed the Chinese on the Nuclear Posture Review and the QDR. The 10th DCT agreed to hold a Special Meeting of the MMCA in August to discuss disputes over maritime safety and freedom of navigation in China’s EEZ. According to a report in the *China Daily* both sides at the DCT “expressed willingness to avoid a recurrence of recent incidents or confrontation between Chinese vessels and U.S. naval ships off China’s southern coast [and agreed to resolve such incidents] as carefully as possible should they happen to occur again.”⁵³

The 11th DCT was held in Washington in December 2010 eighteen months after the last meeting.⁵⁴ It was hosted by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy. China was represented by General Ma Xiaotian, PLA Deputy Chief of General Staff. The meeting reaffirmed the 7-point consensus reached in 2009. It was noted that Secretary Robert Gates was scheduled to visit Beijing from January 10-14 in advance of President Hu Jintao’s visit to Washington later that month. In addition General Chen Bingde, Chief of General Staff, was scheduled to visit the U.S. during 2011.

The DCT reviewed discussions under the MMCA and noted continuing disagreements over maritime safety and security. The meeting touched on possible cooperation in regional security. The two sides also exchanged briefings. The U.S. side briefed on the Nuclear Posture Review, Ballistic Missile Defense Review and the Space Posture Review. The Chinese side was lobbied to pressure North Korea to end its provocations and to denuclearize. The PLA briefed on its strategy and modernization. Once again the Chinese side raised the three obstacles.

The 12th DCT met in Beijing in December 2011.⁵⁵ The U.S. side was represented by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy, China was represented by

⁵² “2009 U.S.-China Defense Consultative Talks (DCT) Small Group Session,” U.S. Embassy, Beijing, July 1, 2009.

⁵³ Quoted in Bonnie Glaser, “U.S.-China Relations: Laying the Groundwork for Greater Cooperation,” *Comparative Connections*, July 2009.

⁵⁴ Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “U.S.-China Relations: Friction and Cooperation in Run-up to Hu’s US Visit,” *Comparative Connections*, January 2011.

⁵⁵ Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “U.S.-China Relations: US Pivot to Asia Leaves China off Balance,” *Comparative Connections*, January 2012.

the new director of intelligence (Department 2), Major General Chen Youyi and PLA Deputy Chief of Staff General Ma Xiaotian. The meeting discussed regional security including U.S. force deployments in Australia, North Korea, Taiwan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the South China Sea and the Middle East and North Africa. The meeting agreed to senior visits and exercises in humanitarian assistance and counter-piracy. The PLA provided a briefing on its Defense White Paper and once again raised three obstacles to military cooperation: arms sales to Taiwan, FY2000 NDAA and high frequency close-in reconnaissance by U.S. aircraft and ships in China's EEZ. There were no breakthroughs in discussions. Unlike previous DCTs this meeting failed to agree on a program of bilateral exchanges for 2012

Defense Policy Coordination Talks

The 3rd DPCT was held in Beijing in February 2009 against the backdrop of China's suspension of military contacts since October 2008. The U.S. was represented by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Sedney, China was represented by Deputy Chief of General Staff Ma Xiaotian. Sedney requested a resumption of military exchanges. The Chinese side raised three obstacles: arms sales to Taiwan, legal restrictions on military contacts, and the publication of the annual *Military Power* of the People's Republic of China.

The 4th DPCT was held in Honolulu in December 2009 in the shadow of incidents involving the USNS *Victorious* and USNS *Impeccable* in March and a further incident involving the USS *John S. McCain* in May.⁵⁶ The U.S. was represented by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia Michael Schiffer and Director of the PLA's Foreign Affairs Office Maj. Gen. Qian Lihua. The topics discussed included: military exchanges, regional security and non-proliferation. Both sides briefed the other. The U.S. side briefed on the QDR and the Chinese side briefed on PLA modernization. Schiffer tried to reinvigorate the MMCA process to manage problems in maritime and air safety. General Qian proposed changing the MMCA charter to alter its focus on operational safety to planning for naval exercises and navy-to-navy contacts.

⁵⁶ Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Laying the Groundwork for Greater Cooperation" *Comparative Connections*, July 2009; Eric A. McVadon, "The Reckless and the Resolute: Confrontation in the South China Sea," *China Security*, 5(2), Spring 2009, 6-9; Ji Guoxing, "The Legality of the 'Impeccable Incident'," *China Security*, 5(2), Spring 2009, 20-21; and Mark Valencia, "The Impeccable Incident: Truth and Consequences," *China Security*, 5(2), Spring 2009, 22-28.

The 5th DPCT was held in Beijing in April 2011. The U.S. side was represented by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Schiffer who met with the Director of the PLA's Foreign Affairs Office Qian Lihua. Once again the Chinese characterized the DCT as a work-level meeting only.

Military Maritime Consultative Agreement

In August 2009, the U.S. and China held a Special Meeting of the MMCA in Beijing to review recent maritime incidents involving the USNS *Victorious*, USNA *Impeccable* and USS *John S. McCain*. The U.S. was represented by PACOM's Director of Strategic Planning and Policy (J5). The U.S. stressed the importance of safety and freedom of navigation in international waters while the Chinese side complained about U.S. surveillance in China's EEZ.⁵⁷

PACOM hosted the 8th plenary meeting under the MMCA in Honolulu in October 14-15, 2010, the first since 2008.⁵⁸ The resumption in military-to-military contacts reflected an uptick in political relations. It was announced at that time China's President, Hu Jintao, would visit the United States in the northern Spring.⁵⁹

The U.S. side was represented at the MMCA plenary session by a joint PACOM team, in contrast, China limited its representation to a single service, the PLAN. The U.S. was represented by PACOM's J5, Major General Randolph Alles (USMC); China downgraded its representation to PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Liao Shining.

The U.S. side raised its concerns about several recent incidents involving close intercepts of U.S. military aircraft in international airspace by PLA fighters and Chinese harassment of U.S. survey ships operating in China's EEZ.⁶⁰ The U.S. charged that Chinese behaviour endangered the lives of U.S. military personnel. Admiral Liao responded by repeating objections to close-in reconnaissance by U.S. ships and aircraft. Admiral Liao rejected the possibility of accidents and argued that

⁵⁷ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 66 and Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: Strategic & Economic Dialogue Sets Agenda for Cooperation," *Comparative Connections*, October 2009.

⁵⁸ "Senior U.S. Defense Officials Conclude Talks with Chinese Counterparts," PACOM Public Affairs, October 15, 2010; "China, U.S. maritime security talks 'candid': Chinese Defense Ministry," Xinhua, October 17, 2010; and Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "U.S.-China Relations: Friction and Cooperation in Run-up to Hu's US Visit," *Comparative Connections*, January 2011. A Special MMCA meeting was also convened in August 2009.

⁵⁹ Huang Xiaoyong, "Gates to visit China, defense ties normalize," Xinhua, October 12, 2010 and CNN, "China confirms president's visit to the U.S.," October 22, 2010.

⁶⁰ Audrey McAvoy, "U.S., China hold maritime security talks in Hawaii," *The Jakarta Post*, October 16, 2010.

any future collision would be the fault of the U.S. The two sides agreed to hold future exchanges on maritime search and rescue operations and to report their discussions to the next round of DCT scheduled for December.⁶¹

There was no plenary meeting under the MMCA in 2011. In August 2011 an MMCA working group met in Qingdao to discuss PLA complaints about U.S. reconnaissance flights. In December 2011 a working group under the MMCA, led by naval captains on both sides, met in Qingdao.

Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of U.S.-China military-to-military contacts and strategic dialogues from 1980 to the present. This paper focused on three key mechanisms in particular – Defense Consultative Talks, the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement and the Special Policy Dialogue/Defense Policy Coordination Talks. The analysis in this paper demonstrates that it is very difficult to extract purely military-to-military contacts from their political and strategic setting. This is exemplified by the inclusion of military representatives as part of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue process and then the initiation of a separate Strategic Security Dialogue within the S&ED.

What does a balance sheet tell us about U.S.-China military relations? On the plus side the following accomplishments should be noted: (1) exchange visits by high-level defense officials (defense ministers and chiefs of defense forces); (2) regular Defense Consultation Talks; (3) continuing working level discussions under the MMCA (4) agreement on the 7-point consensus; (5) no serious naval incidents since the 2009 USNS *Impeccable* affair; (6) continuing exchange visits by senior officers (7) the initiation of a Strategic Security Dialogue as part of the S&ED process; (8) the recent agreement to hold meetings between coast guards and (9) agreement on a new working group to draft principles establishing a framework for military-to-military cooperation.

On the negative side it must be noted first that U.S.-China military-to-military contacts have gone through cycles of cooperation and suspension. In 2009 a U.S. diplomatic cable reported a senior PLA official as observing, “the defense relationship lags behind other aspects of the overall bilateral relationship and it is often caught in a vicious cycle of ‘progress and suspension’.”⁶² The senior PLA official noted that with the exception of the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy

⁶¹ Huang Xiaoyong, “Gates to visit China, defense ties normalize,” Xinhua, October 12, 2010.

⁶² “2009 U.S.-China Defense Consultative Talks (DCT), Session 1: Military-to-Military Relations,” U.S. Embassy, Beijing, July 1, 2009.

in Belgrade in 1999 and the EP-3 incident in April 2001, all other suspensions in military-to-military relations were the result of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Shirley Kan notes that China promotes repeated cycles of suspending contacts and then leverages the timing of their resumption.⁶³ U.S. defense officials view this as the politicization of military-to-military contacts.

Second, since military-to-military contacts were first initiated in 1980 until the present, the U.S. and China have only been able to reach one military-to-military agreement, the MMCA. An evaluation of the health of this agreement is not good. A senior PLA official offered this evaluation, “We signed the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) in 1998... but over the past 11 years the mechanism failed to play an effective role.”⁶⁴ A year later, in May 2010, the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command characterized relations with the PLA as a “very immature military-to-military relationship.”⁶⁵

A review of the MMCA written by the U.S. principal negotiator in 2010, argued that the MMCA was only a

framework for dialogue - it is nothing more..

Logically, the MMCA should have been the first of many and stronger foundations of U.S.-PRC military confidence-building.

Of course, 13 years later, the MMCA remains the only mil-to-mil agreement between these two nations and is of only limited effectiveness because it is held hostage by China over U.S. actions in carrying out our stated obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act.⁶⁶

Another U.S. review of U.S.-China MMCA (1997-2010) concluded:

The Military Maritime Consultative Agreement between the United States and China was a good start on confidence building but is, in its present form, an inadequate measure for managing events. It does not contain relationship-transforming elements that could make it far more relevant and useful. After twelve years, numerous incidents, and one death, it is time to reevaluate it in the light of other experience worldwide so that it better serves the interests of both parties...

A difficult situation that develops at sea is no time to cease communication in order to signal displeasure. On the contrary, it is the very time when communication becomes most vitally important; otherwise both parties risk losing control over events and having to deal with unwanted consequences. The existing Military Maritime Consultative Agreement is a good start, but even if it had included provisions for real-time communication, it would not have helped much in subsequent real-world incidents—and “if it does not work in adversity then

⁶³ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 4.

⁶⁴ “2009 U.S.-China Defense Consultative Talks (DCT) Small Group Session,” U.S. Embassy, Beijing, July 1, 2009.

⁶⁵ Kathrin Hille, “US warns over Beijing’s ‘assertiveness’,” *Financial Times*, May 25, 2010.

⁶⁶ Bruce Lemkin, “U.S.-Taiwan Relations Are No Threat to China,” *Defense News*, November 8, 2012. Lemkin was Deputy Under Secretary of the U.S. Air Force (International Affairs) from 2003-10

it's not worth the paper it's written on."⁶⁷

Finally, a more recent review of U.S.-China military-to-military contacts, prepared for the U.S. Congress in February 2012, concluded:

China's rising power with greater assertiveness and aggressiveness (particularly in maritime areas), refusal to discuss nuclear weapons, cyber threats, and repeated suspensions of visits showed limitations of the results of mil-to-mil exchanges... The PLA has repeatedly suspended mil-to-mil contacts while blaming U.S. "obstacles" (including U.S. reconnaissance, arms sales to Taiwan, legislated restrictions on contacts with the PLA, and the Pentagon's annual report to Congress on PRC Military Power).⁶⁸

Third, there is not much evidence that military-to-military contacts and strategic dialogue have reduced strategic mistrust and raised transparency. It is clear that continued U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, U.S. intelligence gathering in China's Exclusive Economic Zone, FY2000 NDAA restrictions on military interaction with the PLA, and U.S. South China Sea policy remain major irritants for China. Chinese officials repeatedly raise "three obstacles" in their discussions with the United States.

In weighing up the pluses and negatives in the bilateral relationship the bottom line is despite the deficits the United States and China will persist in engaging with each other. Both sides understand that military-to-military contacts are a critical component of bilateral engagement. Without such interaction there is a risk that mistrust between the two militaries could spill over and have a major negative impact on bilateral relations in general. Military-to-military relations will continue to exhibit elements of cooperation and contention and it is likely that strategic mistrust will persist through lack of greater transparency. When incidents and disputes arise between the two militaries, and as the momentum of military-to-military interaction slows, it is likely that two countries' presidents will intervene, as they have in the past, to reset bilateral relations.

⁶⁷ Griffiths, *U.S.-China Maritime Confidence Building: Paradigms, Precedents and Prospects*.

⁶⁸ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, 3.