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

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Enhancing Transparency: Military to Military Cooperation and Strategic Dialogues

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Beijing has often utilised arms transfers and military diplomacy, rather than formal ties, to increase its international influence. The practice, encouraged when General Chi Haotian gained the external affairs portfolio in the Central Military Commission in 1995, has since continued, often involving countries broadly outside China's limited zone of influence, such as in Eastern Europe or the Middle East, or states otherwise considered 'pariah' by the international community, such as Cuba, Myanmar and North Korea.

According to the October 2000 national defence white paper, China handles its military relations independently, and conducts military exchanges and co-operation with other countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. Military diplomacy should serve the state's overall diplomacy and the modernisation of national defence and the armed forces. In pursuance of this purpose the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has actively engaged in external contacts and exchanges, and made sustained efforts for enhanced mutual co-operation with armed forces of other countries.

The desire for countries to maintain a proper relationship with China is reflected in the increasing number of military exchanges the PLA has been involved in over the past 30 years. Since reform began in 1978, senior PLA officers have led thousands of delegations to over 100 countries. According to the Ministry of National Defence, by December 2010 military relations had been established with over 150 countries, with attaché offices in 112 of these states (102 countries have attachés in China). The PLA sends more than 170 military delegations overseas per year, and receives more than 200 from other countries.

While most PLA visits in the 1980s were confined to the senior Beijing officers, since the 1990s the PLA has allowed military region commanders, deputy commanders, or political commissars and fleet commanders to lead delegations abroad. PLA Navy (PLAN) squadrons have visited the US, Russia, Europe, India, Latin America, Southeast Asia, Australia and North Korea. The PLAN has conducted simple exercises with the US, Russian, Indian and French navies, while it has also participated in multinational exercises hosted by Singapore and Pakistan. In 2002 the PLA conducted its first foreign exercise, with anti-terrorism training in neighbouring Kazakhstan. PLA Army Special Forces units have participated in the Estonian ERNA

competitions and have sent soldiers to train in Venezuela. The PLA has also conducted joint tri-service exercises with Russian troops in Shandong province in 2005, the first drills held with an overseas power in Chinese territory, while the PLA Air Force held its first foreign exercises in bilateral counter-terrorism in Pakistan in December 2006. China held the first joint land exercises with India in Yunnan in December 2007, repeated in December 2008 in Karnataka. The small size of the exercises, comprising just one company from each army, reflected the symbolic importance of military diplomacy in China's overall foreign policy. Military exercises seem to play a varied role in Chinese diplomacy, both cementing relations with long-term allies and also building trust with traditional rivals.

Defence transparency

Defence transparency is an issue often raised in connection to the PLA. In truth, it is difficult to define, but a distinction can be drawn between 'public' and 'private' defence transparency. The first relates to information available to populations on defence and military matters, while the second may just be intergovernmental information sharing or co-operation that does not enter the public sphere. Further, defence transparency can be transmitted either through 'official' or 'unofficial' channels, the former referring to governmental or ministerial statements and publications, the latter referring to, usually, independent or state-run media.

When it comes to mil-mil negotiations, we are largely concerned with official, private transparency, although relations are often coloured by the publications of opinion pieces in China's state-run press, for example.

Trends that have aided defence transparency in Europe outside of the official channels, such as the privatisation of defence industries, have not occurred in China. The privatisation of various defence industries and intensified defence industrial competition since the end of the Cold War has helped in producing a wider variety of sources through which one can verify, analyse and research defence information. Previously state-run defence companies servicing largely national needs and Cold War client states with only one real choice of armament provider mean there was no need or incentive to publicise information arms transfers. Now, defence companies may be answerable to their shareholders, and will have to explain their performance through an exposition of their various projects, while large defence tenders are conducted in greater openness.

Similarly, there has been no passing of freedom of information legislation in China as there has been in many European states. Nonetheless, China has been eager to increase its official, public defence transparency, mindful of criticism from other

states. In particular, the defence white paper, published since 2000, is an attempt to both release more information, but in doing so in such a regulated manner, to control information flows and manipulate perceptions to a far greater extent than if unofficial sources were allowed to generate rumours and press stories. In this way, governmental defence transparency in China may at times still be an attempt to obfuscate and obscure; to disguise, deceive and mislead.

In Europe, the confrontation of the Cold War encouraged greater official private defence transparency, both through the encouragement of an alliance (NATO) in reaction to the perceived threat from the Soviet Union, and in a bid to ease tensions with Moscow and hence develop confidence-building measures following the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, including the information sharing of the Vienna document and the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. Perhaps paradoxically, the lack of a unifying threat since the end of the Cold War has also encouraged greater defence transparency as European states have been keen to build on the benefits gained from the Cold War and further regional integration. The EU Rapid Reaction Force, European Defence Agency, and engagement with the UN's Register of Conventional Arms have all increased private and public defence transparency in Europe.

In China, the same driving forces have been lacking: there has not been a sustained period of existential threat that could encourage defence transparency and alliance formation to allow for information sharing. Nonetheless, the increasing tensions over the South China Sea are already encouraging greater transparency between China and the US.

The various maritime disputes of the region may provide the most likely areas for gains in transparency, particularly the South China Sea. Those policy makers wishing to encourage defence transparency in the region would do well to utilise such disputes and leverage existing multinational groupings, such as ASEAN, to encourage incremental military CSBMs, such as alerts of military exercises, collaborative search-and-rescue and military hotlines, to build an interwoven network of military-to-military relations and interactions. However, consistent policy pressure from both within and without the region may be necessary to foster the environment conducive to continued military confidence-building measures and unilateral or multilateral defence transparency.

Mil-mil relations with Europe

China's military-to-military relations with European states are even more limited than with Asian states or the US. A lack of strategic goals, mutual military mistrust and concern over Europe's alliance with the US have all undermined the prospect of mil-

mil relations. They have been further limited by a lack of direct European security interests in East Asia, a lack of a physical military presence and the EU arms embargo.

Nonetheless, some military negotiations do occur, albeit infrequently and with few mechanisms for dialogue. Two potential levels of interaction exist: through the EU and via individual countries.

EU

Sino-EU relations are dominated by trade issues. In terms of mil-mil relations, this is obviously hampered by a lack of a permanent joint HQ in Europe and the issue of the EU embargo.

The embargo, vaguely worded and in situ for more than two decades, has created mistrust and concern from China that Europe is not interested in forging closer ties with the PLA.

In recent years, there has been low-level contact through counter-piracy operations, with regular meetings through EUNAVFOR and the quarterly SHADE. This has encouraged higher-level meetings, such as the discussion between Catherine Ashton and Liang Guanglie in October 2011.

Nonetheless, Sino-EU military-military relations are extremely limited, mainly owing to a simple question for Beijing: to whom do you talk when you want to communicate with the EU's defence sector?

As such, mil-mil relations are largely conducted on a bilateral basis with EU states

France

France is the country with perhaps the longest-running and deepest military-military relations, although even here they remain limited.

In 2012, the two countries held their 11th bilateral strategic dialogue, with mil-mil relations an important section of the dialogue. Discussions were most recently held at deputy chief of staff level, although infrequent meetings at various levels also occur. Mil-mil discussions are focused on uncontroversial areas, including peacekeeping, counter-piracy and training.

A slight thorn in the side of Sino-French mil-mil relations, the French military liaison office in Taipei, was removed in 2010 when the office was closed. Partly as a result of scandal surrounding the La Fayette frigate deal, as well as the frigate deal coming to close, the end of the military liaison office in Taipei allows Paris to focus entirely on China in its mil-mil relations.

UK

Chinese defence relations with the UK are similarly focused on uncontroversial issues. The fourth China-UK defence strategic talks were held in 2011 between Deputy CDS Nicholas Houghton and CGS Chen Bingde. The conversation focused on humanitarian assistance/disaster response, an area often brought up with France as well in order to highlight the more benign aspects of China's military development and seek out areas of co-operation that may prove conciliatory.

An address by Ambassador Liu at Shrivenham in 2011 underlined the main area of co-operation between the UK and China, namely personnel exchanges, while his speech attempted to demonstrate the peaceful rise of the country, with an emphasis on defensive postures and (perhaps ironically) a heavy peppering of Sun Zi quotes to suggest a peaceful intent behind China's defence modernisation.

Germany

Military relations with Germany lie outside any formal negotiation mechanism. The foreign ministerial strategic dialogue, the second of which was held in December 2011, focuses largely on political and economic issues, although a communique released in 2010 mentioned a joint military dialogue and the importance of communication through the counter-piracy operations.

NATO

One further avenue for potential military dialogue between China and European nations is through NATO. Although Beijing largely prefers bilateral dialogue, this particular dialogue is attractive to China in order to discover more about NATO's operations in Afghanistan and Libya, both areas of concern to Beijing.

The main problem is the toxic legacy to the NATO-China relationship. The 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade continues to frame relations, while the recent tendency for NATO to engage in military intervention, ideologically at odds with China's recent insistence on non-interference, means there is little at first glance on which to co-operate.

However, there have been tentative mil-mil negotiations in recent years, with occasional meetings now evolved into a regular dialogue at the assistant secretary general level. More recently, military-to-military interactions have been stepped up. Early in 2012, the director general of the international military staff at NATO, Lt. Gen. Jürgen Bornemann, visited China, and the two sides agreed to hold annual

military staff talks. And at Beijing's initiative, some non-sensitive courses at NATO School and NATO Defense College were opened up to Chinese officers.

Exercises

Exercises with European countries have been restricted in the past, not only by the limited military-military relations, but also by the lack of Chinese power projection capability. It is therefore unsurprising that the PLAN has been at the forefront of encouraging Sino-European exercises, as the Chinese navy's newfound ability to extend its reach further overseas, and desire to practice those skills, have encouraged its deployment to out-of-area exercises.

The first such exercises took place in 2007 through the China Friendship series, involving a five-phase search-and-rescue exercise with France, a similar exercise with Spain and a brief, 40-minute sail with the Royal Navy. These were the first exercises with European states and the first exercises in the Mediterranean.

France and the UK were also involved in the Peace 11 multinational naval exercises hosted by Pakistan, alongside China.

Such exercises are few and far between; with little military knowledge to be gained from them, there is only the symbolic, diplomatic reason to hold such exercises and fit them into already busy defence diplomatic schedules.

The future for Sino-European mil-mil relations

All of this suggests that Sino-European mil-mil relations will remain limited, but contacts will grow. Bilateral relations will likely be favoured by China, particularly with the primary military powers of France and the UK, but NATO is another potential source of co-operation.

China is proving more amenable to some extent on the issues of defence transparency, and European states may therefore be able to leverage their position as external powers with few direct military or security interests in the region to encourage greater mil-mil co-operation. However, this will also limit the need for China to engage with them: ties are likely to grow more quickly with states in the Asia-Pacific region and the US in order to prevent tensions rising over issues such as the South China Sea.