

## The Impact on Military-to-Military Relations

*By Piin-Fen Kok*

It is not unfair to say that military-to-military exchanges tend to be the first casualty of souring China-U.S. relations. The Pentagon's latest annual report on military and security developments involving China throws yet another challenge in the way of repairing U.S.-China military relations that have been frayed since China suspended military-to-military exchanges in January over an announced U.S. arms sale to Taiwan.

The report comes on the heels of lingering military tensions between the United States and China in recent months over a series of incidents. They include the alleged bombing by North Korea of a South Korean warship and China's refusal to offer early condemnation of the attack; China's refusal to host a visit by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates; and, most recently, rising tensions in the Yellow Sea and South China Sea.

As in past years, China's Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs both issued statements objecting to the Pentagon report. They took issue with the report's purported exaggeration of the "China threat" and the mainland's military threat to Taiwan. Chinese scholars called the report "unprofessional" and rejected the report's contention that China continues to shun transparency in military affairs.

This year's report serves to reinforce the U.S. assessment of what it sees as continuing trends in China's military development. These trends include the growing capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the shift in the military balance in the mainland's favor vis-à-vis Taiwan, and the growing strategic interests (including economic interests) that China's force projection is seeking to protect on and beyond its borders.

One encouraging new addition to this latest report, however, is a section on U.S.-China military-to-military contacts, which emphasizes the importance of continued exchanges and cooperation between the two countries' militaries. It singles out specific areas for cooperation, including anti-piracy, international peacekeeping, and humanitarian and disaster relief. It also calls for enhanced dialogue and understanding in areas such as nuclear strategy, space, cybersecurity, international hot-spots, and maritime issues.

All these are important areas in which military confidence-building efforts are much needed, especially in light of the Pentagon's own assessment of China's military development. The report notes, for example, that the PLA is increasingly focused on military operations other than war; that offensive nuclear, cyber and space capabilities are "the only aspects of China's armed forces that currently could be used to pose a global threat"; and that maritime capabilities—including those that allow the PLA Navy to participate in international anti-piracy missions—are contributing to the PLA's power projection and modernization efforts.

But this positive appeal for sustained military-to-military contacts is tempered by unflattering references to China's motivations for such exchanges. They include China's presumed desire to gain "insights into potential U.S. vulnerabilities" and "to drive a wedge between the United States, its allies, and its partners, including Taiwan." And the report states in no uncertain terms that China's suspension of military exchanges is impeding the development of bilateral military relations.

Meanwhile, China puts the ball squarely in the United States' court by urging the latter to be more objective and "do more, not less" in promoting China-U.S. military relations.

In the final analysis, the onus falls on both sides to make the U.S.-China relationship a truly comprehensive one that includes healthy military-to-military relations. That would entail less rhetoric and posturing, and actually making the good faith effort to work with and talk to each other. One can hope that by the time the 2011 version of this report is issued, we might be a little closer to that state of affairs.

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