

U.S.-China Military Relations in an Era of Strategic Competition

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One of the most serious implications of a more competitive U.S.-China relationship is the potential for an accident or miscalculation involving the two states' military forces. The April 2001 EP-3 incident demonstrated how difficult it can be to resolve such an incident; with pressure on both sides not to appear weak to the other or a regional audience, the diplomatic fallout from a future incident might be even harder to address. As U.S. and Soviet leaders found during the Cold War, risk reduction talks and protocols were useful in hedging the risks of an unintended conflict. China and the United States have also made progress in this regard, but difficulties are appearing in implementing agreements already on the books. More work needs to be done to identify new areas of cooperation. This essay sketches how the return of great power competition is shaping U.S.-China military relations and argues that U.S. interests in engaging the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are likely to increase, not only to find mutually acceptable ways to manage conflict but also to message China's leaders and learn more about its military instrument. It then outlines several principles through which U.S. relations with the PLA should be recalibrated. Those include focusing risk reduction talks on the "art of the possible," stronger bureaucratic and international coordination of U.S. messaging, adopting a more flexible concept of reciprocity, pursuing "operational trust" through a stronger agenda of practical exchanges, and more astutely managing risks.

In April 2001, U.S. and Chinese leaders resolved the diplomatic fallout from a mid-air collision involving a Chinese J-8 fighter and a U.S. EP-3 surveillance aircraft near Hainan Island only with great difficulty. The Chinese pilot died while the U.S. crew was detained for 10 days before being released after a controversial U.S. statement of regret. In the following years, aircraft and naval vessels from both countries were involved in a number of near-misses. During two months in mid-2020, for instance, the United States reported "at least nine" incidents,

¹ This paper reflects only the author's views and not those of the National Defense University, Department of Defense, or U.S. government. For helpful comments on previous drafts, the author thanks M. Taylor Fravel, Frank Hoffman, Phillip C. Saunders, and participants in a University of Pennsylvania project on U.S.-China relations. Author contact: joel.wuthnow.civ@ndu.edu.

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including “unsafe and unprofessional” encounters with Chinese ships in the South China Sea.² Fortunately, none of these incidents resulted in fatalities. Yet it could be just a matter of time before another deadly episode occurs. Amid a new era of great power competition, the consequences of another fatal incident could be even harder to manage than it was 20 years ago.

As U.S. and Soviet leaders agreed during the late Cold War, risk reduction agreements and military dialogues were useful in establishing protocols for unplanned encounters and generating agreements on how crises could be handled.³ Since the mid-1990s, U.S. and Chinese defense officials have also discussed ways to reduce the risks of an accident or miscalculation, and agreed to rules governing unplanned aerial and maritime encounters. However, growing tensions are creating obstacles to a healthy military relationship. Chinese officials complain that the United States is acting in bad faith by increasing military operations and exercises near China, while U.S. officials contend that Chinese forces have violated existing agreements by harassing U.S. ships and aircraft. Those incidents and other concerns have led some to argue for fewer exchanges with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), or even to cancel them altogether.

This paper argues that increasing Sino-U.S. tensions warrant a recalibration of bilateral military exchanges, but not a precipitous drop much less a complete “decoupling.” Simply refusing to engage with an adversary is self-defeating because it would increase the risk of a needless conflict and sacrifice other important U.S. goals, including strategic messaging and

² Ryan Pickrell, “Pentagon Says China’s Military Is Challenging the U.S. With ‘Risky’ Run-Ins in the South China Sea During the Pandemic,” *Business Insider*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-chinese-militaries-tension-south-china-sea-during-pandemic-2020-5>.

³ Kurt M. Campbell, “The U.S.-Soviet Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities,” *Security Studies* 1:1 (1991), 109-131. For thoughts on how this experience might apply to the U.S.-China relationship, see Mark E. Redden and Phillip C. Saunders, *Managing Sino-U.S. and Naval Interactions: Cold War Lessons and New Avenues of Approach*, INSS China Strategic Perspectives 5, September 2012.

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information collection opportunities.⁴ Nevertheless, U.S. officials need to be judicious in these exchanges. The risks of engagement include providing the PLA with prestigious “photo ops” and allowing the PLA access to sensitive U.S. capabilities. How to prudently manage military relations is thus a question that future U.S. administrations will have to address. This discussion considers how the new era of great power competition is likely to impact military relations with the PLA and outlines a number of principles that should guide policy adjustments.

A New Era of Competition

U.S.-China military relations has often been influenced by trends in the broader political relationship.⁵ Following normalization in 1979, the United States provided arms and military training to the PLA that supported an alignment against the Soviet Union.⁶ The suspension of military contacts between 1989 and 1993 resulted from U.S. domestic pressures to scale back

⁴ In 2020, wary about the increasing chance of violence, Xi Jinping reportedly warned the PLA not to “fire the first shot” in the South China Sea. Wendy Wu and Minnie Chan, “South China Sea: Chinese Military Told Not to Fire the First Shot in Stand-off With U.S. Forces,” *South China Morning Post*, August 11, 2020.

⁵ Recent works include: Scott W. Harold, “Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability: A Strategy for Improving U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations,” *Asia Policy* 16 (2013): 103-138; Christopher D. Yung, “Continuity and Change in Sino-US Military-to-Military Relations,” in Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Simon Shen (eds.), *Conflict and Cooperation in Sino-US Relations: Change and Continuity, Causes and Cures* (New York: Routledge 2015), 204–224; James Nolan, “Why Can’t We Be Friends? Assessing the Operational Value of Engaging PLA Leadership,” *Asia Policy* 20 (2015): 45-79; Phillip C. Saunders and Julia Bowie, “U.S.-China Military Relations: Competition and Cooperation,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 5-6 (2016): 662-684; Roy D. Kamphausen with Jessica Drun, “Sino-U.S. Military-to-Military Relations,” in Travis Tanner and Wang Dong (eds.), *U.S.-China Relations in Strategic Domains* (Washington, DC: NBR, 2016), 103-118; Scott W. Harold, “Optimizing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (2019): 145-168; and Andrew S. Erickson, “U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations: Policy Considerations in a Changing Environment,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (2019): 123-144. For a third party perspective, see Jingdong Yuan, *Dragon and Eagle Entangled: Sino-U.S. Military Exchanges, 2001-2016* (Canberra: ASPI, 2017);

⁶ Shirley A. Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress: Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 1; David Beitelman, “Strategic Trust: Rethinking U.S.-China Military Relations,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Dalhousie University, 2018, 171-8. One of the earliest proponents of this policy was Michael Pillsbury, who argued that arms sales to and intelligence sharing with China could blunt the threat of Soviet aggression towards the United States by tying up Soviet forces in the Far East. See Michael Pillsbury, “U.S.-Chinese Military Ties?” *Foreign Policy* 20 (1975): 50-64.

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relations after the Tiananmen crackdown and the elimination of a common adversary.⁷ After the Cold War, the need to minimize the chance of a dangerous incident created a floor beneath which U.S. and Chinese leaders were unwilling to allow military relations to fall, while U.S. concerns about China's strategic ambitions and Beijing's objections to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and other policies produced a ceiling above which the relationship could not grow.

Within these boundaries, military relations ebbed and flowed in the 1990s and 2000s. The Clinton administration resumed exchanges and initiated new dialogues to promote stability after the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis.⁸ The George W. Bush administration curtailed exchanges after the EP-3 incident but later used military dialogues to encourage China to become a "responsible stakeholder."⁹ On the Chinese side, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periodically cancelled engagements due to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and external shocks such as the 1999 accidental NATO bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade.¹⁰ The Obama administration basically accepted Xi Jinping's goal of defining military relations as a pillar of a "new-type great power relationship," though it ultimately rejected that label. The 2013 Sunnylands summit between Obama and Xi created an impetus on both sides to look for new initiatives, resulting in agreements on rules of behavior for maritime and air encounters over the next two years.¹¹

Increasing Sino-U.S. competition has led the pendulum to swing back to a smaller set of military engagements. Strategic competition is the outgrowth of the shift in material power in China's favor and an action-reaction cycle of policies instigated on both sides, including

⁷ David Finkelstein, *The Military Dimensions of U.S.-China Security Cooperation: Retrospective and Future Prospects* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2010), 10.

⁸ Kurt Campbell and Richard Weitz, "The Limits of U.S.-China Military Cooperation," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no.1 (2005-6): 182.

⁹ Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts*, 2; Saunders and Bowie, "U.S.-China Military Relations," 666-7.

¹⁰ Finkelstein, *The Military Dimensions of U.S.-China Security Cooperation*, 18-19.

¹¹ The 2014 MOU, which contained an annex on maritime encounters, can be found here:

https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/141112_MemorandumOfUnderstandingRegardingRules.pdf. A separate annex on air encounters was signed in September 2015.

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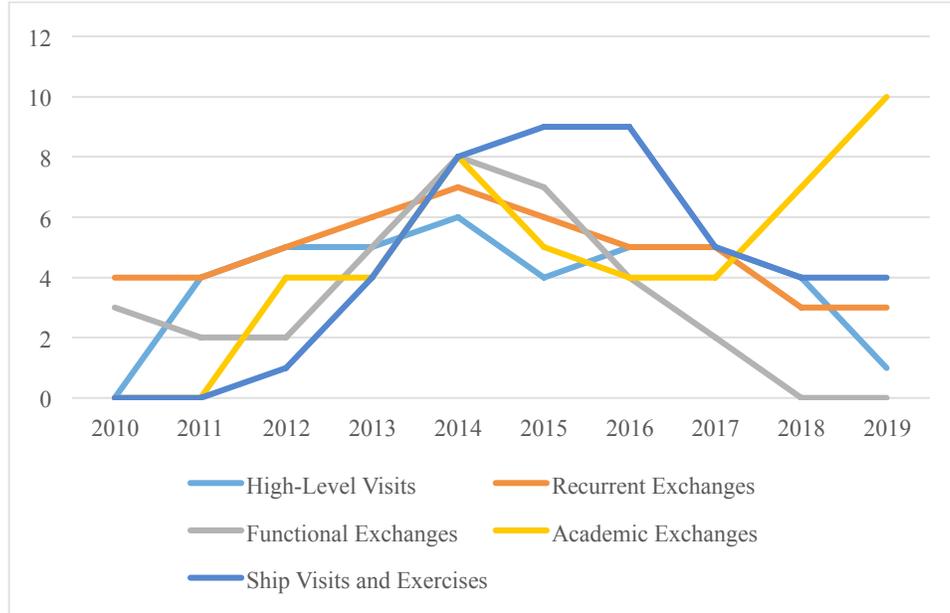
Beijing's economic protectionism, expanding military power, and bid for regional and global influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, and the rebalancing of U.S. military capabilities to the region under recent administrations.¹² The focus of U.S. policy in Asia was spelled out in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which argued that China is seeking “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”¹³ President Trump was mainly focused on the U.S.-China trade imbalance and not eager to step in to “make a deal” on military issues.

Increasing friction led most types of U.S.-China military exchanges to decline after 2017. Data reported in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)'s annual reports on the PLA are incomplete and inconsistent, but enough information is available from this and other sources to identify general patterns (see figure). One trend is a sharp reduction of contacts between operational forces through naval port visits and bilateral exercises. Functional dialogues have also sharply decreased. Senior leaders continue to meet, though the heyday of an average of four to five key leader exchanges per year has passed. There are continuing policy dialogues, but some recent initiatives such as the Joint Staff Dialogue Mechanism and the Army-Army Dialogue Mechanism have not lasted. While data for 2020 are not yet available, it is clear that the impact of COVID-19 will create another factor for limiting in-person exchanges.

¹² These policies are feeding off of each other to a certain degree. For a discussion, see Joel Wuthnow, “China, the United States, and the Indo-Pacific Security Dilemma,” *China International Strategy Review* 1 (2019): 99-110. However, it is worth noting that Beijing does not portray its regional policies in competitive terms as the U.S. does. See “China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation,” Xinhua, January 11, 2017, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2017/01/11/content_281475539078636.htm.

¹³ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018), 2.

Figure: U.S.-China Military Exchanges, 2010-2019



Sources: 2010-2015 data: Phillip C. Saunders and Julia Bowie, “U.S.-China Military Relations: Competition and Cooperation,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 5-6 (2016): 662-684. 2015-2019 data: annual OSD China Military Power reports (2016-2020), various U.S. press releases and media reports (2019).

Growing Sino-U.S. tensions have been at least partially responsible for the decline. U.S. officials have cancelled or failed to renew events due to the desire not to reward provocative Chinese actions and heightened sensitivities about contributing to PLA modernization by allowing access to sensitive U.S. military sites.¹⁴ Bilateral frictions have also led Beijing to cancel exchanges, including China’s suspension of the Joint Staff Dialogue Mechanism, withdrawal of the visiting Chinese navy chief from the United States, and postponement of a U.S. naval port visit to Hong Kong as responses to U.S. sanctions on the PLA in 2018.¹⁵ In the

¹⁴ Helene Cooper, “U.S. Disinvites China From Military Exercise Amid Rising Tensions,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/23/world/asia/us-china-rimpac-military-exercise-tensions.html>.

¹⁵ “China Postpones Military Dialogue in Protest against U.S. ‘Sanctions,’ China Military Online, September 25, 2018, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-09/25/content_9296957.htm.

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author's experience, the quality of some of the remaining exchanges has declined as both sides scale back agendas and as the larger problems in the bilateral relationship are addressed.

Nevertheless, competition has not led to a complete rupture. Dozens of events continue to be held annually. Both sides continue to perceive significant benefits, though their goals differ in some respects. Beijing argues that the military relationship serves as a “stabilizer for relations between the two countries and hence contributes to the China-U.S. relationship based on coordination, cooperation, and stability.”¹⁶ Its specific goals include reducing the likelihood of unintended conflict (understanding that a clash could threaten Chinese economic growth), gaining prestige through participation in U.S. exercises or high-level visits, deriving insights into the U.S. military to address capability gaps, creating fissures between the United States and its allies and partners, and developing leverage to influence U.S. policy by withholding or canceling events.¹⁷

The U.S. Defense Department has consistently identified four main objectives for military relations.¹⁸ First is risk reduction and conflict management. Second is encouraging China to adopt less assertive policies through policy dialogues. Third is improving U.S. knowledge about China through site visits, discussions with PLA interlocutors, and participation in educational programs. Fourth is pursuing practical cooperation. In sum, strategic competition is leading to a more fractious military relationship, but not a divorce.

¹⁶ “Full Text of the 2019 Defense White Paper,” Xinhua, July 24, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

¹⁷ Harold, “Optimizing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship,” 156-157. For a Chinese view, see Zhao Xiaozhuo, “More to Expect from a New Type of China-U.S. Military Relationship,” *China-U.S. Focus*, April 7, 2014, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-new-type-of-china-us-military-relationship-more-to-expect>.

¹⁸ Based on a review of the 2010-2020 annual OSD reports on the PLA, which are required by Congress to enunciate U.S. interests in military exchanges.

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U.S. Priorities and the Impact of Competition

Looking ahead, the basic question confronting U.S. policymakers is defining the purpose the military relationship with China should serve in a competitive era. Some will argue that the benefits of any contact are outweighed by the risks of legitimizing or enabling an adversary, while others may be more comfortable continuing business as usual (the bureaucracy, after all, tends to continue to do the same things absent high-level intervention). In this section, I argue that strategic competition will have a paradoxical effect on U.S. interests: each of the priorities pursued by recent administrations will not only endure, but become *more* important; however, strains in U.S.-China relations will make each of those goals harder to achieve, thus requiring a recalibration of U.S. aims, policies, and activities.

The most important U.S. interests are in risk reduction and conflict management. U.S. forces have long conducted military operations along China's periphery to oppose excessive Chinese territorial claims, deter aggressive behavior, and signal that the United States is willing to bear risks to support its allies and partners. China has responded by shadowing or harassing U.S. naval ships and military aircraft.¹⁹ Those dynamics will intensify as both sides strengthen their military posture and test the other's resolve. A consequence is an increased risk of accidents or miscalculations despite the preference of leaders on both sides to avoid a conflict. If crises do erupt, leaders could be less willing to back down for fear of emboldening the other or appearing weak to domestic or regional audiences.²⁰ These dynamics increase the value of rules of behavior, risk reduction talks, and frameworks and protocols for de-escalation if a crisis occurs.

¹⁹ For a discussion of recent incidents, see Harold, "Optimizing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship," 153-4.

²⁰ For a general discussion of crisis instability in U.S.-China relations, see Avery Goldstein, "First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations," *International Security* 37:4 (2013), 49-89. See also Michael Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2006).

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Nevertheless, risk reduction efforts will be harder as officials fault the other for dangerous incidents or discount the other side's explanations. China, whose coercive strategy rests in part on challenging U.S. operations, has fewer incentives to reach new agreements or abide by existing ones that limit its flexibility. Beijing is also unlikely to agree to new rules that constrain its paramilitary forces, such as the Coast Guard and maritime militia, which have the lead role in enforcing China's maritime claims and play a coercive role by challenging U.S. operations (just as Beijing has avoided a binding code of conduct for the South China Sea).²¹ Understanding that Washington has a greater interest in enforcing rules of behavior in contested regions, Beijing is likely to hold those talks at risk to achieve its own agenda, such as reducing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, or as a signal of discontent.²²

A second U.S. objective is shaping China's behavior through strategic communications. A competitive strategy implies a need to strengthen the credibility of U.S. commitments to its allies and partners and to deter Chinese aggression. Direct U.S.-China exchanges play a valuable role in those respects by allowing leaders to underscore U.S. commitments, clarify "red lines," communicate the consequences for aggression, and express support for rule-abiding behavior. However, fewer senior level visits and dialogues imply fewer chances for U.S. leaders to convey those messages, and fewer functional exchanges will impede outreach to other PLA audiences, such as frontline commanders and mid-level officers.

A third U.S. goal is learning directly about China and the PLA. The value of this goal is increasing in two ways. First, in order to compete more effectively, U.S. officials need accurate information about China's perspectives and military capabilities. Military-to-military

²¹ Andrew Erickson argues that Washington should try to close the "loophole" in which the maritime militia is exempt from existing bilateral rules of behavior. Erickson, "U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations," 138.

²² Those asymmetric interests were on display in Beijing's willingness to cancel the Joint Staff Dialogue Mechanism in 2018.

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engagements provide opportunities to gain insights about PLA doctrine, organization, policies, perspectives, and challenges—though much less on actual military hardware—that are harder to obtain from other sources, and to develop a better understanding of the drivers behind Chinese military activities.²³ Second, those responsible for developing and implementing U.S. strategy towards China benefit from in-depth exposure to the country. Participation in long-term study abroad programs can help produce a more granular picture of China’s political, social, and economic conditions, especially when students are able to travel widely and interact with citizens from all backgrounds.

Acquiring those insights is becoming more difficult as both sides reduce access. U.S. officials have long been frustrated with China’s lack of reciprocity, driven by the PLA’s tradition of opacity and Chinese concerns that equivalent access would disproportionately benefit the United States.²⁴ This problem has intensified in a competitive era: the PLA is trying to maximize opportunities to observe U.S. strengths while limiting opportunities for U.S. visitors to better understand the PLA.²⁵ Meanwhile, U.S. leaders are wary about granting access to U.S. military sites, giving the PLA even less reason to open its own doors. In addition, study abroad opportunities are narrowing due to Chinese policies that restrict the ability of foreign officers to attend PLA courses,²⁶ and restrictive policies on both sides due to counterintelligence and political concerns.

²³ For a discussion, see Kevin Pollpeter, *U.S.-China Security Management: Assessing the Military-to-Military Relationship* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2004)

²⁴ The U.S. military tends to be more transparent, giving PLA observers less insight from visits to military installations or access to U.S. military officials. For a discussion on reciprocity, see Nolan, “Why Can’t We Be Friends,” 62-3; Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts*, 36.

²⁵ U.S. participants in military exchanges may be granted access to “showcase” units, but will have less opportunity to visit ordinary units, as they were in the past. Pollpeter, *U.S.-China Security Management*, 57.

²⁶ At the PLA NDU, foreign students are segregated into a separate campus and have limited exchange with their PLA counterparts. However, there is some mixing of foreign and Chinese students at other PME institutions.

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Regarding the fourth U.S. objective, bilateral drills and cooperative activities are taking on added importance by promoting what former Pacific Fleet Intelligence Director Dale Rielage calls “operational trust,” referring to the expectation that another country’s military service is “safe, competent and reliable in conducting operations.”²⁷ Cultivating such attitudes will be critical in allowing the two navies (or other services) to operate safely near each other and render assistance. Hands-on events thus promote the first U.S. goal—risk reduction—from the bottom up. However, these exchanges will be harder to sustain because of U.S. concerns about bestowing legitimacy on the PLA and the view that they are a waste of scarce resources, creating incentives to cancel these events or not agree to them in the first place.

Recalibrating the U.S. Agenda

Considering how best to evaluate, prioritize, and pursue U.S. interests in relations with the PLA can be challenging due to high staff turnover in relevant policy offices, a preoccupation with the mechanics of individual engagements rather than systematic thinking about the entire relationship, and a focus on developing other aspects of U.S. strategy in Asia.²⁸ However, the risks of failing to properly manage these relations, combined with the growing challenges described above, mean that policymakers will need to develop a cohesive set of principles for recalibrating U.S. policy.²⁹ This section outlines several possibilities.

²⁷ Dale Rielage, “An Imperative to Engage,” *Proceedings* 141 (April 2015), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015/april/imperative-engage>. Rielage, at the time of writing, was the director of intelligence for U.S. Pacific Fleet.

²⁸ For instance, the military relationship is scarcely mentioned in the major lines of effort described in the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*.

²⁹ Aaron Mehta, “The Pentagon Has Created a New Office Solely Focused on China. Is That a Good Idea?” *Defense News*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2019/10/01/the-pentagon-has-created-a-new-office-solely-focused-on-china-is-that-a-good-idea/>. This office provides overall coordination for the military relationship.

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Focusing risk reduction on the “art of the possible”

The top U.S. interest will continue to center on preventing incidents and managing them if they occur. This requires sustaining productive talks, identifying new areas for cooperation and dialogue, and avoiding areas unlikely to yield results. Risk reduction will undoubtedly continue to be a focus of high-level engagements. At the institutional level, the two sides should sustain the annual Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) plenary and semi-annual MMCA working groups. Those sessions are useful because they allow mid-level officers the chance to review recent incidents, discuss ways to improve safety between naval forces and aviators, and explain how each interprets and implements agreements such as the multilateral Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and the 2014-15 bilateral memoranda of understanding on air and maritime encounters.³⁰

Periodic discussions should be augmented by practical cooperation. Some thought should be given to a renewal of naval drills based on CUES, which often coincide with port visits.³¹ If port visits in mainland China, Hong Kong, or the United States are not feasible, these drills could be staged in the Gulf of Aden or in other areas where both navies are operating.³² Some exercises could also be planned through organizations such as ASEAN or NATO.³³ Those exercises not only help build “operational trust,” but are also helpful in associating the PLA Navy with international rules of behavior. This creates a wider expectation that China will abide by those

³⁰ The text of CUES can be found at https://www.jag.navy.mil/distrib/instructions/CUES_2014.pdf.

³¹ “U.S., Chinese Navies Practice Search and Rescue, CUES,” U.S. Pacific Fleet, August 15, 2016, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/130061>.

³² Joint exercises have been held in the Gulf of Aden, but prior to the signing of the CUES agreement in 2014. See Hendrick Simoes, “U.S., Chinese Sailors Participate in Anti-Piracy Exercise,” *Stars and Stripes*, August 25, 2013, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us-chinese-sailors-participate-in-anti-piracy-exercise-1.237271>.

³³ “China Navy Holds First Joint Anti-Piracy Drill With NATO,” Reuters, November 26, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-nato/china-navy-holds-first-joint-anti-piracy-drill-with-nato-idUSKBN0TG08H20151127>; Gregory Johnson, “ADMM-Plus Exercise Strengthens Maritime Security,” U.S. Pacific Fleet, May 13, 2019, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/110741>.

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norms and increases the reputational costs when it fails to do so. Washington should also applaud other states who hold their own exercises with China based on CUES.³⁴

Risk reduction talks should also extend to other areas based on common interests. One example is preparing for a large-scale crisis on the Korean Peninsula. While protocols covering encounters between air and naval forces have been established, there are no similar agreements for ground forces. Without reliable communications at the tactical level, U.S. and PLA units may be unable to identify friend and foe, precipitating missteps that could spark a wider conflagration. Beijing has previously been unwilling to hold direct military talks on Korea contingencies in order to protect its leverage with Pyongyang, but PLA interlocutors acknowledge the need for such coordination. Hosting simulations based on historical or fictional scenarios that bear a resemblance to a Korea crisis could provide both sides with insights into how the other would operate and how it would be possible to establish communications.

The harder question is determining where *not* to seek additional cooperation. It is tempting to propose new rules covering “white hull” ships, but it is doubtful that China would agree due to its interests in maximizing operational flexibility. Washington could still raise these ideas as a bargaining chip or to highlight Chinese intransigence, but expectations that Beijing will agree to such proposals should be low. Another frequently mentioned idea is establishing hotlines between operational commanders, e.g. Indo-Pacific Command and China’s theater commands, to achieve rapid de-escalation. This would suit the U.S. system, in which combatant commanders have wide discretion. However, even if such a mechanism could be established, it

³⁴ See, e.g., “Singaporean Warship RSS Intrepid Visits Qingdao,” China Military Online, May 7, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-05/07/content_8025256.htm.

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would be of limited value due to China's centralized decision-making system and Beijing's poor track record of using the existing hotlines with the United States and other countries.³⁵

Sharpening strategic communications

In a milieu of declining exchanges, U.S. leaders need to think how to maximize the messaging value of the remaining engagements. Counterpart visits can be helpful in underscoring U.S. commitments, just as senior PLA leaders use them to deliver “homilies” on Taiwan and other issues,³⁶ but are less effective in signaling during tense periods. High-level visits are scheduled far in advance based on mutual convenience rather than on real world events that require direct communications and are ripe for cancellation as tensions rise. Video teleconferences, which have been used to facilitate several ad-hoc conversations between the two naval chiefs in recent years, are potentially more useful in ensuring that messages reach their intended audience at the right time, with the caveat that there is no guarantee that Beijing will agree to the call.³⁷ More frequent use of this technology would also reduce the direct and opportunity costs associated with travel.

U.S. officials should also consider how to make better use of Track 1.5 dialogues. Such meetings can help explain U.S. positions—not only to PLA interlocutors, but also to civilians from key government think tanks, who are often influential in informing Chinese views on U.S. policy—and float potential solutions while giving both sides the cover of discussing matters in

³⁵ For instance, China responded to the 2001 EP-3 incident by cancelling the MMCA and demanding that the United States cease reconnaissance flights. Randall Schriver, “Bound to Fail,” *The Washington Times*, July 25, 2011, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/jul/25/bound-to-fail/>. See also Nolan, “Why Can’t We Be Friends?” 71-2; Kan, *U.S.-China Military Contacts*, 25-6.

³⁶ This has been a standard complaint among U.S. participants in senior-level dialogues. See Nolan, “Why Can’t We Be Friends?” 66-7.

³⁷ See, e.g., Christopher P. Cavas, “U.S., Chinese Naval Chiefs to Talk,” *Defense News*, October 28, 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2015/10/28/us-chinese-naval-chiefs-to-talk/>.

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an “academic” setting.³⁸ This requires better synchronization of Track 1.5 and official engagements on the U.S. side (though in the author’s judgment, China has already achieved a high level of coordination in this respect). Some thought should also be given to whether, and how, video teleconferencing can be used to facilitate more frequent contact between government-affiliated scholars, especially during periods when communications between the two sides at all levels is needed to better understand each side’s perspectives and bottom lines.

Stronger international and interagency coordination would also help in reinforcing U.S. messages. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, India, Vietnam, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia all have their own concerns about Chinese behavior which they express through their own relations with the PLA.³⁹ Coordination on messaging with these states makes sense in principle, but may not always be possible in practice. One way to amplify U.S. messages with minimal logistical requirements would be to strengthen coordination with like-minded countries prior to and during multilateral forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue and the Xiangshan Forum, when many of those third parties hold meetings with the PLA on the margins. Signaling will also be more effective if well-coordinated within the Department of Defense and across the interagency.⁴⁰ Inconsistencies not only weaken the credibility of U.S. messages, but also provide Beijing opportunities to exploit perceived divisions in the U.S. bureaucracy in order to achieve

³⁸ On the role of foreign policy think tanks in Chinese policymaking, see Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2010), 34-40. There is also some evidence that civilian research institutes have been consulted in formulating China’s approach to mil-mil relations. Saunders and Bowie, “U.S.-China Military Relations,” 677-8.

³⁹ See Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy 2003-2016: Trends and Implications* (Washington, DC: NDU, 2016).

⁴⁰ As a negative example, U.S. messaging on freedom of navigation operations in the last few years of the Obama administration was clouded by inconsistent rhetoric from different offices. Joel Wuthnow, “Beyond Imposing Costs: Recalibrating U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Asia Policy* 24 (2017): 136. This is also a comparative strength of the PLA, which tends to strongly enforce consistent messages. See also Erickson, “U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations,” 134-5.

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other objectives. Preventing those challenges requires strict message enforcement, especially at the Track 1 level.⁴¹

More consideration should also be given to the circumstances, if any, under which the U.S. side should cancel future events for signaling purposes. The logic of dis-inviting the PLA from RIMPAC 2018 was that it demonstrated a willingness to impose costs on a priority issue for the PLA Navy. Nevertheless, it is not clear that this decision actually achieved a concrete benefit: China continued to militarize its South China Sea outposts and to harass foreign vessels in that theater in the following months.⁴² U.S. policymakers will have to weigh the benefits in terms of imposing costs against the downsides, including the risk that Beijing would respond by curtailing exchanges of higher priority for U.S. policy, sacrificing important messaging and learning opportunities, providing fodder for Chinese narratives construing Washington as an aggressor, and the reality that such events, once turned off, are hard to turn back on. At worst, cancellations could be perceived as only a token gesture, thus weakening Chinese and allied perceptions of U.S. willingness to pay a cost in standing up to Beijing.

Broadening the definition of reciprocity

It is completely appropriate to expect Beijing to provide access to PLA units and interlocutors in exchange for similar opportunities afforded to the Chinese side. Access can help to fill in key information gaps about the PLA and provide opportunities for rising U.S. leaders to better understand PLA perspectives and China as a whole. Beijing has an interest in accommodating at least some U.S. requests, because the PLA desires continued access for information gathering and messaging purposes, and to give its own officers first-hand knowledge of the United States. If the competition intensifies, however, U.S. concerns about China's

⁴¹ More flexibility is useful in Track 1.5 settings to allow participants to float trial balloons and gauge reactions.

⁴² *Annual Report to Congress*, 73-4.

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unwillingness to extend similar levels of access will become more prominent. Those concerns could threaten counterpart visits and other exchanges if formal reciprocity becomes a prerequisite for all exchanges.

As a practical matter, policymakers will need to consider when reciprocity should be demanded and when flexibility is warranted. U.S. observers can sometimes learn *more* than their Chinese counterparts even if a visit is not fully reciprocal because of the imbalance in transparency. Much of what U.S. hosts share is simply information already in the public domain, but the reverse is less true due to the PLA's opacity. Accepting engagements that are not truly reciprocal should be based on a consideration of the insights that are likely to be gained, the significance of that information, and the costs of whatever might have to be disclosed to the PLA to gain that access. Moreover, the contents of visits that are agreed to in principle can always be fleshed out later or re-negotiated, and U.S. officials should not hesitate to push hard to secure an agenda that maximizes the learning value of engagements (just as PLA attachés typically push quite hard to secure their own preferences).

Moreover, U.S. and Chinese participants sometimes benefit from different *types* of access. One example concerns the author's experience with recent military educational exchanges. Students at China's National Defense University often ask to visit U.S. military bases and have less interest in professional discussions. Conversely, U.S. war college students prize back-and-forth discussions with Chinese scholars and have less interest in visiting PLA "showcase" units. Thus, strict reciprocity in terms of equivalent access would not serve either party's goals. The same might be true of senior-level exchanges: U.S. leaders tend to emphasize substantive or intellectual engagements while their counterparts seem to value "photo ops." In these cases,

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Washington should seek what Kevin Pollpeter calls “value-based reciprocity” in which both sides achieve some of their agenda, even if that means granting different sorts of access.⁴³

Tying practical cooperation to “operational trust”

U.S. and Chinese scholars frequently argue that non-traditional security missions should be a natural focus for military cooperation.⁴⁴ There is a long list of potential options, ranging from counter-terrorism to disaster relief, but U.S. leaders should focus first and foremost on those that engender “operational trust,” thus tying these events to U.S. interests in risk reduction. Some thought should be given to reintroducing bilateral maritime search and rescue exchanges or counter-piracy drills combined with practicing CUES protocols. The benefits of such engagements would be matched with fairly low costs: those exchanges would not be especially prestigious,⁴⁵ would not contribute much if anything to PLA modernization, would be unlikely to alienate U.S. allies, and require limited resources.

Participation in multilateral exercises involving China needs to be carefully considered. Chinese and U.S. forces still participate in several annual multilateral exercises hosted by other countries, including Cobra Gold (Thailand), Kowari (Australia), and Khaan Quest (Mongolia). In these cases, U.S. policy needs to weigh the implications for Sino-U.S. military relations and take into consideration host country interests. For instance, Australia has attempted to use the

⁴³ Kevin Pollpeter argues that instead of asking to visit the same type of installation that the PLA visited in the United States, U.S. officials can ask to visit a different unit where they can gain more insight. Pollpeter, *U.S.-China Security Management*, 98.

⁴⁴ For previous suggestions on enhancing non-traditional security cooperation, see Harold, “Expanding Contacts to Enhance Durability,” 113-131; Erickson, “U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations,” 141; Finkelstein, Saunders, and Schriver, *The Military and Defense Dimensions of United States Relations with China*, 43; *China-U.S. Relations*, 49.

⁴⁵ However, Beijing would have to perceive at least some propaganda value to be willing to participate and would likely publicize even very small events in major PLA media.

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trilateral Kowari exercise to balance its relations with both China and the United States.⁴⁶ Simply pulling out of these events due to frictions with Beijing, or requesting that the PLA be confined to observer status or otherwise marginalized, could unintentionally damage U.S. relations with the host countries. Such considerations will become increasingly salient as U.S. competitive strategy in the region depends on healthy relations with those states.

Practicing astute risk management

Military relations with China are a two-way street; as Andrew Erickson notes, “if China were not gaining something of value from defense ties, it would not agree to participate.”⁴⁷ While the two sides’ interests sometimes coincide, there are other cases where they do not, as when China threatens to cancel events to demand changes in U.S. policy, pulls out of exchanges to signal its dissatisfaction, uses participation in prestigious exercises to blunt justified criticisms of aggressive actions in regional disputes, and gains up-close insights into how a top-tier military operates. Sustaining cooperation implies a willingness to accept at least some risks that result from Beijing’s pursuit of its own agenda. In an era defined by a preoccupation with sharpening U.S. competitive advantages, however, policymakers will have to consider how U.S. objectives can be achieved in ways that minimize those risks.

The 2000 National Defense Authorization Act provides general guidance on the types of issues where cooperation requires Secretary of Defense-level authorization, essentially discouraging contacts in sensitive areas such as joint warfighting or advanced logistics.⁴⁸ There is also a vetting process managed by OSD that ensures that defense contacts meet certain legal

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Katie Howe, “A Quiet Kowari: U.S., Australia, and China Trilateral Military Exercise,” *The Diplomat*, September 30, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/a-quiet-kowari-us-australia-and-china-trilateral-military-exercise/>.

⁴⁷ Erickson, “U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations,” 111.

⁴⁸ For the text, as amended in January 2020, see <https://legcounsel.house.gov/Comps/106-65.pdf> (pp. 18-19).

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and policy requirements.⁴⁹ However, formal guidance can do only so much to protect U.S. equities. Much of the onus should be on the individual commands and agencies, and the participants themselves. This means that those envisioning engagements with the PLA need to clearly articulate the potential risks and explain their risk mitigation approaches. OSD can play a valuable role in this respect by compiling and circulating best practices from previous engagements and managing after-action reports; this would be especially valuable given staff turnover and for those with less experience dealing with the PLA.

An aspect of risk mitigation that has not received enough attention is the role of coordination with third countries. The U.S. military has established regulations for managing the release of sensitive information to the PLA, but it is less clear that this is the case for others. It is of little value if Washington withholds critical insights but the PLA is able to gain them through exchanges with U.S. allies that possess similar capabilities. Discussions on how those states can pursue their own goals while avoiding unintentionally enabling PLA modernization would be useful. Broader coordination can also help reduce the possibility that China will be able to use military relations to drive wedges between the United States and its allies (e.g., by verifying that holding a proposed exercise does not exclude or cause alarm in a third country).⁵⁰

Conclusion

Sino-U.S. military relations are unlikely to rebound to the level of cooperation achieved during the latter half of the Obama administration, regardless of who wins the 2020 election. Policymakers will have to safeguard important equities in an environment in which cancellations

⁴⁹ Erickson, "U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations," 127.

⁵⁰ One scholar reports that many of his regional interlocutors had concerns that increasing U.S.-China military engagements could come at the expense of their country's interests. Harold, "Optimizing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship," 160-1.

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of key exchanges are becoming more frequent, distrust is on the rise, appetite for outreach to a perceived adversary is low, attention and resources are diverted to other priorities, and neither side is willing to make concessions that they perceive would put them at a comparative disadvantage. Nevertheless, both sides correctly perceive the dangers in ignoring this part of the bilateral relationship and will have incentives to retain at least a modest schedule of annual and ad-hoc exchanges, even if their objectives and rationales for these events sometimes diverge. For now, U.S. officials should focus less on individual engagements, and more on the basic questions that they will have to address in this new era.

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Appendix: Key U.S.-China Military Engagements, 2014-2019

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Senior U.S. Counterpart Visits to China						
SECDEF	Hagel (Apr.)				Mattis (June)	
CJCS				Dunford (Aug.)		
Service Chief	Odierno (Army) (Feb.); Greenert (Navy)(July)		Richardson (Navy) (July); Milley (Army) (Aug.)			Richardson (Navy) (Jan.)
COCOM / service comp. (4-star)		Robinson (PACAF)(June) ; Harris (PACOM) (Nov.); Swift (PACFLT) (Nov.)	Swift (PACFLT) (Aug.); Brown (USARPAC) (Nov.)	Swift (PACFLT) (June)	Brown (USARPAC) (Nov.)	
Senior PLA Counterpart Visits to U.S.						
MINDEF					Wei Fenghe (Nov.)	
GSD or JSD (Dir. Or Dep.)	Fang Fenghui (May); Sun Jianguo (DCGS) (Nov.)			Shao Yuanming (DJSD) (Nov.)		
CMC VC		Fan Changlong (June)				
Service Chief					Han Weiguo (Army) (May)	
Theater CDR	Huang Guoxian (Nanjing MRAF)	Li Zuocheng (Chengdu MR)(May)	Zhao Zongqi (WTC)(Oct.)	Yuan Yubai (STC)(Sept.); Zhang Jian (STC Army) (Nov.)		
Key Leader Engagements in 3rd Countries						
Various	Greenert-Wu (WPNS)(Apr.); Locklear-Gao (CHOD) (Nov.)	Carter-Chang (ADMM+)(Nov.)	Harris-Sun (CHOD)(Sept.)		Mattis-Wei (ADMM+)(Oct.)	Shanahan-Wei (SLD)(May) Esper-Wei (ADMM+) (Nov.)
Video Teleconference/Defense Telephone Link						
Various		Greenert-Wu (Aug.), Richardson-Wu	Dunford-Fang (May)	Richardson-Shen (July), Joint Staff J5/DJSD (Nov.)	Dunford-Li (Jan.), Richardson-Shen (June, Dec.)	Milley-Li (Nov.)
Major Recurring Dialogues						
MMCA Plenary		Nov. (U.S.)	Nov. (China)	Nov. (U.S.)	Dec. (U.S.)	Nov. (U.S.)
DPCT	Oct. (China)	Feb. (U.S.)	Jan. (China)	Jan. (U.S.)	Dec. (U.S.)	Jan. '20

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						(China)
JSDM				Nov. (U.S.)	<i>Cancelled</i>	
AADM		Nov. (China)	Dec. (U.S.)	Nov. (U.S.)		
APSD		Mar. (U.S.)		Dec. (China)		May (U.S.)
SSD	Jan. (China); July (China)	June (U.S.)	May (U.S.); June (China)			
DCT	Oct. (U.S.)					
JSST	Oct. (U.S.)					
DSD					June (U.S.)	
Bilateral Exercises						
Various	C-Piracy (Aden)(Dec.), CUES Drill (Aug.)	DME (Jan.), CUES Drill (Feb.)	DME (Nov.)(China), CUES Drill (Aug.)	DME (Nov.)(U.S.)	DME (Nov.) (China)	DME (Nov.) (U.S.)
Multilateral Exercises						
Various	Cobra Gold (Jan.)(Thai), RIMPAC (Jun)(U.S.),	Kowari (Oct.)(Australia), Cobra Gold (Feb.)(Thai), Khaan Quest (June)(Mongolia);	RIMPAC(June) (Hawaii); Kowari (Sep.)(Australia), Khaan Quest (May)(Mongolia), Cobra Gold (Feb.)(Thailand)	Kowari (Aug.)(Australia), Khaan Quest (Aug.)(Mongolia), Cobra Gold (Feb.)(Thailand)	Kowari (Sep.)(Australia), Khaan Quest (June)(Mongolia), Cobra Gold (Feb.)(Thailand)	Kowari (Aug.)(Australia), Khaan Quest (June)(Mongolia), Cobra Gold (Feb.)(Thailand)
Naval Port Visits in Both Countries						
Various	3x PLAN ships to San Diego (Aug.); <i>Blue Ridge</i> to Qingdao (Aug.)	<i>Blue Ridge</i> (Zhanjiang)(Apr.), <i>Stethem</i> (Qingdao)(July), 1x PLAN ship to Hawaii (Oct.), 3x PLAN ships to Florida and Hawaii (Nov.- Dec.), 1x PLAN ship to San Diego (Nov.), <i>Stethem</i> (Shanghai (Nov.)	<i>Blue Ridge</i> (Shanghai)(May); <i>Benfold</i> (Qingdao)(Aug.); 3x PLAN ships to San Diego (Dec.);	<i>Sterett</i> to Zhanjiang (June)		
Major U.S. Academic Delegations to China						
Various	Capstone to China	Air War College (Mar.), Capstone (Aug.),	Air War College (Feb.), NWC (Apr.), MWC (May), Capstone (May)	Air War College (Feb.), NWC (Apr.), MWC (May), Capstone (May)	AWC (Jan.), Air War College (Apr.), Capstone (May), MWC (May)	Air War College, NWC, Capstone, MWC, NDU President, Naval War C.
Major PLA Academic Delegations to the U.S.						
Various	PLA NDU Dragons to U.S.	PLAAFCC (Apr.)			PLAAFCC (Apr.), NDU Dragons (May), AMS	NDU Dragons, NDU Tigers, PLAAFCC, PLANCC

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					(Dec.)	
Major Functional Dialogues in Both Countries						
Various	PACOM Mid-Level Officers to China (Feb.), PLA Mid- Level Officers to U.S. (May),	PACOM Mil Medicine Delegation (Jan.), PLAN Prospective CO Delegation (Feb.), Peacekeeping Exchange (May), Peacekeeping Exchange (Oct.), PLA Mid-Level Officers (Aug.), USN Prospective COs to China (Oct.)	PLA Mid- Level Officers (Oct.), National Defense Students (Oct.), Infectious Disease Exchange (U.S.) (May), Peacekeeping Exchange (Dec.)	Submarine Workshop (U.S.)(May), PLA Military Court Delegation (May)		

Source: Annual OSD reports to Congress on the PLA (2014-2018); various U.S. press releases (2019).

Legend: ADMM+-ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus; AWC-Army War College; CHOD-Chiefs of Defense; CUES-Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea; DCGS-Deputy Chief of the General Staff; DJSD-Deputy Director, Joint Staff Department; DME-Disaster Management Exchange; MR-Military Region; MRAF-Military Region Air Force; MWC-Marine Corps War College; NDU-National Defense University; NWC-National War College; PACAF-U.S. Pacific Air Forces; PACOM-Pacific Command; PLAAFCC-PLA Air Force Command College; PLANCC-PLA Navy Command College; PLAN-PLA Navy; SLD-Shangri-La Dialogue; STC-Southern Theater Command; USARPAC-U.S. Army Pacific; WPNS-Western Pacific Naval Symposium; WTC-Western Theater Command.