

STRATEGY

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Dragon and eagle entangled
Sino-US military exchanges, 2001–2016



Jingdong Yuan

January 2017

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Cover image: Chinese People’s Liberation Army Naval sailors line the decks aboard the PLA Frigate Hengshui as it arrives at the Joint Base Pearl Harbor Hickam to participate in the multi-national military exercise RIMPAC in Honolulu, Hawaii, 29 June 2016. © Hugh Gentry/Reuters/Picture Media

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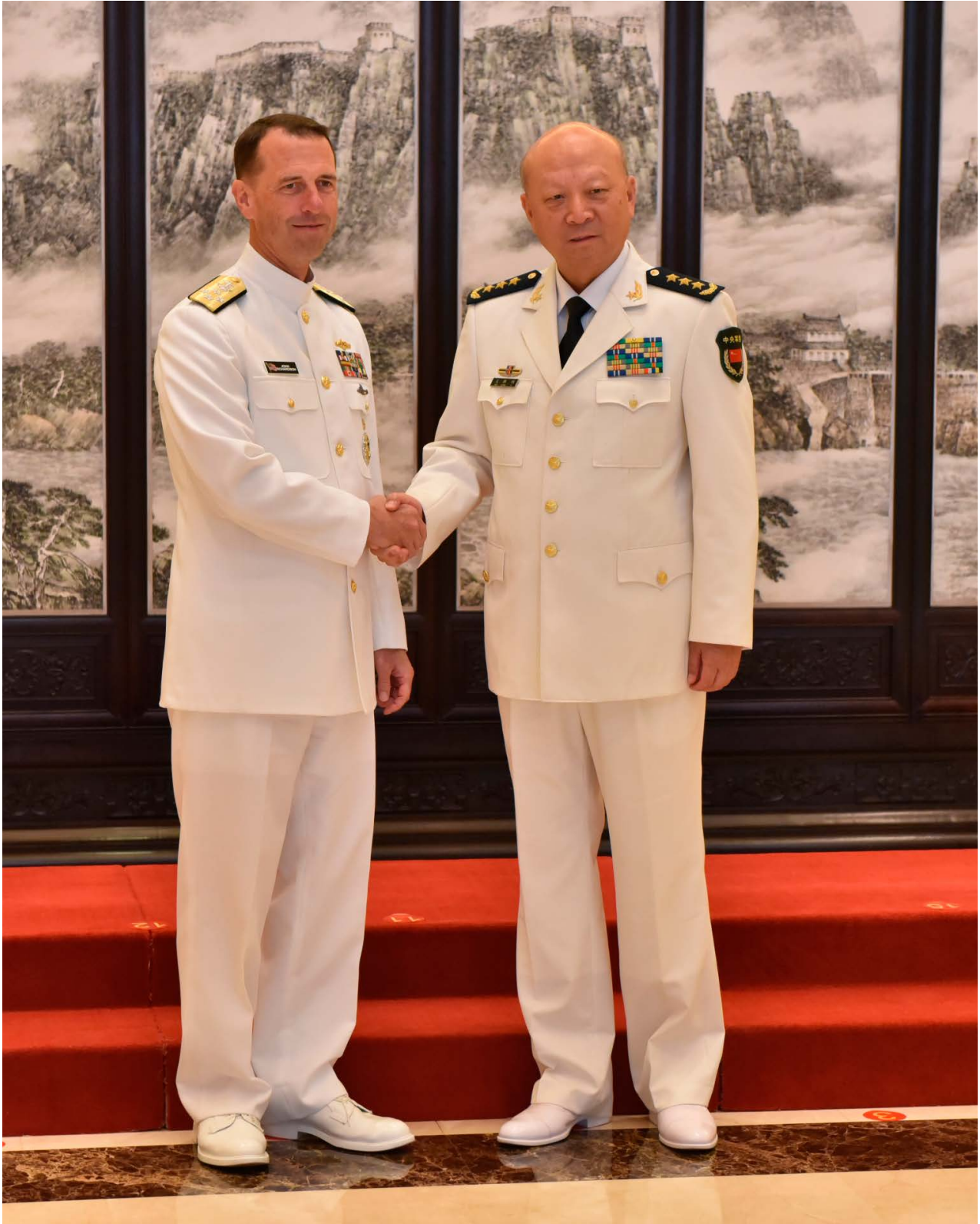
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Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. John Richardson meets with Adm. Wu Shengli, Commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), at the PLAN headquarters in Beijing, 18 July 2016. Richardson was on a multi-day trip to China to meet with his counterpart and tour the Chinese North Sea fleet in Qingdao. The goal of the engagement is to improve mutual understanding and encourage professional interaction between the two navies. Photo courtesy US Navy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

US–China military exchanges constitute an important aspect of bilateral relations between the reigning superpower and a fast-rising one. Initiated in the wake of the establishment of diplomatic relations during the Cold War when the two countries were quasi-aligned against the Soviet threat, military-to-military contacts between China and the US have evolved over the years, and have by and large followed rather than defined the overall Sino-US politico-diplomatic relationship. Increasingly, however, how the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Pentagon view their bilateral military ties and manage their conflicts and expectations and, as far as possible, seek to better understand each other and explore areas of cooperation will have a significant impact on regional peace and stability. It will also reflect the general state of the bilateral relationship during a period of monumental changes in international politics and in particular in the Indo-Pacific.

This ASPI Strategy takes stock of Sino-US military contacts over the past 15 years and provides some preliminary assessments of the evolution and implications of this critical aspect of perhaps the most important bilateral relationship in the world today. It seeks to achieve three objectives. First, it identifies, compares and discusses the rationales, expectations and approaches of the two militaries regarding the relationship. Second, it outlines and reviews bilateral Sino-US military contacts from 2001 to 2016, essentially covering both the George W Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Third, it analyses and evaluates US–China military ties over this period and provides some explanations of their promises, progress and pitfalls.

US interests and objectives in engaging the Chinese military include gaining a better understanding of the armed forces of a rising power, hoping to shape China’s perspectives and foster a stable and cooperative relationship for regional stability, and developing and putting into place both confidence building and crisis management mechanisms to minimise and avoid unintended incidents and prevent disputes from escalating to major military confrontation. At the same time, as the PLA develops and deploys greater military capabilities and Chinese foreign policy grows more assertive, the US military is responding by deploying major defence assets and forces to the Indo-Pacific region, developing future battle-winning capabilities, and strengthening alliances and forming security partnerships in the region.

The PLA, on the other hand, has often considered and implemented bilateral exchanges as part of the broader agenda of promoting US–China relations as a ‘new type of major-power relationship’. It also seeks to demonstrate that it’s an equal of the US military while using the expansion and suspension of military ties to influence the US’s policies, including on arms sales to Taiwan, and its alliances in the region. Clearly, this deep strategic distrust and growing rivalry set limits to the depth and scope of military exchanges. Nonetheless, even as the two militaries may be preparing for the next war with each other, they have nonetheless found common interests in cooperating in a range of non-traditional security areas, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), search and rescue, peacekeeping, military medicine, and anti-piracy/terrorism operations.

The past 15 years have witnessed ups and downs in bilateral military ties, which began with a number of incidents and crises, resulting in the temporary suspension of ties at the beginning of the Bush administration. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the subsequent shift in US strategy towards combating global terrorism and seeking cooperation with China paved the way for the normalisation of military-to-military contacts between the PLA and

the Pentagon. Since then, bilateral military ties have gradually been institutionalised through high-level visits, defence dialogues, functional exchanges and cooperation in bilateral and multilateral contexts. Both US and Chinese leaders clearly recognise the importance of developing a stable bilateral military relationship and, indeed, have at times admonished their top military brass to enhance mutual understanding and explore and expand areas of cooperation.

Deep structural constraints impose limitations on both the scope and the pace of bilateral military ties. Indeed, while Beijing and Washington have managed to expand areas of contact and maintain or repair bilateral military relations after major setbacks, they have yet to resolve their core differences. Thus, beneath pledges of cooperation and building a healthy, stable relationship lie deep rifts over a number of issues:

- US arms sales to Taiwan
- Chinese concerns over US strategic intentions in the Indo-Pacific
- Chinese objections to US missile defences and military intelligence-gathering activities
- questions about lack of Chinese transparency in defence modernisation
- military threats against Taiwan
- China's growing assertiveness in its territorial disputes with neighbouring countries
- the development and deployment of anti-access/area-denial capabilities that threaten the US forward military presence
- harassment of US ships in the South China Sea in a direct challenge to the long-held principle of freedom of navigation.

The development and maintenance of US–China military contacts remains a work in progress, but it is an increasingly critical aspect of the broader bilateral relationship between a reigning superpower that has no intention of giving up its primacy in the Indo-Pacific and a rising power with growing ambitions and assertive foreign policy agendas. The last few years have seen the introduction of measures by the Pentagon and the PLA to enhance confidence building and regulate maritime and aerial encounters between the two militaries. There are more and regular channels of communications as well as growing (albeit still at a low level) joint and multilateral exercises in non-traditional security areas such as anti-piracy, search and rescue, and HADR. Managing bilateral military ties will be a major challenge for the PLA and the Pentagon as the contest for regional dominance intensifies and the likelihood of military escalation grows amid territorial disputes in the South and East China seas, more frequent US–China face-offs in the Western Pacific, and strong, nationalist leaders in both Beijing and Washington.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Growing tensions between China and the US over the South China Sea, cybersecurity and regional geostrategic realignments in the Indo-Pacific are causing serious concerns among policymakers and analysts about the risk of great-power confrontation. One particular concern is how the US and Chinese militaries will interact amid emerging rivalry between the two countries and whether they can manage to avoid a major showdown.

With the election of Donald Trump as the US president, the stakes become all the greater as the Republican administration seeks to confront Beijing on a number of issues, from trade (candidate Trump charged China as a currency manipulator and threatened to impose hefty tariffs on Chinese goods) to the 'One China' principle observed by eight US administrations since President Nixon first visited China in 1972 (President-elect Trump ignored the protocol by talking to Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen during the transition and openly questioned why the US should be bound by it).

While Beijing's responses have so far been rather restrained as it apparently waits to ascertain the official position of the Trump administration after inauguration, the Chinese Government nonetheless adamantly insists that the 'One China' principle is the foundation of Sino-US relations and can't be traded notwithstanding Trump's penchant for treating everything in transactional terms. Indeed, a China under President Xi Jinping (and about to go through a critical leadership transition in 2017) is unlikely to back down on issues it considers as its vital interests, from territorial disputes in the South China Sea to US freedom of navigation patrols (FONOPs) close to or through Chinese-claimed waters. China's snatching of a US underwater drone in front of a US Navy research vessel in waters off the Philippines was a clear message to and test of the incoming Trump administration. US-China relations could be headed towards a confrontation that, most worryingly, might include military clashes between two nuclear-weapon states.

This ASPI Strategy analyses the evolving US-China military relationship in the past 15 years (2001-2016). It argues that, while bilateral Sino-US military exchanges have by and large expanded over time and have served the interests of both countries, they remain the most fragile aspect of otherwise expanding, complex and, on balance, rather mature and stable Sino-US relations. In contrast to the significant progress made in bilateral ties over the past four decades, during which Washington's engagement policy has clearly shown substantive results in encouraging China to be a more responsible stakeholder in the international system, the one area that demands greater care in this volatile period of power transition and growing uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific is the development of stable military-to-military ties between the Pentagon and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Granted, formal dialogues and consultation mechanisms do exist and, in recent years, additional confidence building measures (CBMs) have been introduced to enhance mutual understanding and reduce miscalculation, but much more remains and needs to be done, not only in implementing and strengthening existing risk reduction measures but also in expanding areas of cooperation where the two countries share common interests.

This report builds on existing scholarship to examine the domestic and international constraints and opportunities that Beijing and Washington face in developing stable and mutually beneficial bilateral military ties. It seeks to better understand the rationales, expectations, programs, processes and barriers in US–China military engagement, and to assess the progress, promises and pitfalls of this most important aspect of Sino-US relations.

By most accounts, the US–China relationship represents—for both countries—the most important among any bilateral relations today. Officials and analysts alike acknowledge the fact that many global and regional issues can't be effectively tackled without cooperation between the world's reigning superpower and a rapidly rising one. The two countries maintain close to a hundred official dialogues and have regularly consulted each other on major issues of the day, from climate change to global financial and economic stability, and from regional security to nuclear nonproliferation. Managing these challenges requires Beijing and Washington to work together, build mutual trust and develop the necessary mechanisms for crisis management and conflict resolution. These drivers have helped the two countries to address and overcome difficulties and significantly broadened and deepened their bilateral relations over the past four decades.

The most challenging and, increasingly, the most critical aspect of the US–China bilateral relations remains military-to-military ties, which continue to be underdeveloped, uneven and, until recently, vulnerable to suspension and disruption in the broader political relationship.

The most challenging and, increasingly, the most critical aspect of the US–China bilateral relations remains military-to-military ties, which continue to be underdeveloped, uneven and, until recently, vulnerable to suspension and disruption in the broader political relationship. Indeed, the past 15 years have included the temporary suspension, resumption and expansion of military exchanges, notable progress and setbacks, and continued efforts to improve mutual trust and understanding between the two defence establishments, including the professional militaries (Kan 2014a). The PLA and the Pentagon have sought to maintain and develop bilateral military exchanges through:

- high-level visits of defence ministers and military leaders
- regular bilateral military dialogues and meetings, such as the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), annual Defense Consultation Talks, the defence/security component of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue and the recently introduced Army-to-Army Dialogue Framework
- CBMs, including memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on avoiding incidents at sea and in the air and advance notification of major military activities
- functional activities such as port visits, military educational programs and military medicine programs
- joint exercises in non-traditional security areas, such as anti-piracy, search and rescue, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations
- the PLA's participation, for the first time, in the 2014 and 2016 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) multinational naval exercises.

This ASPI Strategy provides a preliminary assessment of the promises and pitfalls of Sino-US military relations over the past 15 years, beginning with the temporary suspension of bilateral military contacts in the wake of the April 2001 mid-air collision between a Chinese fighter aircraft and a US EP-3 surveillance aircraft. Specifically, the report aims to examine the rationale behind US engagements with the Chinese military and the PLA's perspectives on and interest in developing military ties with the US, and to assess whether and to what extent bilateral military exchanges have met expectations and accomplished particular goals, including:

- US–China interests in developing and maintaining military ties beyond the broader strategic objectives sought by the White House, the Pentagon and Beijing
- efforts on both sides to overcome obstacles in order to establish and promote engagement to dispel misunderstanding and miscommunication, manage crises to prevent escalation, and explore opportunities for cooperation where the two militaries could contribute to global and regional peace and security, including in non-traditional security areas.

This report examines the implications of an emerging issue that's critical for both militaries: China's growing anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities and their deployment, and seeks to address the problems of unintended consequences and issues of extended deterrence in the Western Pacific involving third parties, how these emerging military postures run the risk of escalation and major confrontation during crises and what the two militaries must do to avoid them without compromising their separate defence strategies and alliance commitments. Based on these discussions, the report tries to draw some general conclusions and suggest tentative recommendations for developing stable and pragmatic bilateral military relations between China and the US during this period of power transition and geostrategic uncertainty.

Whether and to what extent the PLA and the Pentagon can develop a new type of military-to-military relationship by managing or avoiding conflicts, respecting each other's core interests and seeking to cooperate on issues where they share common interests will have significant impacts on the Indo-Pacific, including alliance relationships, regional stability and the security of the commons.

Australia has a great stake in a stable and working Sino-US military relationship and can in effect play a more active role in developing and promoting multilateral CBMs and joint military programs and activities, such as HADR and anti-piracy operations. Such activities help to enhance mutual understanding, develop functional shared expertise and common practices and contribute to building common security.

Chapter 2 discusses Chinese perspectives and interest in developing bilateral military ties with the US and how they can be understood with the broader concept of a 'new type of great-power relationship' that Beijing promotes. It also highlights US rationales and interests in developing and maintaining military ties with the PLA as part of the broader strategic objectives sought by the White House and the Pentagon.

Chapter 3 reviews Sino-US bilateral military ties over the past 15 years, highlighting major developments, progress and setbacks. It's clear that Washington has important reasons for engaging the Chinese military, given China's rising political and economic power, its growing military capabilities and its more assertive posture, all of which have significant impacts on US interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

Chapter 4 discusses Chinese perspectives on developing military ties with the US, including Beijing's concept of a new model of great-power relations and its proposal for a new type of military-to-military relationship, and the US responses to those concepts.

Based on those goals and expectations, Chapter 5 examines the practical limitations on the further development of bilateral military exchanges in the short to medium term.

Chapter 6 concludes the report with some tentative recommendations for developing stable and pragmatic bilateral military relations between China and the US during this period of power transition and geostrategic uncertainty.

CHAPTER 2

Sino-US military relations: what do Washington and Beijing want to achieve?

The US and China have different perspectives on military-to-military exchanges. For Beijing, the scope and depth of such exchanges to a large extent reflect the overall bilateral political relationship; when the political relationship is strong, it provides a conducive environment for expanding military contacts. Conversely, a deteriorating bilateral political relationship inevitably leads to setbacks in military exchanges; indeed, such ties are sometimes curtailed or suspended by China to register protest, to express disapproval or simply as a means of retaliation for what Beijing considers as erroneous US actions detrimental to Chinese core interests, such as arms sales to Taiwan and, increasingly, US positions on territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

In addition to Taiwan, Chinese military leaders often complain about US military surveillance and intelligence-gathering activities near China and about the US National Defense Authorization Act of 2000, which imposes restrictions on bilateral military exchanges (Zhang Fang 2016a, Perlez 2012). Not surprisingly, they often use bilateral dialogues to engage their US counterparts on those three issues. The first two matters gravely threaten China's core national interests, while the third reflects US strategic distrust.

US arms sales to Taiwan have always been, and remain, the most destabilising factor in Sino-US relations and negatively affect bilateral military contacts. Beijing's usual response has been to cancel scheduled military consultations and planned programs in protest against the sales. In recent years, PLA analysts have called for sanctions to be imposed on American companies involved in such sales (Zhang Fang 2014:184). Beijing takes a top-down approach to managing bilateral military ties; that is, strategic agreement on major issues is a precondition and provides guidelines for specific military cooperation, not the other way around. Increasingly, however, the Chinese military recognises the importance of the institutionalisation of bilateral military exchanges through the more than 90 existing official dialogues (of which only five currently involve the two militaries) between the two countries (Finkelstein 2010, Zhang Fang 2014:100).

Increasingly, Chinese analysts discuss a new type of Sino-US military relationship within the broader context of the major-power relations that President Xi proposed during his meeting with President Obama at Sunnylands, California, in the summer of 2013. The language used by PLA analysts describes the Chinese objectives of 'avoiding conflicts, managing crises, and seeking cooperation' (Zhang Fang 2014:185).

Ever since the end of the Cold War, Beijing and Washington have been managing an increasingly interdependent yet deeply distrusting relationship between the two countries. They have different visions for the regional security architecture, prefer different approaches to addressing regional security issues, and are increasingly engaged in open competition for regional primacy, in particular in the South China Sea. The Obama administration's 'rebalancing' to Asia and the strengthening of US alliances and partners aim at hedging against China's rise as well as encouraging Beijing to play a more constructive role (Carter 2016:65–75, Ross 2013:20–40, Jin Canrong et al. 2013).

It's widely acknowledged that the two great powers have yet to develop mutual strategic trust between them, more than 40 years after the Nixon breakthrough and despite the existence of more than 90 official and regular channels of dialogue and consultation. Some have argued that, given the nature of international politics, it would be futile to develop any serious mutual trust between a rising power and a reigning superpower with vast differences in their respective sociopolitical systems, historical experiences, geostrategic perceptions, and visions for the international and regional orders (Wang & Lieberthal 2013, Friedberg 2011, Pomfret 2016). The best that can be accomplished is to recognise those differences and develop mechanisms to manage their relationship, minimise the negative impacts of disputes and promote cooperation where they share common interests. Where bilateral military exchanges are concerned, Beijing has sought to develop a new framework for this most sensitive and critical aspect of the bilateral relationship, which has always been the most vulnerable to any vicissitudes in bilateral political relations but that has never been more important—not the least to avoid direct military confrontation, given the dearth of clear and reliable communication and crisis management arrangements (Kan 2014a, Lu Yin 2014).

Clearly, managing Beijing's relationship with Washington while continuing China's ascendancy to great-power status is the most important foreign policy objective for Chinese leaders. From Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, developing a stable and cooperative bilateral relationship featured prominently in Chinese foreign policy agendas. The concept of a 'new model of major-power relations' was first proposed by the Chinese leadership in 2012, when then Vice-President Xi Jinping visited the US. It was further elaborated when Xi met Obama in California in early June 2013. Essentially, it's summed up as the follows: no conflict or confrontation; mutual respect; and cooperation for win-win outcomes. The rationale for proposing this new model is to break the historical pattern of rising powers challenging reigning powers, which has almost invariably resulted in major-power rivalry and wars (Jin Canrong & Zhao Yuanliang 2014, Hadley 2013).

To some extent, behind this concept of major-power relations is Beijing's need to address the growing concern that a rising China will pose a serious challenge to US primacy in the region, leading to instability and conflict, and to provide some reassurance to Washington that China recognises the important role of the US in the region and has no intention of seeking to replace it. Beijing also hopes that its own interests will also be recognised and respected by Washington (Steinberg & O'Hanlon 2014a). Chinese analysts often suggest that there seem to be good reasons to believe that the concept would work and therefore set an example of relationships between emerging powers and a reigning one:

- The two countries have no direct territorial disputes (although the US does have security commitments to allies, some of which do have territorial disputes with China, such as Japan and the Philippines).
- There are ever-growing economic interdependence and expanding sociocultural ties between the two countries.
- There are mutual interests in joining forces to confront traditional and non-traditional challenges, ranging from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to illicit trafficking and maritime piracy (Wang Jisi 2015).

At the same time, both countries also recognise the risk of failure to manage differences and disputes between them; as nuclear powers, neither can afford miscalculations and missteps leading to military confrontation (Eikenberry 2014, Allison 2012).¹

That being said, and despite the multitude of official dialogues and consultations between the two countries, a deep trust deficit prevents them from achieving the stated objectives as laid out in this new model. For one thing, while Beijing clearly aims to get Washington to respect China's core interests, which include sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Obama administration has been concerned that concession in this area would undercut the credibility of its security commitments to allies and support to friends. Instead, while not objecting to the new concept, Washington seeks to operationalise it and emphasises that existing norms and rules need to be respected and stresses the importance of clearly defining what constitutes the status quo (Cheng Li & Lucy Xu 2014, Carpenter 2014). What is more feasible and practical is cooperation on specific issues, where bilateral efforts could achieve concrete results without having to engage in semantics and conceptual wrestling.

Indeed, while the precise definition of a new model of major-power relations remains a work in progress, Beijing and Washington have turned to areas where common interests exist and consensus can be developed. At the November 2014 summit held in Beijing between Xi Jinping and Barack Obama, the two countries announced a series of agreements, including two military MoUs that aim at enhancing confidence building and setting rules of behaviour for the safety of air and maritime encounters. At the summit, Xi reiterated the importance of building a new model of major-power relations and proposed that the two countries work on six areas:

- Hold high-level exchanges to enhance mutual strategic trust.
- Manage bilateral issues on the basis of mutual respect.
- Deepen comprehensive exchanges in all areas.
- Manage and control sensitive issues and disputes in a constructive manner.
- Strive for mutual accommodation and understanding of each other in the Asia–Pacific region.
- Jointly address global challenges—terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, diseases, and climate change. (Yang Jiemian 2014, Valencia 2014)

Chinese efforts in defining and contextualising bilateral military ties in the context of the new model of major-power relations reflect a recognition that the one area that demands greater care in this volatile period of power transition and growing tensions in the South China Sea is the development of stable military-to-military ties between the Pentagon and the PLA (Lu Yin 2014). During US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's visit to China in 2014, Chinese Defence Minister General Chang Wanquan broached the concept of a new type of military-to-military relationship (US DoD 2014a). Central Military Commission Vice Chairman General Fan Changlong visited the US in June 2015 and elaborated on the contents of a new type of military relationship with the US: mutual trust, cooperation, no conflict, and sustainability (互信、合作、不冲突、可持续). Fan also made three proposals: enhance high-level exchanges, seek practical cooperation, and strengthen crisis management (Jin Canrong & Wang Bo 2015, Zhong He 2015).

Indeed, the key to better military-to-military relations, according to China's 2015 defence white paper, is to 'strengthen defense dialogues, exchanges and cooperation, and improve the CBM mechanism for the notification of major military activities as well as the rules of behaviour for safety of air and maritime encounters, so as to strengthen mutual trust, prevent risks and manage crises.'² Chinese analysts also emphasise that equality [平等] should be a key principle governing US–China exchanges and that US expectations of reciprocity and transparency must be placed within this broader understanding, given China's inferior military capabilities compared to those of the US. In other words, meeting the demands for strict reciprocity could expose weaknesses in China's defence and ultimately undermine its security.

At the same time, the Chinese side is concerned that further development in bilateral military ties could be hampered by third-party elements, such as China's territorial disputes with some of its neighbouring states and perceived US biases towards those states—its avowal of neutrality on sovereignty disputes in the South and East China seas notwithstanding—and Washington's recent strengthening of alliances and security partnerships in the region as part of the 'pivot to Asia' strategy (Zhang Fang 2016b).³

Chinese analysts suggest that stable bilateral military ties, being a critical component of Sino-US relations, can help enhance strategic mutual trust, minimise conflict and manage crises. Especially in non-traditional security areas such as anti-piracy escorts, counterterrorism and peacekeeping, and increasingly in the Indo-Pacific, the two militaries share common interests. At the same time, managing their differences is conducive to regional stability. However, Chinese analysts differ on whether mutual trust must remain the precondition for a new type of military relationship or whether such a relationship can enhance mutual trust not only between the two militaries but also broader bilateral political relations. Indeed, there's widely shared pessimism about the difficulty of moving bilateral military relations forward, given the dearth of strategic trust. On the other hand, some Chinese analysts believe that cooperation, even if limited and based on a lack of mutual trust, can and must serve to improve it, not the other way around. Specific measures can include crisis management mechanisms, CBMs, dialogues and interactions at multiple levels (Zhang Fang 2016a:21–24).

From Beijing's perspective, US–China military contacts are also a part—a most important one—of PLA military diplomacy that has evolved over the past 15 years and played an indispensable role in advancing and protecting Chinese interests, representing and promoting China's foreign policy of peace and development, deepening mutual understanding and cooperation with other militaries, and contributing to international and regional peace and stability (Zhang Fang 2014).⁴

President Xi, in particular, has placed great emphasis on the critical role of military diplomacy in China's overall foreign policy strategy, exhorting the PLA to begin a new phase of military diplomacy. This includes not only high-level military visits, but also naval port calls, educational exchanges, joint military exercises, military sales, joint defence R&D, peacekeeping operations, HADR and the repatriation of Chinese citizens in disaster and civil conflict areas, among other activities (Hua 2015, Bokhari & Lamont 2011, Parello-Plesner & Duchâtel 2015). It supports China's overall foreign policy agendas by demonstrating both its resolve and capabilities to defend its national interests and its willingness to develop deeper understanding, enhance confidence building and cooperate in providing international public goods in the form of humanitarian disaster assistance and the protection of critical sea lines of communication, such as through its naval escort taskforces in the Gulf of Aden (Wang Qiaobao 2013, Sun Jianguo 2015, Erickson & Strange 2013).

While these interactions and activities expose PLA officers and personnel to foreign militaries, and raise the possibility that the latter could influence PLA officers undesirably (such as by floating the idea of nationalising the Party–army: 军队国家化), such exposure remains limited to selected middle-rank officers and PLA scholars who primarily work on long-term strategic issues as well as analyses of foreign militaries. Chinese Communist Party control of the PLA remains solid, despite the PLA's growing professionalisation and greater responsibility over operational matters, and every general secretary of the party has considered absolute party control of the military a cardinal principle to ensure PLA loyalty and political reliability (Scobell 2005, Xiao Dongsong & Li Conghe 2014, Shambaugh 1991, You Ji 2006).

US objectives for engagement with the Chinese military have evolved over the past four decades, but certain key elements have remained unchanged.

US objectives for engagement with the Chinese military have evolved over the past four decades, but certain key elements have remained unchanged. While the Pentagon pursues parallel top-down and bottom-up approaches to promote bilateral military ties, it also recognises the limits of military exchanges set by the overall political relations between the two countries. US analysts suggest that the nature of bilateral relations—cooperative and competitive—inevitably defines a military relationship that will encounter significant barriers to deeper engagement and mutual trust (Saunders & Bowie 2016). By actively engaging the Chinese military, Washington hopes that it can gain a better understanding of the PLA's military doctrines and security perspective, its role in China's foreign and security policymaking and its ways of operations. At the same time, greater transparency can help avoid misunderstandings, especially in the context of a potential conflict across the Taiwan Strait, and more recently the growing Chinese military capabilities and increasing US–China encounters in the South China Sea (Kjorness 2011, Cheung Tai Ming 2001, Bader et al. 2014). In a 1995 speech, Defense Secretary William Perry spelled out the rationale for engaging China's military:

[E]ngagement opens lines of communication with the People's Liberation Army—the PLA. A major player in Chinese politics, the PLA wields significant influence on such issues as Taiwan, the South China Sea and proliferation. And if we are to achieve progress on these issues, we must engage PLA leaders directly ... [By] engaging the PLA directly, we can help promote more openness in the Chinese national security apparatus, including its military institutions. Promoting openness or transparency about Chinese strategic intentions,

procurement, budgeting and operating procedures will not only help promote confidence among China's neighbors, it will also lessen the chance of misunderstandings or incidents when our forces operate in the areas where Chinese military forces are also deployed. (US DoD 1995)

The general policy of engagement isn't pursued blindly. Indeed, there are important principles that must be observed in its implementation. According to Kurt Campbell, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Clinton administration:

Our engagement strategy is this: 'We will work with China where we can—such as the Korean Peninsula; and we will disagree where we must—as we do with some of China's proliferation activities.' I believe this engagement recognises China for what it is—an emerging power, poised to either contribute to, or detract from, the tides of economic dynamism, cooperation, and trust that are filling the Pacific Basin.⁵

For Donald Rumsfeld, President Bush's first Defense Secretary, engagement for engagement's sake wouldn't advance US interests; he placed great emphasis on transparency and reciprocity. Robert Gates, Rumsfeld's successor, was keen on building a 'sustained and substantive' military-to-military relationship devoid of the on-off switch that often characterised military ties between the two countries.

Under the premise of engagement, and recognising the importance of the PLA in China's national security decision-making, the US has sought to achieve several broad objectives in its military contacts with China:⁶

- Establish clear lines of communication between senior leaders to conduct substantive exchanges on a range of defence and security issues, and to reduce chances of miscommunication and miscalculation, especially during times of turbulence and friction.
- Establish CBMs designed to reduce the possibility of accidents or miscalculations between US and Chinese operational forces.
- Develop ties that increase the safety of US and Chinese military personnel, provide mechanisms for crisis prevention and management, and contribute to greater transparency.
- Encourage PLA participation in appropriate bilateral and multinational military activities, such as search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, anti-piracy, disaster relief, and the Cobra and RIMPAC exercises.
- Engage the PLA, a critical actor in China's national security community, on a range of global and Asia-Pacific regional security issues; part of such efforts would be to shape PLA behaviour.
- Conduct functional and professional exchanges that are of mutual benefit, such as in the area of military medicine.
- Increase Chinese defence transparency to better understand the scope and extent of PLA modernisation.
- Enable both militaries to foster institutional knowledge and build habits of cooperation and work toward greater mutual understanding.
- Influence and 'shape' PLA perspectives on critical security issues, such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism and regional stability.
- Engage the Chinese military in the areas of nuclear weapons, cybersecurity and military space and develop contacts between officers from the US Strategic Command and the PLA Second Artillery Corps (now the PLA Rocket Force).
- Encourage the PLA to observe and contribute to established norms, such as the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea.

To pursue these objectives, the US military has sought to establish broad, regular and more balanced military contacts with China. For instance, the 2012 USPACOM theatre strategic guidance on China listed the following goals:

- Sustain a military-to-military relationship to prevent miscommunication and miscalculation.
- Pursue opportunities for increased military cooperation in areas of mutual interest.
- Monitor China's military modernisation programs and prepare accordingly. (Locklear n.d.)

Admiral Mike Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged that US–China military relations are the most important and challenging, but that the critical things are to keep up the dialogue and work where both have common interests and can achieve concrete results. Blind suspicion and mistrust aren't the way to manage this relationship; instead, the two sides must work together to build trust (Mullen 2011). Referring to the periodic Chinese interruption of bilateral military exchanges in protest at arms sales to Taiwan, Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggested during his January 2011 visit to China that it's critical that both sides keep communication channels open and protect them from changing political winds.⁷ The US for a time even accepted the concept of a 'new type of military-to-military relationship'.

The 2014 Pentagon report on China states that both China and the US 'have articulated the desire for a new model of military-to-military relations that is an integral part of a broader shared vision for a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive US–China relationship', and that the Pentagon would pursue efforts to develop such a relationship 'focused on: sustained, substantive dialogues; concrete, practical cooperation; and enhanced risk reduction' (US DoD 2014b:59). Indeed, PLA and US analysts both acknowledge that 2014 and 2015 witnessed major developments in military ties, including high-level visits, port calls and joint exercises. Those activities reflect top Chinese and US leaders' (Xi's and Obama's) commitments to strengthening bilateral relations, especially the military components (Zhang Fang 2016a:93–96, Saunders & Bowie 2016). While the Pentagon no longer makes reference to the 'new model', its 2016 report to Congress on the Chinese military continues to emphasise that:

[S]ustaining positive momentum in the military-to-military relationship supports US policy objectives to encourage China to uphold international rules and norms and to contribute positively to resolving regional and global problems. DoD seeks to continue building a military-to-military relationship with China that is sustained and substantive ... [The focus will be on] enhancing risk reduction measures that diminish the potential for incidents or miscalculation. (USDoD 2016:iii)

Specifically, those measures include:

- (1) building sustained and substantive dialogue through policy dialogues and senior leader engagements;
- (2) building concrete, practical cooperation in areas of mutual interests; and
- (3) enhancing risk management efforts that diminish the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation. (USDoD 2016:95)⁸

However, there are also strong voices in Congress that caution against expanding US–China military ties without carefully assessing what those ties can realistically accomplish, how they might serve US interests, and the risk that they might contribute to Chinese military capabilities. For example, Senator John McCain, Chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, opposed sending US aircraft carriers to China (for port calls), concerned that this could send the wrong signal to Beijing, given its aggressive behaviour, and to America's allies as they seek security reassurances from Washington. Representative Randy Forbes, Chairman of the Congressional China Caucus, wrote to the Pentagon leadership emphasising that the US focus on military-to-military links should be concerned with the most the challenging aspects—nuclear forces, offensive cyber activity and crisis stability, among others (Whitlock 2015, Forbes 2014). Senator McCain and the ranking Democrat senator, Jack Reed, wrote to Secretary Carter asking the Pentagon to disinvite China from RIMPAC 2016, given its 'bad behavior'. Within the US military, concerns have been raised about Chinese cyber activities, and China's increasingly assertive behaviours in the South China Sea are undermining support for bilateral military ties (Lubold 2015, Lyngaas 2015).⁹

Despite the modest progress over the past 15 years, Sino-US military relations have continued to be hampered by strategic distrust, divergent interests and priorities, and, most of all, US arms sales to Taiwan. As mentioned above, the PLA has suspended bilateral military ties in protest, including by cancelling high-level visits (Carpaccio & Gienger 2010, Hille 2010).

From the PLA perspective, unless and until the US removes the three obstacles, and as long as bilateral military ties aren't based on the principles of mutual respect and equality, a new type of military relationship can't fully

materialise. The US's insistence on Chinese military transparency despite the asymmetrical capabilities of the two militaries isn't acceptable to the PLA and is deemed harmful to China's national interests. The Chinese military is now becoming more critical of US actions in the Indo-Pacific, particularly about what it considers as the US's unwelcome interference in disputes between China and the other claimant states in the South China Sea, which it believes can only be resolved among themselves.¹⁰

The US, on the other hand, sees growing competition in critical strategic domains such as space and cyberspace, heightened rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, and declining confidence in changing Chinese military behaviour through engagement as setting the limits to any future development of bilateral military contacts (Saunders & Bowie 2016).

While China and the US have managed to maintain or repair bilateral military relations after major setbacks, they have yet to resolve their core differences. Thus, beneath pledges to build a healthy, stable relationship lie deep rifts over a number of issues. For China, those issues pertain to the US's arms sales to Taiwan, strategic intentions in the Asia-Pacific and missile defences. The US continues to question the lack of transparency in Chinese defence modernisation, China's military threats against Taiwan, its growing assertiveness in its territorial disputes with neighbouring countries, its development and deployment of A2/AD capabilities that threaten the US forward military presence, and its harassment of US ships in the South China Sea, which poses a direct challenge to the US's long-held principle of freedom of navigation.

Clearly, before a more stable bilateral military relationship can develop, longer term strategies must be formulated that emphasise engagement, exchange and better understanding of each other's interests, priorities and policy options.

Incidents could ensue, with serious consequences for both countries. Clearly, before a more stable bilateral military relationship can develop, longer term strategies must be formulated that emphasise engagement, exchange and better understanding of each other's interests, priorities and policy options. Particularly important may be increased contacts between the two militaries at the officer corps level, at which both sides have increasingly similar profiles in terms of their educational levels and professional backgrounds. Developments in the past two years have been encouraging, but challenges remain (Churchman 2015). On a number of issues, the two countries hold diametrically opposing views.

From Beijing's perspective, the impediments to the development of a solid bilateral military relationship remain structural. Chinese uncertainty about the general state of bilateral relations at the politico-strategic level precludes a well-developed military-to-military relationship. In other words, as long as the US continues to view China as a strategic competitor, such a relationship can't be deepened. The annual US Department of Defense reports to Congress on Chinese military capabilities and the military balance across the Taiwan Strait, and the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), all view China as a potential challenger to American interests, and the US pivot to Asia reflects that view. To date, Washington continues to maintain bans on military sales to China (Chu Zhaofeng 2014).

The Chinese military also emphasises that transparency is important to clarify strategic intent, rather than to reveal military capabilities. This has been a major issue between China and the US in military-to-military contacts. While Chinese defence white papers over the years have become more structured, regular and systematic, there remains a lack of transparency in data and information on military modernisation efforts and capabilities (Saunders & Rustici 2011). One US analyst points out that it is imperative that the US military's understanding of the PLA should be enhanced through military exchanges (Goldstein 2011).

The US and China hold opposing views and have increasingly clashed over the South China Sea issue. Beijing resents what it sees as US bias on the territorial disputes—Washington’s disavowal notwithstanding—and accuses the US of engaging in a negative campaign against China (LaGrone 2016a, Perlez & Buckley 2016).

In his commencement address at the US Naval Academy on 27 May 2016, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter expressed serious concerns about what he described as unprecedented and expansive actions by China in the South China Sea, such as ‘pressing excessive maritime claims contrary to international law’. Carter concluded that such actions ‘could erect a Great Wall of self-isolation’.¹¹

One contentious issue is the US challenge to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea through land reclamation projects, which have turned submerged features into manmade islands with extensive runways, military installations and even missile batteries. Beijing has reacted to US FONOPs with strong rhetoric, describing them as ‘militarising’ the South China Sea.

The two countries have differing interpretations of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, especially over the issue of innocent passage involving military ships, and sharp differences over US FONOPs. The US doesn’t recognise the legality of the Chinese U-shaped line (the ‘nine-dash line’) in the South China Sea (Zhang Jingquan & Pan Yu 2016). Another issue concerns what the Chinese view as overt US military intelligence-gathering and surveillance activities near China’s maritime territories and inside its EEZs, especially in areas close to PLA Navy bases and facilities. Chinese responses in recent years have typically included high-risk close encounters or coordinated harassment to discourage further US activities in militarily sensitive areas (Mastro 2011).

Chinese military analysts point out that developments over the past few years have already provided an opportunity for the US to wade into China’s maritime disputes in the South and East China seas, with an undisguised leaning to the other contenders despite statements to the contrary (Yang Yi 2015). Continued stalemate and further escalation will only lead to even greater US involvement, including direct military assistance to its alliance partners. PLA analysis suggests that the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the US and the Philippines in effect allows US Navy and Air Force access to bases and facilities in the Philippines and could embolden Manila to confront Beijing in territorial disputes as part of Washington’s strategy to align the region’s countries to counteract China’s efforts to assert its sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea (Liu Lin 2016).

In recent months, there has been a major shift in Manila’s position on its alliance with the US. President Rodrigo Duterte has publicly declared a separation from Washington and the suspension of US–Philippine joint military patrols in the disputed areas of the South China Sea. In his visit to Beijing in late October 2016, Duterte hailed his meeting with President Xi Jinping as a historic step towards improving bilateral relations. The two countries signed multiple trade and investment deals worth billions of dollars. Beijing subsequently appears to have allowed Filipino fishermen to return to their traditional fishing grounds near the Scarborough Shoal (Henningan 2016, Hodge 2016, Clover & Fei Ju 2016, Rauhala 2016).

In regard to the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute, a recent US Senate amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 2013 reaffirms US treaty obligations to the defence of Japan, including territories under its administrative control. Those obligations were also publicly reaffirmed many times by high-ranking Obama administration officials (Luo Yuan 2014). High-ranking US military officers have even publicly encouraged claimant states in the South China Sea territorial disputes to form a joint fleet to patrol the disputed areas and have promised American support.¹² Chinese military analysts have noted that a number of Asian countries that have territorial disputes with China have recently hardened their positions and sought to internationalise the issue after Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s visits to those countries or meetings with their leaders.

The US has partially lifted its arms ban on Vietnam. During Carter’s June 2015 visit to Hanoi, he also pledged to extend loan credits to enable Vietnam to purchase maritime patrol boats (Zhang Yichi 2015). PLA analysts reject the US assertion that China’s land reclamation and installation of limited defence equipment constitutes the militarisation of the South China Sea (and the territorial disputes). They argue that it is US aerial and maritime intelligence-gathering and surveillance activities and FONOPs near and through Chinese territorial waters that

threaten to heighten tensions and militarise the otherwise peaceful environment in the region. In fact, they point out that the US position has shifted from relative neutrality and non-involvement to involvement and even deep involvement, including elevating security cooperation with Vietnam and the Philippines (Liu Lin 2016, Fang Xiaozhi 2016).

While it's hard to imagine the territorial disputes leading to a direct Sino-US military confrontation, it remains imperative that the countries in the region, including the US, abide by existing agreements such as the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea and adopt additional crisis management mechanisms and CBMs to address these emerging and grave concerns in the unlikely scenario of incidents spiralling rapidly out of control (Wang Fa'eng 2015, Shannon 2014).

In sum, Chinese military analysts are acutely aware of the US's role in the territorial disputes and the broader geostrategic realignment in the region. They see recent US efforts to strengthen alliances and encourage regional powers to form stronger security partnerships as being driven by a number of considerations. First and foremost is Washington's desire to maintain its predominant position in the Indo-Pacific region. The pivot to Asia reflects this strategic reorientation, especially given China's rise as a major power that could challenge the US position (Wang Xiangsui 2015, Wang Xiangsui 2015, Shao Jingjing 2015). A recent analysis by PLA National Defense University analysts points out that, despite its economic difficulties and impending sequestration of funding, the US military will in effect increase its presence, including by relocating advanced weapons systems to the region (Tang Yongsheng et al. 2013). Furthermore, one other important objective of the US rebalancing to Asia is to build upon and extend existing alliances to trilateral or quadrilateral security alignments to enlist support from the region's major powers so as to buttress American primacy in what's often described as the emerging Indo-Pacific region. This is particularly the case in US–India defence cooperation in recent years (Wang Tao 2015).

The broader issue, however, is whether and to what extent US alliance systems in the region constitute a major obstacle to any further development of China–US bilateral military exchanges. Beijing continues to view the US alliances as relics of the Cold War and not conducive to developing cooperative security in the Indo-Pacific. PLA analysts often emphasise that the alliances and growing US security partnerships with a number of other countries, such as India and Vietnam, and emerging security cooperation among US allies and friends are clearly aimed at China as a challenger to American primacy and US interests. High-ranking PLA officials have been highly critical of these developments and publicly warned interlocutors against participating in what Beijing views as US-led containment efforts (Hu Xin 2016, Nicholson 2012).

Chinese military analysts pay close attention to developments in these alliance and security partnerships. For instance, the closer ties between New Delhi and Washington since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, especially in the defence area, are the subject of growing discussions and analyses in Chinese military publications and by PLA analysts. Of particular note is US–India deepening bilateral defence cooperation, whereby India has not only become the largest market for US arms sales (\$1.9 billion in 2013) but also benefits from technology transfers. The PLA perceives such heightened defence cooperation as reflecting the US's intention to build strategic encirclement in an effort to contain China (Wang Tao 2015).

In that context, there's a significant consensus—and there are growing concerns—that the Chinese and US militaries may be dragged into direct conflicts as a result of Washington's alliance commitments. Indeed, some would argue that—notwithstanding its avowed neutrality—the US has encouraged its allies, such as Japan and the Philippines, to intensify their territorial claims in recent years (Liu Yawei & Zheng Ren 2014, Dai Xu & Ma Weining 2016). On the other hand, China's growing economic power and military capability and increasingly assertive foreign policy have often been cited by Western analysts as major reasons for both the US pivot to Asia (to maintain US primacy) and for regional countries to respond favourably to Washington's initiatives, including by strengthening alliances and forming security partnerships (Tellis et al. 2014).

This understanding of the evolving regional and US–China strategic dynamics clearly points to the limitations on bilateral military ties between Beijing and Washington. First and foremost, while neither side has publicly

designated the other as the enemy, it's obvious that each sees the other as a potential competitor for primacy and a military threat to security. In this context, US alliances and security partners in the region will prevent the two militaries from truly engaging in doctrinal, joint training and war-fighting initiatives and interoperational exchanges, except in non-traditional security areas and CBMs.

The lack of strategic trust sets clear limits to the depth and scope of military exchanges. As a rising power that's inferior to the US military in resources, technologies, war-fighting experience and organisational structure, the PLA wants to minimise the exposure of its weaknesses (hence its resistance to military transparency) and to exploit and develop asymmetrical capabilities, rather than seeking parity across the board. At the same time, it seeks to maintain contacts to minimise misunderstandings and misperceptions, as well as to exploit and expand cooperation in areas of exchanges and joint activities where the two militaries can contribute to peace and stability at the global and regional levels (Zhang Fang 2014:211–230).

While the PLA is wary of the extent to which bilateral military ties with the US can realistically expand and deepen further, that hasn't prevented it from engaging its counterparts in the region, including some US allies and new security partners, such as South Korea, Vietnam and Australia.

In recent years, China – South Korea relations have expanded to include defence dialogue and exchange visits by high-level defence officials. For example, South Korean Defence Minister Han Min-koo and PLA Vice Chief of Staff Sun Jianguo pledged to open a hotline between defence ministers during a meeting on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May 2015. A South Korean stealth destroyer made its first port call to Shanghai in August. South Korean Army Chief of Staff Kim Yo-hwan and Naval Chief of Staff Admiral Chung Ho-seop visited China and met Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan and PLA Navy Commander Admiral Wu Shengli, respectively (Snyder & See-won Byun 2015). Even though China and Vietnam have spatted over territorial disputes in recent years, Beijing and Hanoi have maintained regular high-level military contacts in an effort to exercise self-restraint and defuse tensions (Lau 2016).

Australia and China have established and maintained a defence dialogue since 1997, making Australia one of the few US allies to engage with the PLA on a regular basis.

Australia and China have established and maintained a defence dialogue since 1997, making Australia one of the few US allies to engage with the PLA on a regular basis. Over two decades, Beijing and Canberra have held 19 rounds of defence consultation covering a broad range of areas, from training and education to maritime cooperation (Wei Zongyou 2015:13). In recent years, the two countries have also established a comprehensive strategic partnership and annual prime ministerial summits.

Bilateral military exchanges have also expanded. For example, the Australian Defence Minister, the Secretary of the Defence Department, the Chief of the Australian Defence Force and all service chiefs visited China, and a total of 45 items of cooperation and exchanges between the two militaries were launched in 2014.¹³ PLA Chief of Staff General Fang Fenghui visited Canberra in late 2015 to hold the 18th annual China–Australia Defence Strategic Dialogue, even at a time of growing tensions in the South China Sea and increasing pressure on Australia to join the US to conduct FONOPs (Nicholson 2015, Wroe 2016, Sheridan 2016). Dennis Richardson, the Secretary of the Defence Department, and Air Chief Marshall Mark Binskin, the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, held the 19th Australia–China Strategic Defence Dialogue with top PLA officials in Beijing in late 2016 (DoD 2016). The PLA Navy has in recent years conducted joint military exercises with the Royal Australian Navy, and Chinese, Australian and US military personnel have conducted Exercise Kowari for joint training in Australia's rugged northern regions since 2014 (Placek 2014, Nicholson 2016, Hatch 2016).

All of these activities have taken place while the US–Australia alliance has remained strong 65 years after the signing of the 1951 ANZUS Treaty (Wainwright 2016, Dean et al 2016). Australian and American forces have fought side by side in almost every major military conflict since then, from the Korean War and Vietnam War to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Australia was among the first to commit air power and special forces to fight against the Islamic State in northern Iraq (Gill 2015:90–91). Indeed, while the Coalition government has domestic agendas significantly different from those of its Australian Labor Party (ALP) predecessor, it has continued to follow and further expand areas of cooperation with the US, including the rotation of US Marine Corps personnel through Darwin, enhanced aircraft and additional naval cooperation in northern and Western Australia, and missile defence and space cooperation. The last involves surveillance radar at the Harold E Holt Naval Communication Station in Western Australia and the future relocation of a highly advanced US space surveillance telescope to Australia (Thayer 2015:6).

Of course, the US–Australian alliance isn't without its strains and tests (Curran 2016). Given China's significance to Australia as a major trading partner and increasingly also a key investor, Canberra has been careful in managing its relationship with Beijing. Especially on economic issues, Australia has at times resisted US pressure and adopted policies that it considers will advance its interests. This was on full display in Canberra's decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015, despite the Obama administration's strong objection (Walker 2014). However, it's in the security arena that Australia's alliance with America is at once essential for its security and risky in the context of a military conflict between China and the US. Granted, Canberra has stood firmly with Washington on issues such as China's establishment of an 'air defence identification zone' in East Asia in 2014 and China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea (Dupont 2016).

While Canberra supports rules-based international and regional orders, it has adopted a more cautious approach towards directly challenging Beijing or supporting US military actions that could heighten risks of escalation. In recent months, heated debates have ensued over whether Australia should conduct FONOPs of its own or with like-minded countries. Clearly, Washington would like to see Canberra adopt such a posture. The spat between the Turnbull government and the ALP's defence spokesman, Richard Marles, on this issue has crystallised the sensitive question of how closely and how far Australia should follow the US policy. The fact that both the Australian Government and former ALP prime ministers such as Paul Keating, as well as former Australian diplomats, all strongly rebuked Marles's suggestion highlights the dilemma that China's rise and its growing assertive foreign policy impose on Canberra (Nicholson & Owens 2016, Bramston 2016). One well-connected Republican foreign policy insider is worried and warns against complacency about the Australia–US alliance, as he sees Beijing clearly seeking to stick a wedge into the alliance, forcing a 'choice' on Canberra (Fontaine 2016).

The challenge for Australia is to balance its economic interests and security needs. In fact, because of its unique position as a trusted ally of the US and as a country with a history of defence engagement with the PLA, it could and should adopt a more proactive approach to the China 'choice'. Instead of passively reacting and adjusting to volatile Sino-US relations and growing rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region, Canberra should seek to promote an inclusive, rules-based regional order in which China is accorded a space as a stakeholder, including by engaging with the PLA in bilateral and multilateral military exercises. At the same time, it must also 'seek a seat at the table' where US deliberations on China are formulated and made through such established avenues as the annual AUSMIN meetings. Aligning with and standing for accepted norms and principles, rather than feeling obliged to side with the US on every policy issue, allows Canberra a level of freedom and flexibility in dealing with China on its own merits without necessarily alienating Washington (Wainwright 2016).

Not surprisingly, PLA analysts have also called for strengthening Australia–China defence cooperation as a potential means of facilitating better US–China military ties. Indeed, while Canberra has made clear its positions on issues such as the South China Sea, it has continued to develop and expand military exchanges with the PLA (Zhang Fang 2016a:206–208, Wroe 2016, Hurst 2015).

CHAPTER 3

Sino-US military relations, 2001–2016: a brief overview

The US rationale for contacts with the Chinese military can be traced back to the mid-1970s, even before Washington established formal diplomatic relations with Beijing.¹⁴ In a foresight article in *Foreign Policy* in 1975, Michael Pillsbury argued for engaging the Chinese military in the emerging strategic triangle, specifically by selling arms to China, so as to more effectively contain Soviet threats (Pillsbury 1975). After diplomatic relations were normalised in 1979, both the Carter and Reagan administrations liberalised controls on military and dual-use technology transfers to China (Merjie 2015). In January 1980, Defense Secretary Harold Brown visited China, and the gesture was reciprocated in a visit to the US the next year by Chinese Defense Minister Geng Biao. Formal military ties were established (Chandra 1980). (Note that among Geng's entourage was his staff secretary, Xi Jinping, who is now the Chairman of China's all-powerful Central Military Commission, as well as the Communist Party General Secretary and President of China.)

The US and China expanded their defence cooperation in the 1980s through their joint intelligence-gathering on the Soviet military, support for the Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion, further liberalisation of restrictions on exports of US dual-use technologies to China, and limited US foreign military sales programs to the PLA, including the \$550 million Project Peace Pearl, which upgraded the avionics of Chinese F-8 fighter aircraft (Taubman 1981, Jing-dong Yuan 1995a, Kenny 1987). The Chinese and US defence ministers exchanged visits in the mid-1980s. However, the 4 June 1989 Tiananmen incident and the ending of the Cold War brought Sino-US bilateral military ties and foreign military sales programs to a complete halt (Mann 1990).

The gradual recovery and resumption of US–China military-to-military ties following both the Tiananmen incident and tensions over the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis yielded some limited results in the second half of the Clinton administration, including defence minister/secretary visits in the late 1990s and the Clinton–Jiang summits of 1997–98. However, this brief thaw was quickly overshadowed first by the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade (Perlez 1999) and the 2000 US presidential campaign, in which Republican candidate George W Bush advocated strong US alliances in Asia and viewed China as a 'strategic competitor' rather than a partner.

Then came the April 2001 EP-3 mid-air collision and the subsequent detention of US crew members in Hainan. The Bush administration approved the largest US arms sale to Taiwan since 1982, which included such weapons systems as diesel–electric submarines, P-3 antisubmarine aircraft and Kidd-class destroyers (Boese 2001, Kan 2014a). These developments led to suspensions and reviews of the military-to-military exchange programs. After the EP-3 incident, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld ordered the temporary suspension of military-to-military contacts with China. He sought a more balanced and reciprocal relationship, arguing that the PLA had been using the exchanges to gather intelligence (Rumsfeld 2011:314).

In June 2001, Rumsfeld ordered the resumption of limited contacts on a case-by-case basis, but it wasn't until late April 2002, when Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao, who was also Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, visited the US that it was agreed that the two countries would begin talks on resuming bilateral military contacts.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman subsequently visited Beijing and discussed the principles of transparency, reciprocity and consistency in military-to-military contacts with PLA Deputy Chief of Staff General Xiong Guangkai and Defense Minister General Chi Haotian (Kan 2014a:58).

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration shifted policy to focus on the global war on terrorism. At the same time, the second North Korean nuclear crisis broke out in late 2002. Washington and Beijing sought to strengthen their cooperation in response to these global and regional security challenges. After a two-year hiatus, the 5th Defense Consultative Talks were resumed in December 2002, although the US side stated that no major progress could be reported on issues such as transparency and reciprocity in bilateral military exchanges (Rhem 2002).

In September 2003, USS *Cowpens* and USS *Vandegrift* became the first foreign naval ships to ever visit Zhanjiang, Guangdong Province, the home port of the PLA Navy South Sea Fleet. A month later, the PLA Navy destroyer *Shenzhen* and supply ship *Qinghai Lake* visited Guam—also a first (Kan 2014a:59). In October 2003, Central Military Commission Vice Chairman and Defense Minister General Cao Gangchuan visited the US, seven years after his predecessor had made the last visit. General Cao and Secretary Rumsfeld held ‘productive and constructive’ talks and agreed to more exchanges in the coming years. However, the bar was set low enough not to raise expectations. Rumsfeld characterised these exchanges as ‘appropriate, local, and beneficial’ (Gertz 2003).

The Cao visit and the subsequent, albeit still limited, resumption of military-to-military exchanges ushered in a period of uneven development, with both progress and setbacks. Over the past 15 years, US–China military-to-military ties have expanded to include more frequent high-level visits, functional exchanges, regular consultation and dialogue, educational programs, and joint exercises. Top Chinese leaders and Central Military Commission chairs, from Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, have visited the US. Most if not all uniformed Central Military Commission vice chairmen have visited, as have all Chinese defence ministers.

Similarly, US defence secretaries from Donald Rumsfeld to Chuck Hagel¹⁵ and all serving chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have visited China. US service chiefs and especially PACOM commanders visit China regularly during their tenure, and those visits have been reciprocated by visits of ranking PLA officers, including defence ministers, department heads, service chiefs and regional commanders.¹⁶ The PLA Navy commander, Admiral Wu Shengli, has visited the US many times and has regularly hosted his American counterparts since he assumed the post in 2007, the most recent one being the US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral John Richardson.¹⁷ Even as the US Navy conducts FONOPs within 12 nautical miles of the artificial islands China has built in recent years, Wu characterised relations between the two navies as the ‘best in history’ when meeting with a visiting US naval delegation in late 2015 (Blanchard 2015).

The Pentagon and the PLA have also maintained regular contacts at the deputy chief of the general staff/undersecretary level and function-level working groups on issues ranging from maritime safety to regional security, and have established new contacts. This has included the annual Defense Consultation Talks, the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement meetings, the Defense Policy Coordination Talks and, since 2011, the Strategic Security Dialogue under the rubric of the US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue.¹⁸ In 2007, the two sides set up a defence telephone link. The past few years have also witnessed the signing of the MoU Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters (2014) and annexes, and the MoU on Notification of Major Military Activities CBM Mechanism (2014), which includes a military crisis notification mechanism for the use of the defence telephone link (2015) (Kan 2014a, USDoD 2016:111–145). In addition, functional exchanges have been established and become extensive. They play a critical role in facilitating mutual understanding and cooperation at the lower level and are an indispensable fabric for overall bilateral military relations. Significant efforts and time have been committed to maintaining and promoting such ties.¹⁹

Over the years, US–China military-to-military exchanges have expanded to include naval port calls, exchanges between the national defence universities (such as Capstone delegations), war and staff colleges, and logistics and military medicine institutions, and more frequent joint exercises in the areas of HADR, anti-piracy (off Somalia

and the Gulf of Aden), and search and rescue, among others. The PLA has been invited to observe and participate in multilateral military exercises (such as RIMPAC and Exercise Cobra Gold, which involves Thailand, the US and Singapore) (Kan 2014a).

Port calls by naval ships have constituted another component in US–China military contacts.

In 2014, for the first time, the PLA Navy participated in the multinational RIMPAC exercises. Two years later, five PLA Navy ships attended the 2016 exercises, which involved 27 navies. The PLA Navy taskforce also conducted joint training with ships from a US carrier group before heading to Hawaii (LaGrone 2016b, Spitzer 2016). Port calls by naval ships have constituted another component in US–China military contacts. As a sign of building confidence and mutual trust, top PLA leaders have been granted access to US military bases, facilities and aircraft carriers, while the US Defense Secretary and top military leaders have been granted visits to the Beijing Aerospace Control Center, the PLA Second Artillery Corps (renamed as the PLA Rocket Force) command centre in western Beijing and China’s first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*.

Exchanges of delegations composed of mid-level military officers and joint exercises have taken place as well (Kan 2014a). In late 2015, Joint Base Lewis–McChord in the Tacoma area in the state of Washington hosted 80 Chinese military personnel for a week-long exercise in preparation for natural disasters. In the latest in a series of exchanges between the two armies, the objective was to practise enhanced collaboration so they could ‘bring a more timely response in a humanitarian disaster’ (Ashton 2015). PLA Navy Taskforce 152 visited Florida and Hawaii and conducted joint exercises with the US Navy in the Atlantic, including maritime communications, rescue missions and fleet operations (Shim 2015, Chang Jun 2015).

Finally, at the Track 2 level, there have been increasing opportunities for military officers (either retired or serving, but in their private capacity) and security analysts to engage in in-depth discussions on bilateral, regional and global issues. Regular forums include:

- the Pacific Forum CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) – China Foundation for International Strategic Studies strategic dialogue
- the US–China Strategic Dialogue sponsored by the Naval Postgraduate School and the Pacific Forum CSIS
- Track 1.5 US–China conferences on arms control and disarmament sponsored by the Middlebury Institute’s James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and the China Association of Arms Control and Disarmament
- the Sanya Initiative that involves retired senior US and Chinese general officers
- the Xiangshan Forum, which is the Chinese version of the Shangri-la Dialogue and which has attracted participants from a growing number of countries and militaries in recent years.

These Track 1.5 and Track 2 activities have often included retired and serving military officers from both countries and have covered strategic nuclear, military confidence building and regional security issues. For example, the Sanya Initiative has drawn retired US and Chinese general officers, while the Xiangshan Forum has attracted hundreds of military officers and security analysts (Cossa et al. 2015, Glosney et al. 2014, Potenza 2012, Val 2016, CNS 2016, Schwarck 2015).

Sino-US military-to-military exchanges have also experienced setbacks over this period, especially when the political relationship has turned sour. Despite the modest progress noted above, military relations have continued to be hampered by strategic distrust, divergent interests and priorities and, most of all, US arms sales to Taiwan, over which the PLA has suspended bilateral military ties in strong protests, including by cancelling high-level visits (Carpaccio & Gienger 2010, Hille 2010).

US critics of the bilateral military exchanges argue that the process has yielded very little (and nearly nil) of the stated objectives and expected results—from transparency on Chinese military modernisation programs and reciprocity in military exchanges to enhanced mutual understanding and true cooperation at the operational level. Some say that this has become engaging for the sake of engagement rather than on substance; others suggest that the exercise is futile, given the different and at times diametrically opposite goals that the two militaries set for the bilateral exchanges. Indeed, many argue that few of the objectives stated by US defence officials can be said to have been achieved. So the question becomes: why bother (Campbell & Weitz 2005, Hooper 2006, Cheng 2011)? Indeed, there have been suggestions that the US should discontinue inviting the PLA Navy to participate in the multinational RIMPAC exercises out of concerns that such engagements could expose US military intelligence to espionage and help to enhance China's war-fighting capabilities (Clark 2016, Lubold 2015).

From Washington's perspective, the growing frequency with which the PLA seeks to intercept and disrupt US intelligence and surveillance activities, for instance, is having a negative impact on bilateral military exchanges.

From Washington's perspective, the growing frequency with which the PLA seeks to intercept and disrupt US intelligence and surveillance activities, for instance, is having a negative impact on bilateral military exchanges. The Pentagon has accused the Chinese military of unsafe interceptions, such as when it flew a J-11 jet within 50 feet of an American surveillance plane on a 'routine' patrol in international airspace near Hainan, in violation of an accord that the two governments signed in 2015 (Schmidt 2016, Ali 2016). Beijing denied the charge, stating that the Chinese fighter jet maintained a safe distance while intercepting the US aircraft, and calling for the US to stop future surveillance flights. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei urged the US to stop such 'close-in reconnaissance activities', seeing them as a threat to Chinese national security (Chun Han Wong 2016).

Washington is also objecting to China's massive land reclamation in the South China Sea, calling on China and other claimant states to halt the building of artificial islands and vowing to challenge Beijing's sovereignty over the vast maritime territories by conducting FONOPs within 12 nautical miles of China-claimed/manmade features (Gady 2016, Perlez 2016). Amid growing tensions, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter postponed a planned visit to China as part of his Asia trip. Instead, Carter visited the Philippines and India and boarded a US aircraft carrier in the region. The Chinese responded by refusing a scheduled port call to Hong Kong by the aircraft carrier USS *John C Stennis* and its accompanying vessels (Sherwell 2016, Lubold 2016).

While most Chinese analysts acknowledge that bilateral military ties have evolved to include exchanges at multiple levels, some point out that, in terms of substance, they have yet to return to the level prior to 1989; for example, military sales and defence technology transfers have been completely removed from the current programs. And US–China military cooperation remains confined to the non-combat areas of peacekeeping, HADR and anti-piracy (Xu Hui 2010, Han Bing et al. 2014). However, even during the last decade of the Cold War, when the US and its Western European allies relaxed controls on defence and dual-use technologies and selected military equipment sales, extensive restrictions were maintained on exports and military-to-military exchange programs between the PLA and the Pentagon. The US foreign military sales programs were the exception rather than the rule in bilateral military ties (Meijer 2016, Jing-dong Yuan 1995b).

The Chinese side maintains that, despite progress over the years, further developments in military-to-military relations are hampered by the so-called 'three obstacles' that the US side needs to remove: US arms sales to Taiwan, US reconnaissance in China's EEZs, and the restrictions imposed by US domestic laws on exchanges and technical cooperation between the Chinese and US armed forces (see Han Xudong 2011). Beijing argues that US arms sales to

Taiwan remain a serious impediment to improving bilateral military ties. Between 2001 and 2015, the US approved close to \$21 billion in arms sales to Taiwan; during the same period, \$5.1 billion worth of arms were delivered (Kan 2014b, Forsythe 2015).

President Bush's decision to approve \$6.5 billion in arms sales and his controversial 'whatever it took to help defend Taiwan' statement in April 2001, early in his administration, strained bilateral relations (Boese 2001). In 2008, Chinese Defense Minister General Liang Guanglie reacted strongly when the Bush administration announced \$6.4 billion in delayed arms sales to Taiwan, demanding that they be cancelled. The package included Patriot III missiles, Apache helicopters and parts for F-16 A/B jet fighters. Liang argued that the move created serious obstacles for military-to-military exchanges (Bodeen 2008).

After President Obama announced an \$6.4 billion arms deal for Taipei in 2010, the PLA cut off most contact with the Pentagon. Some Chinese analysts and retired PLA officers even suggested that China should impose sanctions on those companies involved in arms exports to Taiwan. Beijing turned down Gates's proposal for a fence-mending visit in June. However, it did allow the nuclear-powered carrier USS *Nimitz* to dock in Hong Kong, despite the growing tensions between the two countries. In September 2010, Deputy National Security Advisor Thomas E Donilon visited China and met with Central Military Commission Vice Chairman General Xu Caihou, who told Donilon that China valued its military relations and hoped that the dialogue channel would remain open (Wan 2010).

It wasn't until late 2010 that military contacts were resumed. At a defence ministers' meeting in Hanoi, Chinese Defense Minister Liang met Secretary Gates, for the first time in a year that the two countries' top military leaders had engaged in talks. This met the mandates set by both Hu Jintao and Barack Obama, who wanted the two militaries to engage more in order to avoid misunderstandings (Whitlock 2010, Stewart & Alexander 2010). Gates subsequently visited China in early 2011.

Other retaliatory measures that Beijing has resorted to in response to US arms sales to Taiwan and close-in surveillance and intelligence-gathering overflight and naval activities near Chinese territories have included disapprovals of port calls at Hong Kong by US Navy ships (2007 and 2014), a refusal of a US request to visit the PLA command centre in the Western Hills outside Beijing, and the cancellation of high-level exchange visits in response to what China considers as US infringement of Chinese sovereignty (Kan 2014a, LaGrone 2016c).

CHAPTER 4

Factors affecting bilateral military exchanges

US–China military contacts must be placed in the larger contexts of the overall bilateral relationship and the regional and global geostrategic power balances. China’s growing economic and military power is changing the geostrategic landscapes in the Indo-Pacific region in important ways. With this rising power comes increasing assertiveness in its foreign policy behaviour, including a much firmer position on territorial issues and more public denunciations of US-led alliances in what Beijing characterises as ‘a cold war mentality’ (Chou Xueping & Lu Kang 2014).

What’s most worrying, from the Pentagon’s perspective, is increasingly aggressive Chinese harassment of US ships, which could potentially result in major incidents. The US, meanwhile, is also reorienting its strategic posture after a decade of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The pivot or rebalancing to Asia reflects Washington’s recognition of the region’s critical importance to long-term US strategic interests and its determination to maintain a leadership role.

In other words, whatever the public announcements and notwithstanding perhaps sincere intentions, the US and China remain strategic rivals as much as partners (Campbell 2016, Shambaugh 2013, Wines 2010). The difference in recent years, however, is that both Beijing and Washington have sought to maintain a stable relationship, work on differences and seek to expand cooperation where they can. One astute China observer points out that this relationship has reached a level of stability and maturity, buttressed by strong economic interdependence, growing people-to-people contacts and a sense of pragmatism (Jakobson 2016).

There’s recognition at the highest level of the importance of stable US–China military-to-military contacts. At a recent event hosted by the National Committee on US–China Relations, four former secretaries of defence (Harold Brown, William Perry, William Cohen and Chuck Hagel) all emphasised that such contacts remain the best way to avoid a future war between the two countries. They also supported the expansion of bilateral military relations, including hosting PLA officers at American military institutions such as West Point (Mehta 2016).

On the Chinese side, the PLA’s engagement with the US military has given it a sense of respect and more knowledge about the world’s most powerful armed forces. The ties also constitute an important part of Chinese military diplomacy, which has expanded over the years with more high-level exchanges, port calls, joint exercises and military educational programs (Wang Qiaobao 2013, Hagt 2015). However, compared to the US foreign military programs, the PLA’s experiences remain limited in scope and number. For instance, each year the US Pacific Command conducts nearly 1,500 exercises and other engagement activities with its foreign military counterparts, while its US Navy component is involved in 700 training events and 170 exercises (Allen 2015).

While differences exist and tensions continue between the US and Chinese militaries, the two sides appear to agree that they should maintain contacts despite these problems. One of the signs of maturity in bilateral military ties is that, unlike in the past, communication channels remain open even if tensions between the two sides are rising. Since 2002, the International Institute of Strategic Studies has organised the Shangri-La Dialogue to discuss regional

security issues. In recent years, US and Chinese defence and military leaders have engaged in sharp exchanges and differences over a range of issues at the dialogue. Indeed, the Shangri-La Dialogue serves as another important forum for the two militaries to interact and discuss issues of mutual concern on the sidelines (Sun Ru 2007).

Another recent example of this maturity is the communication between top Chinese and US military leaders. PLA Chief of Staff General Fang Fenghui recently requested discussions with his counterpart, Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, via a video link-up. They covered a number of issues, such as the South China Sea, and Fang called for both sides to exercise restraint and manage differences constructively. Dunford proposed that both sides make efforts to bolster risk reduction mechanisms in bilateral military ties.²⁰

In the same way, PLA Navy commander Admiral Wu talked to his US counterpart, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson, by video conference after a US guided-missile destroyer sailed within 12 nautical miles of one of China's manmade islands in the South China Sea. Both agreed to maintain dialogue and follow protocols to avoid incidents (Rajagopalan & Shalal 2015).

Despite growing tension, the Pentagon has remained committed to openness and inclusiveness in its approach to bilateral military relations, including its invitation to the Chinese military to participate in the 2016 RIMPAC exercises (Eckstein 2016, Seck 2016).

Clearly, both China and the US want to maintain stable military ties during times of tension to minimise negative impacts and avoid misunderstandings. One senior PLA analyst, Yao Yunzhu, points to the successful completion of all bilateral military exchange programs planned for 2014 (more than 60 items) as an indicator of a mature military-to-military relationship. In her view, one area that deserves greater attention is the protection of sea lines of communication. In this area, the two sides can work together to guarantee freedom of navigation. However, she also cautions against unrealistic expectations. For instance, the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act remains a major obstacle to further developments in bilateral military ties. Yao emphasises that conflicting strategic interests rather than misunderstandings are the main cause of bilateral strategic distrust (Churchman 2015).

CHAPTER 5

Limitations on Sino-US military relations

Military diplomacy and cooperation range from alliance relationships to minimum CBMs, the purpose of which is to avoid the risk of war. The current Sino-US military relationship remains tilted to the latter end of the spectrum. It's neither an alliance relationship nor a directly adversarial one. While there have been some notable achievements over the past 15 years, continued progress has been impeded by a number of factors, prominent among which are the US's and China's fundamentally different views on key issues relating to regional security, institutional interests, different agendas, inconsistent implementation of policy on the US's part, and poor communication between the US administration and Congress.²¹

There are important differences in the security outlooks and military strategies of the two countries. The US sees its continued military presence and active engagement in regional security through bilateral defence alliances as crucial to regional stability. It relies on quick reaction and the ability to intervene as an important post-Cold War strategic requirement. The Chinese, on the other hand, want to regain regional prominence and freedom in dealing with what they regard as either domestic or purely bilateral issues. China's recent change of attitude towards multilateral security structures and its emphasis on security cooperation partnerships are directly opposed to US reliance on bilateral security alliances and forward military deployments (Swaine 2011, Friedberg 2011, Goldstein 2011).

China's post-Cold War security policy aims at maintaining a relatively stable and peaceful environment for economic development, building comprehensive national strength, protecting territorial integrity, achieving reunification with Taiwan, and participating in and supporting regional security cooperation through dialogues and consultation.

A number of potential points of conflict between China and the US could lead to military confrontation if mismanaged. While against openly challenging the US primacy, many Chinese analysts advocate ways and means that can constrain US power and influence, if not exclude its presence in Asia. They include greater support of international and regional institutions, partnerships with other great powers, and the exercise and promotion of Chinese soft power, including seeking to shape international norms even as China is being socialised into accepting them. Some even suggest that China should re-examine its perspective on alliances, especially on how external balancing could strengthen China's position vis-à-vis US-led hub-and-spoke systems (Wuthnow et al. 2012, Mingjiang Li 2009, Mingjiang Li & Chen Gang 2010, Pu 2011, Feng Zhang 2012). Indeed, President Xi has called on the country to make greater efforts in shaping the international environment even as Beijing continues to place economic development on the top of the policy agenda. Here, *yousuo zuowei* (有所作为 achieving something) doesn't contradict *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦 keeping a low profile) but requires China to be more active—although still selective in its diplomacy.

The 2000 National Defense Authorization Act, which Beijing considers to be one of the three major obstacles to a normal military-to-military relationship, imposes on the Department of Defense specific restrictions on its military

contacts with China. The Defense Secretary may not authorise any military contact with the PLA that would result in the inappropriate exposure of specified advanced US military capabilities:

- force projection operations
- nuclear operations
- advanced combined-arms and joint combat operations
- advanced logistical operations
- chemical and biological defence and other capabilities related to weapons of mass destruction
- intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations
- joint war-fighting experiments and other activities related to a transformation in warfare
- military space operations
- other advanced capabilities of the US Armed Forces
- arms sales or military-related technology transfers
- the release of classified or restricted information
- access to a Department of Defense laboratory.²²

Even with these restrictions in place, successive US defence secretaries have sought to develop and improve bilateral military ties, hoping that such exchanges would enhance cooperation between the two militaries while not contributing to the PLA's war-fighting capabilities. Indeed, the legislation doesn't prohibit the Secretary of Defense from engaging with the PLA.²³

Robert Gates, who served in that role in both the Bush and Obama administrations, sought to strengthen the military-to-military relationship, including by expanding dialogues in the areas of nuclear weapons, space, missile defence and the cybersphere. Gates often reminded his PLA counterparts that 'sustained and reliable ties insulated from political ups and downs were essential to reduce miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation.' This refers, of course, to Chinese cut-offs of ties in response to US arms sales to Taiwan, but also to Chinese objections to US close-in surveillance flights and naval ships (Gates 2014:525).

Two developments have important implications for US efforts to engage the Chinese military. The first is growing Chinese military capability. China's nuclear and conventional missile developments and its A2/AD strategy pose serious threats to US power projection in the Western Pacific, challenge Washington's ability to intervene during crises either to protect its own interests or to support and protect allies and partners in the region, and undermine the credibility of its extended deterrence.

As China deploys anti-ship and land-attack ballistic and cruise missiles with extended ranges and improved precision, US forward-based troops, depots and naval forces at sea, such as aircraft carrier battle groups, are becoming vulnerable targets. US allies and partners, concerned about being attacked, may become reluctant to provide bases to the US military. Coupled with steep cuts in US defence budgets in the coming years, America's commitments to Asia will have to undergo significant changes and adjustments to meet the new challenges (Mahnken et al. 2012, Horowitz 2012).

The second critical development is the potential for maritime confrontation between China and the US, especially where military activities in the EEZs are concerned. Soon after a 2009 incident, in which a PLA Navy frigate crossed the bow of the USNS *Impeccable* at a range of 100 metres without first making contact, the Commander of US Pacific Command, Admiral Timothy Keating, testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, stating that the incident was 'certainly a troubling indicator that China, particularly in the South China Sea, is behaving in an aggressive, troublesome manner and [is] not willing to abide by acceptable standards of behavior or "rules of the road".' In other words, even where disputes over the content of rights such as freedom of navigation remain unsettled, parties should still respect the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, which holds that vessels should operate safely in the vicinity of other vessels (Odom 2010).

On the other hand, China's concern over US aerial and maritime surveillance and intelligence gathering must also be seen in the context of its ongoing defence modernisation programs, including the Jin-class Type 094 nuclear ballistic-missile submarines, which are based in Sanya on Hainan (Buszynski 2012:146). Each Type 094 will carry 12 Julang-2 (JL-2) missiles, a modified version of the DF-31 with a range of 7,200 km (Norris & Kristensen 2011). While the Pentagon's 2011 report on the Chinese military recognised that 'the JIN and the JL-2 will give the PLA Navy its first credible sea-based nuclear capability', it pointed to repeated delays in their deployment (USDOD 2011:3–4).

China and the US have in the past 15 years been entangled in a number of high-profile incidents, such as the 2001 EP-3 mid-air collision, the 2009 *Impeccable* incident, the 2013 *Cowpens* incident and others. The existing bilateral CBMs, such as the Maritime Military Consultative Agreement and the annual Defense Consultative Talks, have only recently been supplemented with the two MoUs signed in late 2014, which have established clear 'rules of the road' (Valencia & Guoxing Li 2002, Pedrozo 2009).

The delay has largely been caused by the major differences between China and the US on the merits, the modality and the sequence for establishing CBMs. For Washington, developing CBMs, especially where overlapping interests and maritime encounters are growing, is critical to managing potential disputes and preventing minor incidents from escalating to a major confrontation. Beijing, on the other hand, continues to insist that strategic trust and intention must precede any particular CBM; specifically, it's reluctant to acquiesce to US rights to carry out military surveillance and intelligence gathering close to China's territorial waters (Medcalf et al. 2011).

But, as the EP-3 and *Impeccable* incidents demonstrate, without proper rules of the road, more such incidents could occur and risk escalation, leading to military conflicts that neither side would benefit from. In this context, the 1972 US–Soviet Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents at Sea would still be valuable (Lynn-Jones 1985). However, as the commander of US Navy Pacific Fleet suggests, there are more than philosophical differences impeding a healthy development of the military-to-military relationship. Beijing is deeply distrustful of US intentions in the region and it continues to link the Taiwan arms sale issue to the development of comprehensive US–China military ties (USDOD 2012). Granted, due to the two countries' differences in historical experiences, threat perceptions and strategic cultures, there will be different expectations and interpretations and therefore different degrees of receptivity to developing CBMs. Nonetheless, they shouldn't be allowed to become excuses and obstacles to developing mechanisms for the safe management of maritime operations (Griffiths 2010).

These developments warrant enhanced rather than reduced military-to-military contacts to manage these differences through better communication and understanding. While past incidents reflect structural changes in power relations between China and the US, their occurrence and the apparent inability and unwillingness to resolve them promptly are also indicative of a lack of ground rules. Military leaders of both countries have become increasingly aware of the potential risks of miscalculation and escalation and appear to be taking steps to address them—albeit at a slow, perhaps glacial, pace. In this context, the recent momentum to further enhance bilateral military exchanges at the senior level is a good sign.²⁴ In addition, at the functional level, the two militaries can begin exploring areas of cooperation in non-traditional security, including joint anti-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden. Other areas of cooperation include peacekeeping, search and rescue, and military medicine.

One question about maritime CBMs is whether and to what extent the Cold War era US–Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement could be applied to the US–China case, or even replace the current Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA). While the Cold War agreement played an important role in mitigating accidents and harassment at sea and, most critically, keeping the communication channels open even when political relations encountered serious problems, such as after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, there's no consensus that it would be suitable for mitigating US–China maritime rivalry (Winkler 2014, Griffiths 2010, Pedrozo 2012).

Some Chinese analysts reject even the analogy, arguing that China doesn't have the capability or the intention to challenge US military primacy, as the former Soviet Union had, in a Sino-US confrontation. Others suggest that maritime encounters between the two countries aren't deliberate, violent or confrontational at the strategic level, and don't pose a challenge to the existing international maritime order. But misperceptions and even

miscalculations remain serious risks that need to be managed. In this context, the MMCA has played a useful role in mitigating potential US–China maritime escalation but, as the number of maritime encounters between the two navies has increased, amendments or even negotiation on new formulae could be considered (Xu Hui 2010).

However, it's acknowledged that the MMCA clearly has its limitations. Its implementation or even general meetings on it can be affected by the political atmosphere. As a consultation process, the MMCA doesn't contain substantial provisions on military operations. This deficiency wasn't addressed until 2014, when the two militaries signed MoUs on this matter. There's no agreement on what constitutes a violation. The US side could accuse the Chinese aircraft and vessels of engaging in unsafe and dangerous behaviour, while the Chinese side could contend that US close-in intelligence gathering and surveillance threaten Chinese security and are the main causes of incidents (Zhang Yuan & Hu Dekun 2014).

One of the motivations for establishing and expanding US–China military-to-military contacts is to promote mutual understanding, develop trust and introduce mechanisms so that misunderstanding, miscommunication and miscalculation can be avoided as the two militaries increasingly operate in each other's proximity.

One of the motivations for establishing and expanding US–China military-to-military contacts is to promote mutual understanding, develop trust and introduce mechanisms so that misunderstanding, miscommunication and miscalculation can be avoided as the two militaries increasingly operate in each other's proximity. To those ends, political and military leaders on both sides have sought to develop and maintain a stable military-to-military relationship. However, they hold different views about how the desired ends can be achieved. One of the strategies proposed emphasises engagement at all levels, both top-down and bottom-up. For the US, bottom-up appears to be more important. There are many areas of common interests where the two sides can strengthen cooperation: counterpiracy, peacekeeping, military medicine, search and rescue, HADR, educational exchanges, responses to infectious disease outbreaks, and so on. These expanded contacts could increase the stakes and therefore the costs for China if it were to cut them off during times of crisis and tension (Harold 2013).

However, there are deep individual and institutional barriers to deepening US–China military-to-military relations. For example, the US doesn't have regular access to PLA operational or combat officers in order to observe and understand how senior Chinese officers think and act. This is changing slowly as bilateral military exchanges at the functional level begin to include more PLA officers in operational commands, groomed to become future military leaders. However, access to regular PLA combat units, other than showcase units, remains rare.²⁵

One study indicates that efforts to build trust between US and Chinese flag officers and general officers would be futile and therefore have minimum operational value. Individual barriers would include differences in worldviews, while military and political structures would limit freedom of contact. One important observation is that PLA interlocutors often include so-called 'barbarian handlers'—military scholars and researchers with no operational and command experience whose job is to interact with the Western visitors. While this is slowly changing, it remains a significant impediment (Nolan 2015).

Unrealistic expectations of what military engagement can accomplish could carry serious consequences if those expectations aren't met or misunderstood. For example, the US is perceived to place more value on military-to-military liaison with the PLA than vice versa, enabling the PLA to apply 'carrot and stick' diplomacy, including by cutting off military contacts to signal political displeasure. Institutional impediments include Chinese Communist Party control of the PLA, the PLA's role in crisis resolution, differing organisational structures, the shorter tenure of US flag and general officers, and the US Congress (Nolan 2015). In addition, there's a mismatch

between the long tenures of PLA officers handling US–China military exchanges (up to 15 years on the job) compared to the tenures of their US counterparts (usually 2–3 years). This gives the PLA a greater advantage in institutional memory and knowledge of the history of the bilateral military contacts.²⁶

While the US and China adopt different approaches to bilateral military ties, the overall political relationship inevitably sets limits on the potential for military-to-military exchanges. From the US perspective, even though reductions in tensions and miscalculations serves important purposes, it's also constrained by the National Defense Authorization Act and the risk that expanded ties may contribute to the enhancement of Chinese military capabilities.

The PLA, on the other hand, is informed by its perspectives on global and regional strategic affairs and remains less than sanguine about future developments in the depth and scope of bilateral military exchanges. Indeed, it's been known for dragging its feet and at times being less than helpful to its political masters, especially when the latter have appeared to be weak and irresolute in exercising control over the military.

Notorious instances in which PLA actions seem to have caught the civilian leadership unawares include the antisatellite and J-20 tests in 2007 and 2011, respectively. The J-20 tests took place just as US Defense Secretary Robert Gates was to meet President Hu Jintao, China's top leader and putative head of the Central Military Commission, who apparently wasn't aware of the tests (Bumiller & Wines 2011). However, such instances are few and far between and often attributed to the strength or weakness of the top civilian leadership or the style of leadership of individual commanders-in-chief in enforcing civilian control over the military (Nan Li 2015).

In practice, the US–China military-to-military relationship will always remain subordinated to the larger strategic and political objectives of the two countries. When top political leaders make commitments to improve military contacts, military leaders seek to find ways to implement some of the agenda, although usually in non-sensitive areas such as NTS. Other areas could include joint studies by the two militaries' think tanks, more joint exercises in areas of anti-piracy, search and rescue, and HADR, and more multinational exercises, such as RIMPAC (Yung 2015).

In fact, some PLA analysts argue that the emerging maritime strategic balance provides opportunities for the US and Chinese navies to cooperate in a number of areas. While competition between the two powers continues and could even intensify, globalisation, China's deepening dependence on seaborne commerce and the need to develop maritime governance allow Beijing and Washington to search for cooperation in transport safety, port security and joint actions in response to maritime piracy, illicit trafficking and natural disasters. Granted, this remains a minority view (Yang & Fang 2015).

The two militaries have both benefited from a stable relationship in some areas over time, such as in reducing mistrust, managing conflicts and avoiding major miscalculations. There are also areas in which the two militaries already have begun to cooperate, such as HADR, anti-piracy and trilateral security dialogues involving the US, one of its allies and China to enhance military CBMs (Kamphausen & Drun 2016).

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

The Sino-US military relationship has undergone uneven development over the past 15 years. There have been periods and areas of growing cooperation and ones of suspicion and confrontation. While China and the US have managed to maintain or repair bilateral military relations after major setbacks, they have yet to resolve their core differences.

Thus, under pledges to cooperate and build a healthy, stable relationship lie deep rifts on a number of issues. China objects to US arms sales to Taiwan, US missile defences and military intelligence-gathering activities and has concerns about US strategic intentions in the Indo-Pacific. The US continues to raise questions about China's lack of transparency on defence modernisation, military threats against Taiwan, growing assertiveness in territorial disputes with neighbouring countries, development and deployment of A2/AD capabilities that threaten the US's forward military presence, and harassment of US ships in the South China Sea in a direct challenge to its long-held principle of freedom of navigation. Incidents could ensue, with serious consequences for both countries.

US interests and objectives in engaging the Chinese military include gaining a better understanding of the armed forces of a rising power, hoping to shape the latter's perspectives and foster a stable and cooperative relationship for regional stability, and developing and putting into place confidence building and crisis management mechanisms to minimise or avoid unintended incidents and to prevent disputes from escalating to major military confrontation. At the same time as the PLA develops and deploys greater military capabilities and Chinese foreign policy becomes more assertive, the US military is responding by deploying major defence assets and forces to the Indo-Pacific region, developing future battle-winning capabilities, and strengthening alliances and forming security partnerships in the region.

The PLA has often considered and implemented bilateral exchanges as part of its broader agenda of promoting US-China relations as a 'new type of major-power relationship'. It also seeks to demonstrate that it's an equal of the US military while using the expansion or suspension of military ties to influence US policies, including on arms sales to Taiwan and US alliances in the region.

This deep strategic distrust and growing rivalry set limits to the depth and scope of Sino-US military exchanges. However, even as the two militaries may be preparing for the next war with each other, they have nonetheless found common interests in cooperating in a range of non-traditional security areas, such as HADR, search and rescue, peacekeeping, military medicine, and anti-piracy and terrorism operations. The two sides have also institutionalised bilateral contacts over the past 15 years through multiple levels of regular visits, dialogues and functional exchanges, some of which have in recent years weathered serious differences, such as on US arms sales to Taiwan, that in the past had led to the suspension of bilateral military ties.

US-China military contacts have been and will remain an important barometer of not only overall bilateral relations between the world's largest and second-ranked economies, but also the PLA's influence over, or compliance with,

Chinese foreign policy. Clearly, the PLA has been given an outlet to voice its perspective and preference on issues crucial to its institutional interests. Its influence becomes greater when the Chinese civilian leadership is weak and needs the PLA's support, or over issues on which the armed forces' professional views carry the strongest weight.²⁷ For example, one could expect that the PLA's assessment of the US's development and deployment of the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons or the so-called 'Third Offset' will carry significant weight in Chinese national security policy deliberation, as it could potentially threaten and neutralise Chinese A2/AD capabilities by blinding PLA space-based systems and thereby preventing them from being used for pre-emptive strikes (Biddle & Oelrich 2016, Morris et al. 2015, Walton 2016). However, the scope and extent of such influence will remain highly selective and limited, especially with a strong leader such as Xi Jinping in command of the military.

Managing this relationship won't be easy. But the key is to keep trying, as it's too important to be left unattended, to be swayed by the vicissitudes of the general bilateral relationship during a crucial period of transition in international politics and adjustments for both countries. However, for a more stable bilateral military relationship to develop and to be sustained, longer term strategies must emphasise engagement, exchange and a better understanding of each other's interests, priorities and policy options.

From the US perspective, this also requires patience, strategic focus and the right approaches, including on the question of how to convince the PLA that it's in its own institutional interests to be more open and engaged in bilateral and multilateral settings, and to take on greater responsibility for regional peace and stability. Particularly important may be greater contacts between the two militaries at the officer corps level, where both sides are of increasingly similar makeup in terms of education and selection criteria and share the ideals of professionalism.

For the PLA, it's also essential that Sino-US military contacts be maintained even when—in fact, especially when—the political relationship experiences difficulties. Those links may be critical in avoiding military conflict as tensions rise in the South and East China seas over territorial issues and over US FONOPs and close-in intelligence-gathering activities. In this regard, the PLA has as much responsibility as the US military for managing bilateral differences and averting actions that could result in further incidents and escalation.

Never before have the US–China military exchanges been so critical, and their mismanagement so precarious. The Trump administration's China policy could put Washington and Beijing on a collision course. Top US national security officials are already calling for tougher positions on the South China Sea and the Chinese Government is vowing to defend its vital interests in the region. During this period of rising tension and uncertainty, the least that the two militaries can and must do, is to exercise great caution to avoid taking actions that could heighten tensions and risk escalation, and strictly follow the rules of the road that have been put in place in the past few years. How well the world's two largest militaries can manage their relationship will have a significant impact on peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. The stakes could not be higher.

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NOTES

- 1 On how to manage this delicate relationship, see Steinberg & O'Hanlon (2014b).
- 2 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2015.
- 3 '中美军事交流中的四大障碍' ['Four major obstacles in Sino-US military exchanges'], 中美关系简报 [US-China Relations Briefing], no. 7, 16-30 June 2009.
- 4 See also Holz & Allen (2010).
- 5 Statement of Dr Kurt Campbell, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 6 November 1997.
- 6 These are drawn from the Department of Defense's annual reports on the Chinese military power (US DoD, various years); statements by high-ranking US defence officials; and interviews conducted by the author with US defence analysts and officials (including uniformed personnel) at the following institutions: RAND, National Defense University, Defense Group Inc., Congressional Research Service, East-West Center, Pacific Forum-CSIS, Pacific Command (PACOM) and the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. At the requests of the US interviewees, names, specific dates and places of these interviews remain anonymous and undisclosed.
- 7 Robert Gates, Shangri-La Dialogues, 2010; Gates (2014:415-416).
- 8 After the Obama administration came into power, it was decided that the annual Pentagon report on the Chinese military should also publicise the benefits of bilateral military exchanges with the PLA, as well as assessing developments in the Chinese military's capabilities and their impacts on regional and global security. Interview, US defence analyst.
- 9 US defence analysts point out that partisan bickering can also explain the typically hawkish views of congressional Republicans regarding bilateral military exchanges.
- 10 '军事学者:中国不再愿意让美单方面主导两军关系' ['Military scholar: China no longer willing to allow US to unilaterally determine bilateral military ties'], 南华早报 [South China Morning Post], 17 April 2014.
- 11 'Full transcript: Secretary of Defense Ash Carter's Naval Academy commencement address', *Capital Gazette*, 27 May 2016,
- 12 Li Yan, '美舰队司令发南海言论试探拉东盟, 中国要反对' ['US fleet commander talks about the South China Sea to draw ASEAN to its side, and China should oppose this'], *CCTV Military Channel*, 27 March 2015..
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- 14 Chinese analysts suggest that US-China military ties date back to the 1940s, when the US Army Observation Group, commonly known as the 'Dixie Mission', visited Yan'an, the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party and the PLA. See Zhang Fang (2016c:47-62).
- 15 The Obama administration's last Defense Secretary, Ashton Carter, did not visit China during his tenure; a previously scheduled April 2016 visit was postponed to later in the year but never materialised. See Lubold & Page (2016).
- 16 A detailed record of these visits is in Kan (2014).

- 17 'Navy leaders meet amidst South China Sea friction', *The Maritime Executive*, 18 July 2016, online. Wu stepped down as the PLAN Commander in late January 2017.
- 18 'China, US to launch strategic security dialogue', *Xinhua*, 6 May 2011, online.
- 19 For instance, to invite and coordinate PLA Navy participation in the RIMPAC exercises requires years of planning within the PACOM multi-year planning cycles and the commitment of significant time and resources. Visits by PLA delegations require discussions and negotiations of detailed itineraries, protocols and other specifics. Interviews, US defence officials.
- 20 'China, US should manage South China Sea differences constructively: Chinese general', *Reuters*, 13 May 2016; 'US–China military leaders talk amid tensions', *DoD News*, 13 May 2016.
- 21 See Randy Schriver's observations in Yates et al. (2000).
- 22 The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, Public Law 106–65, Security. 1203. Military-to-Military Contacts with Chinese People's Liberation Army.
- 23 Interview, US defence officials and analysts.
- 24 'Senior Chinese, US military officers hold phone talks', *Xinhua*, 12 March 2013.
- 25 Interview, US defence analyst.
- 26 Interview, US defence officials.
- 27 On this, see the editors' introduction in Saunders & Scobell (2015).

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	anti-access/area-denial
ALP	Australian Labor Party
CBM	confidence building measure
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
FONOP	freedom of navigation patrol
HADR	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
MMCA	Military Maritime Consultative Agreement
MoU	memorandum of understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
R&D	research and development
RIMPAC	Rim of the Pacific Exercise

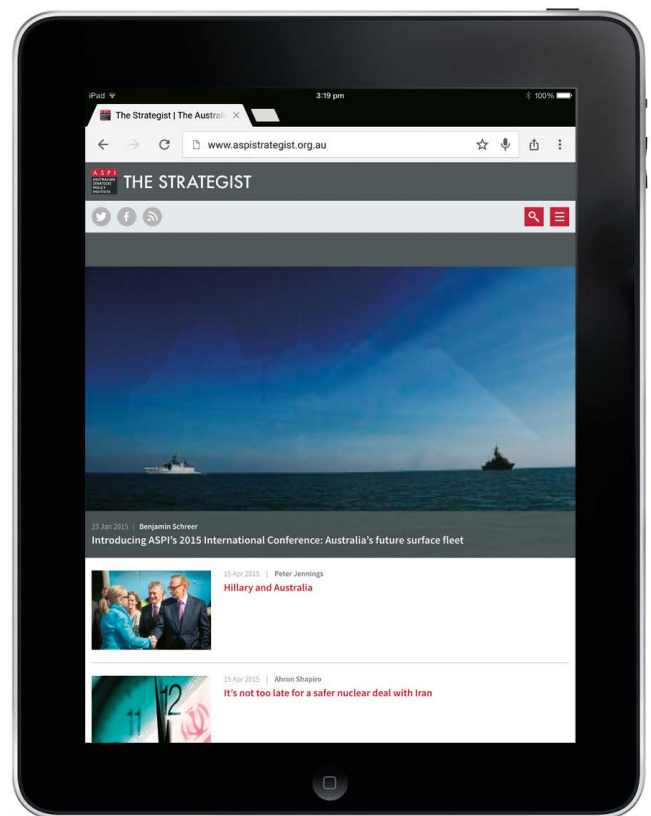
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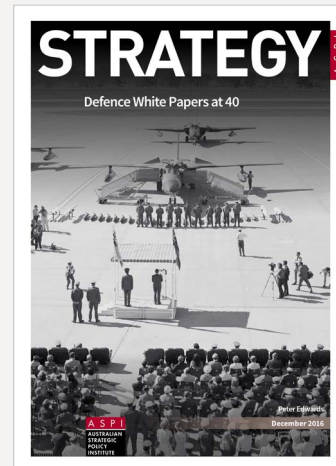
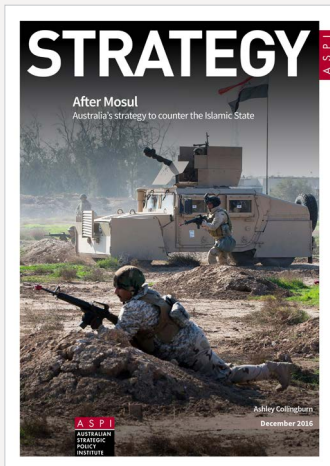
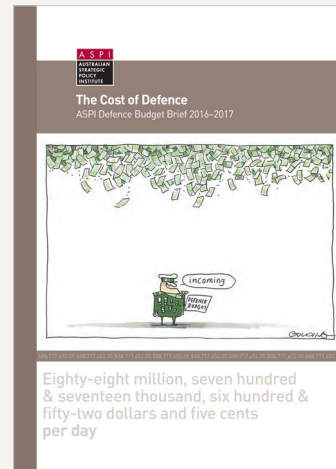


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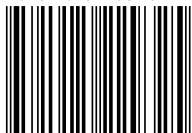
Dragon and eagle entangled

Sino-US military exchanges, 2001–2016

US–China military exchanges constitute an important aspect of bilateral relations between the reigning superpower and a fast-rising one. Initiated in the wake of the establishment of diplomatic relations during the Cold War when the two countries were quasi-aligned against the Soviet threat, military-to-military contacts between China and the US have evolved over the years, and have by and large followed rather than defined the overall Sino-US politico-diplomatic relationship. Increasingly, however, how the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Pentagon view their bilateral military ties and manage their conflicts and expectations and, as far as possible, seek to better understand each other and explore areas of cooperation will have a significant impact on regional peace and stability. It will also reflect the general state of the bilateral relationship during a period of monumental changes in international politics and in particular in the Indo-Pacific.

This ASPI Strategy takes stock of Sino-US military contacts over the past 15 years and provides some preliminary assessments of the evolution and implications of this critical aspect of perhaps the most important bilateral relationship in the world today. It seeks to achieve three objectives. First, it identifies, compares and discusses the rationales, expectations and approaches of the two militaries regarding the relationship. Second, it outlines and reviews bilateral Sino-US military contacts from 2001 to 2016, essentially covering both the George W Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Third, it analyses and evaluates US–China military ties over this period and provides some explanations of their promises, progress and pitfalls.

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