

China's Military Diplomacy in an Era of Change

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Since the 1990's, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become a ubiquitous presence on the world stage, economically, diplomatically, and in its security relations. Whether in international institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, in diplomatic circles as high-ranking Chinese officials traverse the globe, or in economic affairs, China's footprint is no longer confined to the Asia Pacific region.

For the first time in the history of the PRC, China has global economic interests complementing its global political interests and, potentially, a widening security agenda. The ideologically-driven international policies of the Mao era have been overtaken by economic and security-driven imperatives. Pragmatic considerations of energy supply, two-way investment and trade, technology transfer, international shipping, and major investment projects dominate Chinese overseas efforts.¹ Political considerations are still important, but diplomacy is now much more in the service of an economic agenda than in the past.

China is furthermore involved globally in an extensive variety of activities: scientific and technological conferences, military visits and exchanges, aid programs, peacekeeping operations, and bilateral and multilateral political activities. In so doing, it is entering into a web of international activities unprecedented in the history of the PRC, and one that, if it continues, will put China squarely in the camp of interdependent nations for whom conflict is a potentially dangerous disruption.

Given this larger context, how does China's military diplomacy fit into its overall foreign policy? What is the range of military activities that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and other Chinese government institutions undertake in the conduct of China's military

¹ Hank Kenny and Kristen Gunness, "Chinese Activities Worldwide and Implications for the United States," The CNA Corporation, Alexandria, VA, 2001.

diplomacy? What, if anything, has changed in China's approach to military diplomacy in recent years, and why?

China's Foreign Policy and the Role of Military Diplomacy

When examining how military diplomacy fits into China's overall foreign policy, the most fundamental point to make is that the PLA's conduct of foreign military relations is considered to be a strategic-level activity by the Chinese leadership. It is expected to support the larger foreign, diplomatic, political, economic and security agenda set forth by the leadership of the Party/State. In this regard, the "political" and the "military" are inseparable. The PLA's overseas military activities are viewed by both the PLA and China's civilian leadership as a political undertaking using military means for strategic reasons, not as a freestanding set of military initiatives conducted by military professionals for explicitly military reasons.²

For example, the 2004 White Paper on China's National Defense lists five national security goals. They are:³

- Safeguarding and promoting national development (i.e. economic development);
- Shaping the international environment favorably in China's interest
- Maintaining domestic public order and social stability
- Stopping separation and promoting reunification of Taiwan, and defending national sovereignty; and
- Modernizing the PLA in line with the development of other militaries.

It is interesting to note that, of these five goals, only the last two are explicitly military in nature.

A second point to emphasize when looking at how China's military diplomacy fits into its foreign policy is that when it comes to conducting foreign military relations, the PLA is not an independent actor. There is a large body of data that indicates that the PLA has to coordinate with the Party-State bureaucracy, depending on the type of bilateral military initiative contemplated, and with which country it is to take place. By way of example, evidence indicates that the PLA coordinates with the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group of the Party Central Committee on US-related military activities such as military-to-military agreements

2 David Finkelstein, "Engaging DOD: Chinese Perspectives on Military Relations with the United States," The CNA Corporation, Alexandria VA, 1999, p. vii.

3 China's National Defense in 2004, government White Paper, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20041227/index.htm>

that require a PLA signature on behalf of the PRC, ship visits to or from China, or visits of high-level delegations. In addition, the PLA coordinates its military diplomacy activities with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on a routine basis.⁴

Activities Employed by China in its Military Diplomacy

The PLA employs a variety of activities, programs, and venues in conducting military diplomacy. These include such traditional activities as high-level strategic security dialogues, military functional exchanges, professional military education exchanges, the import and export of military weapons and equipment, and participation in peacekeeping operations. Other, more recent additions include increased participation in Track 1.5 and Track II dialogues, regional multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and, most significantly, the PLA's willingness to participate in combined military exercises with Kyrgyzstan and Russia.

Broadly, China's activities with regard to military diplomacy can be grouped into four categories:

- Strategic-level activities
- Regional activities
- Professional military education exchanges
- Cooperation with other nations in non-traditional security areas

Strategic-level Activities

This category includes Chinese efforts to shape the international security environment to support Beijing's national defense objectives at the strategic level through its use of military diplomacy. The PRC has three basic ways in which it does this: high-level defense consultations and dialogues with key global actors, exchanges between high-level military delegations, and arms transfers.

Defense consultations and strategic dialogues: China has engaged in frequent high-level consultations and strategic dialogues with countries with which it has strategic-level areas of cooperation or which are in areas of potential conflict. Recent highlights include:

- Strategic consultations between China and Russia, including meetings between the General Staff headquarters of the two countries' militaries in 2003-2004;

⁴ David Finkelstein, "Engaging DOD: Chinese Perspectives on Military Relations with the United States," The CNA Corporation, Alexandria VA, 1999, p. 50.

- Ongoing consultations with the United States on non-proliferation and bilateral security issues, including the Defense Consultative Talks, the eighth round of which took place earlier this month⁵; and
- Strategic dialogues with other actors that China perceives as important in shaping the international security situation, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and Japan.

Arms transfers: Arms sales and military technology transfers have a longstanding role in Beijing's conduct of military relations with other nations, and this remains the case today. China's arms sales have decreased markedly since the 1980s, when the emphasis was largely on the sale of arms and technology to help fund the PLA.⁶ Today, arms sales are apparently being used less as a money-making proposition, and more as a strategic end to accrue political influence with countries that the PRC perceives are important to its national interests. To wit, the bulk of China's arms sales are to African nations where it has energy interests, such as Sudan, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Libya, or to countries in the Middle East where it has longstanding political and economic interests, such as Iran, or to regional allies such as Pakistan and North Korea.⁷

In terms of arms imports, the PLA has increasingly sought to acquire state of the art capabilities to support its military modernization program. Strikingly, whereas China's arms sales are largely done to support its political and economic agenda (i.e. the military supporting the political), when it comes to arms imports it is the political and economic agenda that is supporting the military.

For example, in the spring of 2004 China's civilian leadership used economic, diplomatic, and political elements of national power to pressure the European Union to lift its arms embargo. China's relationship with Russia is another example. Closer political and economic relations between these two countries have manifested in increased sales of Russian arms and technologies to the PRC—which are also helping to keep Russia's cash-starved defense industries afloat.⁸

5 “China, US hold defense consultations on closer military ties,” *Xinhua*, June 8, 2006.

6 For statistical data on China's arms sales, see SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), arms transfers database, <http://www.sipri.org/contents/armstrad/>.

7 Congressional Research Service Report to Congress, “China and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missiles: Policy Issues,” April 5, 2005; Thalif Deen, “How to Curb China's Arms Trade,” *Asia Times*, June 11, 2006; and SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), arms transfers database, <http://www.sipri.org/contents/armstrad/>.

8 While different sources cite different statistics on the exact number of Russian arms exports to China, most seem to indicate that Russian arms exports to China equal about 50% of total Russian arms exports. One article quoted the Russian Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) as stating, “China constitutes the largest single importer of post-Soviet Russian arms and military equipment, with purchases

Military exchanges: The PLA has an ambitious program of military exchanges. These include foreign visits by PLA Army, Air Force, and Navy personnel. According to the 2004 Defense White Paper, China has sent high-level military delegations to over 60 countries and hosted delegations from more than 70 countries. Recent highlights include Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan's visits to North Korea and Vietnam in 2006, and his 2005 visits to Russia and Central Asia, as well as to Egypt, Tanzania, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Other trips abroad by high-ranking Chinese officials include the President of National Defense University's visits to Israel, Jordan, and Ukraine in 2004.⁹

Regional Activities

Many of the PRC's foreign military activities are aimed at bolstering relations with countries on its periphery, shaping its regional security environment, and ensuring that tensions do not erupt into armed conflict on China's borders. This is a tall order given that China has borders with fourteen countries, many of which encompass restive areas.¹⁰ Over the past decade, the PRC has made extensive efforts to settle border disputes and shore up relations with its neighbors. While this has led to *decreased* potential for state on state hostility, the PRC faces an *increasing* number of transnational threats such as drug and weapons smuggling, human trafficking, and international organized crime, to name only a few.

China's regional military diplomacy activities include:

- State to state military protocols with friendly border nations, such as the 1996 "agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field Along Border Areas," signed with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan;
- Participation in military exercises with Russia and, to a far lesser extent, India; and
- Participation in (and leadership of) regional forums that deal with security issues such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

China's relations with Russia deserve a special mention. Beyond the PRC's significant imports of Russian arms these two countries have over the past several years grown closer both politically and in the security realm. Since the turn of the century, border demarcation issues have been settled, friendship treaties have been signed, and joint statements espousing common viewpoints on the international order have been released. A recent example would

ranging between 30% and 50% of Russia's entire annual deliveries." Isenberg, David, "How Russia Keeps China Armed," Asia Times, November 19, 2004.

9 China's National Defense 2004, Appendix III: Major Military Exchanges with Other Countries.

10 For a complete listing of China's border countries see the CIA World Factbook for China, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ch.html>.

be the pronouncement calling for a timetable for withdrawal of US forces from Central Asia, and in particular from bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.¹¹

This trend toward cooperation has become apparent in military relations between the two countries as well. “Peace Mission 2005,” the Russian-Chinese combined military exercise, made headlines around the world. Conducted under the auspices of an anti-terror exercise, it was the largest combined military exercise the PLA had participated in. According to articles in the Russian press, a future exercise is in the works: shortly after the conclusion of “Peace Mission 2005” Russian media ran an announcement by the chief of Russia’s General Staff that a second set of Russian-Chinese combined military exercises would be held in 2007, this time under the oversight of the SCO.¹²

Professional Military Education Exchanges

A third type of activity the PRC engages in with regard to military diplomacy is professional military education exchanges through the PLA’s professional military education system. This includes sending PLA officers abroad to attend foreign institutions, bringing in foreign instructors to teach as visiting professors and hosting foreign officers at Chinese military academies.

Examples of these exchanges include the National Defense Science and Technology University, which has sent officers for graduate training at foreign scientific research institutes and higher educational institutions, as well as received foreign military delegations and visiting scholars. In addition, the PLA’s Science and Engineering University has established an exchange program with the United States Military Academy at West Point.¹³ Finally, National Defense University has hosted foreign military exchange students through its Foreign Training Department.

In addition to education exchanges, the PLA also participates frequently in Track 1.5 and Track II dialogues with US think tanks, as well as government and academic institutions.

Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security Areas

China has stepped up cooperation with other nations to counter non-traditional security threats. In the post 9/11 era, Beijing has continued to cooperate with the US and others on countering terrorism, and has led several regional combined counter-terrorism exercises

11 China Eurasia Forum, selected news summaries, May-July 2005, <http://www.chinaeurasia.org/headlines.html>. To find the text of Sino-Russian joint statements, see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China website, www.fmprc.gov.cn

12 “Russian-Chinese 2007 Exercises to be held under SCO,” RIA Novosti, December 1, 2005.

13 “PLA University of Information Engineering Graduate Student Enrollment Ad 2005,” *PLA Daily*, February 7, 2005.

through the SCO. In addition, China has increased its participation (albeit somewhat contentiously) in peacekeeping operations, sending peacekeepers to Cambodia, the Congo, and Liberia.¹⁴

Other non-traditional security threats loom on the horizon. It is possible that China, and the PLA, will have to deal with large-scale medical crises brought about by, for example, the spread of AIDS, another SARS outbreak, or a pandemic caused by Avian Flu or another such virus. It is conceivable, given this type of potential crisis, that the PLA will be forced into cooperating with other militaries on crisis response and containment.

Finally, it is worth noting what China does NOT do in its military diplomacy. The one element of military diplomacy that Beijing has not, and still does not, pursue today, is the path of forming traditional military alliances. By not entering into formal military alliances, Beijing allows itself the flexibility to pursue both its military and political agenda; and ensures that it has most freedom possible to shape its interests.

Changes in China's Approach to Military Diplomacy

While the PLA has employed many of these activities, programs, and venues for the past several decades, there has been some change in its approach to military diplomacy. The first, and most obvious change has been the PLA's willingness to conduct combined military exercises with its neighbors. There are likely many reasons as to why the PLA decided to conduct such exercises: Chinese officials pointed to the Sino-Russian combined exercise as a chance to practice a counter-terrorism scenario, while foreign observers speculated that the exercise was aimed at countering U.S. influence and showing off the new level of Russian-Chinese cooperation. The Russian press noted that the exercise was a chance to showcase Russian arms and boost arms sales to China.¹⁵ Still others speculate that these combined exercises allow the PLA to experiment with some of its new doctrinal concepts and test evolving command and control arrangements.

While this may all be true, one can also point to the PLA's foray into combined exercises as a natural outgrowth of China's increased regional presence in Central Asia, and its role as a regional power. As China plays more of a leading role in Central Asia—whether through institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or economic investments in energy in Russia and Central Asia—it will likely continue to bolster regional cooperation, both politically and militarily, thus contributing to its national defense goal of shaping the international security environment.

14 China's National Defense 2004, Appendix VI: Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations

15 "Russian Media Question Aims of Joint Exercise with China," RIA Novosti, August 31, 2005.

A second change has been the PLA's increased participation in international efforts to counter non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, and maritime piracy issues. China's increased participation in countering these activities is indicative of two things. It recognizes that it needs, in many cases, international cooperation to solve these issues in and around its own borders. And Beijing sees that China's role as a global power requires it to be a participant in these issues.

Implications of Change in China's Military Diplomacy for the United States

Given these changes, there are at least three implications of China's military diplomacy for the United States.

- First, as China becomes an ever-stronger economic power, economic incentives will continue to clash with defense-related concerns, and this could have repercussions for US interests. The debate over lifting the EU arms embargo is likely just the beginning of many such discussions.
- Second, China's approach to military diplomacy is largely tied into its political agenda; therefore, when dealing with the PLA or when looking at China's military diplomacy activities as a whole, one must also consider Beijing's larger political agenda.
- Third, the PLA clearly conducts a comprehensive program of military diplomacy, and its overseas military activities are likely to become even more numerous as it continues on the path of military modernization. The more the United States can engage China in professional military exchanges, Track II dialogues, and other avenues to enhance mutual knowledge and transparency, the better off both countries will be in the future.