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Media Diplomacy and U.S.-China Military-to-Military Cooperation

By Thomas A. Hollihan and Zhan Zhang

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MILITARY-TO-MILITARY COOPERATION**

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For general inquiries or to request additional copies of this paper please contact:

USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School

University of Southern California

3502 Watt Way, G4

Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281

Tel: (213) 821-2078; Fax: (213) 821-0774

cpd@usc.edu

www.usepublicdiplomacy.org

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In January of 2011, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the United States for a series of conversations with President Barack Obama. Following that visit, the two leaders issued a joint statement affirming “the need for enhanced and substantive dialogue and communication at all levels: to reduce misunderstanding, misperception, and miscalculation; to foster greater understanding and expand mutual interest; and to promote the healthy, stable, and reliable development of the military-to-military relationship.”¹

Later that month, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates visited China to meet with his Chinese counterparts and to argue for closer military-to-military cooperation. Military leaders in each nation have long distrusted each other, but nonetheless Gates invited General Chen Bingde to visit Washington.² General Chen visited the United States in March; a few months later, in July, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited China for a series of meetings with the leadership of the People’s Liberation Army. Mullen’s visit was the first by the senior commander of the U.S. military in Beijing in four years. While in China Mullen observed Chinese fighter planes conduct close air exercises over an airfield, watched counterterrorism training maneuvers on an army base, and toured a Chinese submarine at a naval base.³

Military-to-military contacts serve two important purposes. First, they give commanders from each nation the opportunity to forge genuine first-hand relationships with potential adversaries that might prevent missteps, misunderstandings, or accidental encounters from escalating into a full-scale military confrontation that neither country desires. Second, they create opportunities for public diplomacy as each nation communicates its foreign policy objectives through the media to multiple audiences. Each nation communicates with its own domestic audience, with the public audience from the other nation, and with the leaders and publics of the other nations in the

region. Viewed from this perspective, public diplomacy is a form of strategic communication where arguments are created in order to advance particular goals.⁴ Strategic communication may involve traditional foreign policy, international diplomacy, military strategy, and domestic politics.⁵

This essay examines the public arguments regarding military-to-military cooperation between the U.S. and China as a form of media diplomacy. As Gilboa noted, media diplomacy may include speeches, press conferences, interviews, tours of significant sites, media events, or even managed leaks. Media diplomacy permits policymakers or political leaders to “use the media to send messages to leaders of rival states and to non-state actors,”⁶ and it also allows nations to send signals that can be interpreted and understood differently by different audiences. The objectives of foreign policy are pursued as the heads of state, diplomats and military leaders seek to influence public audiences through op-eds and media interviews, in which their positions can be explained and put into the context of the other country’s and region’s needs, issues, and challenges. The goal of such communications is to influence reporters, editors, academic leaders, community leaders, and key decision-makers in government ministries or other organizations that can in turn impact public opinion. If public opinion is favorably influenced, then the political environment might be shifted so that it is possible for each nation to achieve its foreign policy objectives.⁷

The current media environment is complex. Public audiences draw upon multiple sources of information and construct different and often competing narratives as they evaluate foreign policy arguments. People judge and value facts differently because they rely upon their own unique histories, cultural memories, social knowledge, notions of what constitutes good reasons, and normative rules for argumentative praxis.⁸ Foreign policy arguments and public diplomacy today has become what Joseph Nye calls “a contest of competitive credibility.”⁹ While previously the strength of a nation’s economy or the power of its military may have determined success, today a nation’s success may be determined by whose story wins.¹⁰

The world today is composed of globally linked communication networks where “competing ideas shape the course of events.”¹¹ Even in a nation such as China, known for its controlled press and authoritarian government, elite and educated audiences are increasingly exposed to messages from an array of media sources, and have access to social media that permits them to exchange information with each other and with people living overseas. Kuang Wenbo described how in China the development of an era of “omnimedia” created by new low-cost information technologies has left audiences with more freedom and government less in control.¹² It is increasingly difficult for any government to control its own story because the contemporary media-scape consists of multiple competing stories.¹³

This study considers three questions: 1) How did U.S. and Chinese government spokespersons use the media to communicate their objectives and to reach various audiences? 2) Were there substantial differences in media coverage of the talks on military-to-military collaboration in U.S. and Chinese media? And, 3) How did the mediated arguments and media discussions of the visits reflect the foreign policy interests of each nation?

The U.S. Military Role in the Pacific

Since the end of World War II the U.S. has been the dominant military power in the Asia-Pacific, and it deploys significant numbers of personnel in the region. A series of postwar bilateral treaties increased allies’ dependence on the U.S. and created a structure for long-term U.S. hegemony in the region. The cornerstone of this policy was the Mutual Security Treaty, forced on Japan as the price for ending the formal U.S. military occupation. The U.S. presence has served several purposes over the years, most importantly the encirclement of the Soviet Union (and now Russia), China, and North Korea. The U.S. acquired sites for training, refueling, and maintenance, and bases from which U.S. military interventions could originate. The most visible evidence of the U.S. role in the region has been the presence of the U.S. Navy. The 7th fleet,

headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan, deploys 50 to 60 vessels, 350 aircraft, and approximately 50-60,000 personnel in the region. These forces can be quickly supplemented by Pacific Fleet forces operating from Hawaii. U.S. ships frequently make port calls around the neighborhood, and each visit constitutes an act of public diplomacy and is an overt expression of U.S. military might and interest in the region.

The U.S. security umbrella prevented Japan and South Korea from developing their own nuclear weapons systems. Advocates of the U.S. presence, both in the United States and in allied nations, would cite the past sixty-plus years of peace and stability in the region as evidence that these expenditures have borne fruit. U.S. hegemony in the region demands, however, a permanent and substantial presence of U.S. military assets now and into an unending future. This is at a time when the United States is facing huge budget deficits, is embroiled or is just recovering from costly land wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and when the American people are being asked to reduce government expenditures by surrendering very popular entitlement programs at home. The commitments to Asia have been in place for so long that they have been taken for granted in Washington, and have not been seriously questioned or discussed in either presidential or congressional campaigns. Lind argued that: “because the hegemony strategy is so alien to American and international foreign policy traditions, and so potentially costly in its open-ended strategic and budgetary commitments, many of its supporters have suggested that it should be kept secret from the wider American public, since it is so at odds with what most Americans think.”¹⁴ Lind further argues that the American people, if they really understood the nature of our hegemonic commitments in Asia, might balk at the notion that they should shoulder so much of the cost to provide global security while their allies get off so cheaply.

The Rise of China

The Asia-Pacific is profoundly important to the rest of the world. The twenty-one nations that belong to the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum account for 40 percent of the world’s population, 54 percent

of its economic output, and 44 percent of its international trade. The rapid economic development of the region has stimulated global economic growth.¹⁵ The nation that has most accounted for this growth has been China, where, under Deng Xiaoping, the economy was changed from a centrally planned system largely closed to international trade to a market-oriented system emphasizing manufacturing for export. As a result, the Chinese economy has experienced unprecedented expansion. China now has the second largest economy in the world and the International Monetary Fund has projected that it will pass the United States and become the world's largest economy by 2016.¹⁶

China has now decided to modernize its armed forces. In recent years, China has updated its land-based ballistic and cruise missile program (improving both their accuracy and range), enlarged its submarine fleet, and completed a new submarine base on Hainan Island. China now has approximately 66 submarines compared to the U.S. fleet of 71, and some experts claim that it could have 85 to 100 submarines by 2030. It has also significantly improved its communication, intelligence, and cyber-warfare capabilities. In addition, China has been working on anti-satellite weapons and lasers that could help shield the nation from incoming missiles.¹⁷ Finally, in an achievement that will be both symbolic and strategically important, China is developing its own aircraft carriers and a new generation of jet fighters.¹⁸

The increasing military capability of China has been accompanied by a more assertive foreign policy. China has in recent years contested – or from a Chinese point of view has been challenged by– Vietnam (over the Paracel and Spratly Islands), the Philippines (over the Spratly Islands), South Korea (over Socotra Rock), and Japan (over the Okintori and Sankaku/Diaoyu Islands). China has asserted claims over large parts of the South China Sea.¹⁹ In defense of their claims of sovereignty, Chinese naval vessels have actively confronted and harassed American and Japanese ships operating in the area, including recent incidents with the *U.S.S. John S. McCain* and a survey ship called the *U.S.N.S. Impeccable*.²⁰

China has undeniable interests at stake. The reunification with Taiwan is a long-standing foreign policy objective of the Beijing government, and this alone is justification for the military expansion. In addition, however, the Chinese remember the humiliation China suffered at the hands of the imperial powers in earlier decades, and there is a strong commitment that such indignities can never be permitted to occur again. Finally, China's economic vitality demands access to oil and other minerals and the ability to move finished manufactured goods by sea. Currently, almost 80 percent of China's oil imports transit the Indian Ocean, and thus could be subject to a blockade by a dominant U.S. naval force.²¹ Building up naval resources is a means to send a clear message to potential adversaries that China intends to protect its vital interests.

The new territorial claims, build-up of naval resources, and even the confrontational acts may be part of a long-term strategy not only for asserting its strategic foreign policy interests abroad, but also for intensifying feelings of nationalism at home. As Medcalf and Heinrichs observed:

The growth of regional navies, and their more conspicuous use in asserting national interests, reflects the increased influence of nationalism in defence [sic] policy and posture. This seems especially so in China.

Nationalism remains a key pillar of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party.

This is beginning to manifest itself, among other ways, in the emerging forcestructure of the PLA-N: for instance, national pride would seem a major reason for China's decision to acquire an aircraft carrier. China's naval nationalism might thus be seen as a 'prestige strategy': the Communist Party seeking to reinforce its domestic position through its external security posture.²²

The build-up of Chinese military assets, the continuing presence of U.S. forces in the region, the more assertive Chinese territorial claims, and the response by other nations (especially Japan, Vietnam,

and South Korea) has led to a significant increase in what are known as “incidents at sea.” As Medcalf and Heinrichs also noted: “The term ‘incidents at sea’ encompasses a wide range of maritime activities and situations. It can include maritime encounters that are either deliberate or inadvertent and involve any combination of ships, submarines and aircraft from military, auxiliary and civil organisations [sic] of different countries – in this case, major powers of Indo-Pacific Asia.”²³ These incidents may include the challenging or “buzzing” of aircraft flying over open waters, the shadowing of surface vessels traversing the area, and even the collision between a Chinese fishing trawler and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel. One type of incident that represents a unique danger is known as “shouldering,” or “dangerous or aggressive manoeuvring [sic] by one or more vessels in close proximity to those of another country. This kind of action is especially risky when opposing ships have no option but to take evasive action to avoid imminent collisions, as occurred during the Impeccable incident in March 2009.”²⁴ The Chinese vessels appear to have become more aggressive in their patrols and have been more willing to “shoulder” U.S. and Japanese ships.²⁵ There is a danger that such confrontations could expand into other even more dangerous interactions between rival powers such as “accidental or reckless firing during military exercises; simulated attacks on ships or aircraft; electronic jamming of communication equipment; illuminating opposing ships, especially bridges, using powerful searchlights (known as ‘dazzling’); and firing flares.”²⁶ Such activities significantly increase the risk that an adversary might miscalculate or misread the situation, and escalate the situation beyond control. The initial spark to provoke the confrontation might not even come in an interaction between U.S. and Chinese forces; an escalation resulting from an incident between China and Japan, for example, might immediately and severely test the seriousness of the U.S. commitment to protect Japan, and thus severely limit the choices available to U.S. military and civilian leaders.

Both nations have acknowledged that military-to-military engagements were necessary and could reduce tensions. For example, when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates met with his

Chinese equivalent, he stated: “We are in strong agreement that in order to reduce the chance of miscommunication, misunderstanding or miscalculation, it is important that our military-to-military ties are solid, consistent and not subject to shifting political winds.”²⁷ The Chinese Defense Minister General Liang Guanglie responded by issuing his own statement acknowledging that their meeting was “positive, constructive and productive,” while also declaring that the Chinese agreed on the importance of creating “sustained and reliable” military-to-military relations.²⁸

U.S. Media Diplomacy

U.S. media diplomacy toward China involves multiple ongoing meetings and press statements. The diplomacy began before the visits occurred, continued during each visit, and persisted when the visits were finished. The goal was to communicate that the United States was taking a moderate and even supportive position on Chinese military expansion, but also to express concern that a now powerful China was obliged to pursue more mature and nuanced foreign policy relations with its neighbors. Prior to departing for Beijing, Admiral Mullen directly expressed his commitment to improving communications between the two militaries. He declared in a public speech presented at the Center for American Progress that: “as many nations develop, they invest in their military but with greater military power must come greater responsibility, greater cooperation and just as important, greater transparency. When you talk transparency, particularly on security and defense matters, we inevitably come to the issue of military exchange. What the U.S., frankly, seeks, a sustained and reliable military-to-military relationship with China, is hardly unusual.”²⁹

The U.S. also communicated to the Chinese government, to its allies in the region, and to Americans at home, that it would not abandon its commitments to the region despite the economic challenges it currently faced or the rise of China. During his visit to Beijing, Admiral Mullen toured a university and answered questions posed by Chinese students. In one such encounter he declared:

“[The U.S. has] had a presence in this region for decades ... and certainly the intent is to broaden and deepen our interests here and our relationships here.”³⁰

Although the U.S. commander emphasized the positive commitments of his government, and the benefits that could be gained from cooperation, the U.S. media discussed the Chinese skepticism of U.S. motives and the fact that Mullen’s Chinese hosts openly scolded him during his visit. For example, Chen Bingde, China’s top army official, was described as having expressed “misgivings” about the U.S. decision to conduct naval exercises with the Philippines in the South China Sea at the height of recent tensions in June. The general was also said to have criticized U.S. plans to conduct “inappropriate” exercises with the Vietnamese Navy.³¹

The *New York Times*’ account of the Admiral Mullen’s visit emphasized that winning “rapprochement between the world’s leading military power and its fastest-rising one [was] a fiendishly difficult task,” and asserted that China was engaging in a “breakneck modernization of its creaky military machine.”³² The media frame was: while the United States was the steady, determined, and predictable power in the region, focused on the same set of commitments that had guided its policies, priorities, and partnerships in the Pacific since the end of World War II, China was upsetting the applecart, not only through its rapid economic development but also through its military investments and more assertive foreign policies. The newspaper article emphasized, for example, that China would soon have a new “still-secret class of advanced submarines,” a “seagoing missile” that “could strike ships as far as 1,025 miles away,” and “seven reconnaissance satellites.” The article conceded that at some level, “China’s military ambitions are understandable. The country’s global trade footprint and its reliance on foreign fuel and raw materials justify building a sophisticated and far-flung military force to secure its interests, just as the United States has done.”³³ Nonetheless, the article warned that the Chinese intended to use new military resources “to rein in American military power in the western Pacific,” and to serve “as a counterforce to the United

States Navy’s Seventh Fleet, which has dominated Pacific waters for a half-century or more.”³⁴

American diplomats, foreign policy experts, and military leaders were cited in Wine’s *New York Times* article as being concerned that China has not as of that time been willing “to sit down and tell us what they’re doing and what missions these new platforms and weapons are intended to achieve.”³⁵ The newspaper reported that Americans were anxious that the Chinese have been “ambiguous about their motivations” and unwilling to engage in the types of military-to-military conversations that can serve to build trust and enhance understanding.

The willingness of Admiral Mullen to use the media as a forum for his public diplomacy was most evident in an unusual op-ed piece he published in the *New York Times* when he returned from China. The essay used America’s most prominent newspaper and the newspaper most likely to reach elite audiences both in the United States and abroad, to argue the importance of enhancing U.S. – China military-to-military diplomacy. Mullen declared:

The military relationship between the United States and China is one of the worlds’ most important. And yet, clouded by some misunderstanding and suspicion, it remains among the most challenging. There are issues on which we disagree and are tempted to confront each other. But there are crucial areas where our interests coincide, on which we must work together. So we need to make the relationship better, by seeking strategic trust. How do we do that? First, we’ve got to keep talking. Dialogue is critical. A good bit of misunderstanding between our militaries can be cleared up by reaching out to each other. We don’t have to give away secrets to make our intentions clear, just open up a little.³⁶

Mullen discussed his visits with his counterpart PLA General Chen Bingde in the United States in May and in China in July.³⁷ He explained that when General Chen was in the United States he showed him the capabilities of the Predator drone and invited him to observe a live-fire exercise. In return, he said that during his visit to China

he toured the latest submarine, took a close look at a new fighter jet, and observed a counterterrorism exercise. What was most interesting about the article, however, was that Mullen emphasized that the conversations were candid and that there were disagreements. He acknowledged that the Chinese objected to continued U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and said they were told “the United States military will not shrink from our responsibilities to allies and partners.”³⁸ He declared that General Chen said that the Chinese “strategic intentions were purely defensive; I said that neither the skills they were perfecting nor their investments seemed to support that argument.”³⁹ Mullen, however, offered no apology for the frank disagreements. Indeed, he celebrated them because “at least we were talking.”⁴⁰

In the next section of the op-ed the Admiral identified the common interests that the United States and China shared:

We’re both maritime nations with long coastlines and economies dependent on unhindered trade. We both face threats of drug trafficking, piracy and the movements of weapons of mass destruction. We both want stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Pakistan. We both recognize the need for coordinated international humanitarian aid and disaster relief.⁴¹

The Admiral then mentioned how the two nations agreed to conduct joint missions aimed at countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Still, he acknowledged, there were substantial differences dividing the two nations: “We still don’t see eye-to-eye with China over military operating rights in the South China Sea. We still don’t fully understand China’s justification for the rapid growth in its defense spending or its long-term modernization goals. And we don’t believe that China should be allowed to resolve disputes in contested waters by coercing smaller nations.”⁴² Yet he also declared, in a bold and assertive American voice, that: “these sticking points aren’t all bad. It’s all right to disagree sometimes, to have substantial differences. In fact, sometimes bluntness and honesty are exactly what’s needed to create strategic trust. And we need still more of it.”⁴³ Mullen even leveled criticism of the political leadership both in China and the U.S.:

Our military relations have only recently begun to thaw but China's government still uses them as a sort of thermostat to communicate displeasure. When they don't like something we do, they cut off ties. That can't be the model anymore. Nor can we, for our part, swing between engagement and over reaction. That's why the commitment by President Obama and President Hu Jintao to improve military-to-military relations is so important. Real trust has to start somewhere. And it shouldn't be subject to shifting political winds.⁴⁴

Although Admiral Mullen's arguments and those of other government spokespersons in the U.S. were communicated to public audiences through many of the most influential media outlets in the United States – such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* – it must also be recognized that such arguments did not appear in isolation. The American public was also exposed to arguments taking a far more skeptical view toward U.S.- China relations. For example, a blog published by the influential conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation argued that “30 years of military-to-military interaction have not led to greater PLA transparency, increased safety in Sino-U.S. military interactions or greater cooperative approaches to challenge. Instead, efforts at engagement have led Beijing to believe that it has more leverage in military-to-military talks than Washington, because the U.S. appears almost desperate to have the talks, unlike China.”⁴⁵ The author further argued that:

Given the tight legal restrictions on what can be shared with the Chinese [imposed by the U.S. Congress], the one thing the talks do for the Chinese is to stave off the U.S. from pursuing its own national interest, for fear of jeopardizing U.S.-Chinese military-to-military links. This is consistent with Mao Zedong's tactic of ‘fight fight, talk talk (da da, tan tan). Mao would negotiate, not in order to “get to yes” and reach a compromise solution, but to buy time, color his opponent's views, and influence third parties. The ultimate goal never changed, whatever the negotiating positions.⁴⁶

The suggestion presented was that the Chinese were scheming, pretending to negotiate in good faith, while clinging to the same rigid

and ideologically focused political strategies that have defined the regime since it was founded. The argument characterized attempts to negotiate with the Chinese as dangerous and perhaps not always focused on “serving American interests.”⁴⁷

These oppositional arguments shaped the domestic political debates in the United States, especially given the approach of the 2012 elections. China has long been cast as a hostile and authoritarian regime, especially in much conservative political discourse, and rhetoric that depicted the Obama administration as weak and vulnerable in dealing with a deceptive, steely, and ideologically committed enemy committed to an aggressive policy of domination over its neighbors resonated with many Americans accustomed to the narratives of the Cold War. Countering such suspicions about China was an objective of Chinese media diplomacy.

Chinese Media Diplomacy

A quick and superficial glance at Chinese media reports would suggest that there were similarities in the statements issued by the United States and Chinese governments or the media discussions of the need to enhance trust and develop military ties between the two countries. Yet a closer reading reveals noteworthy differences in how the issues were discussed and in the concerns in each nation.

The Chinese media cited statements by Chinese leaders as supportive of greater military-to-military collaborations, but these same reports indicated that the Chinese authorities were more modest in assessing the likely impact of such visits. These reports emphasized that creating trust was a worthwhile objective, but that trust would not occur without mutual respect. For example, the Xinhua news service reported that Vice President Xi Jinping told Admiral Mullen: “I hope the two countries’ defense departments and armed forces will remove obstacles and promote their ties with mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation.”⁴⁸ This same theme was echoed by General Chen Bingde who told Xinhua “Only a country that respects others can gain respect from others.”⁴⁹

General Chen also chided his guests with the statement: “I hope heartfely [sic] that our U.S. friends understand this and treat others in a modest manner and act cautiously.”⁵⁰ The importance of crafting a relationship based on respect also made it into the *China Daily*: “It is probably difficult for the superpower that is the U.S. to accept the rise of China as well as alter its attitude toward its emerging economy. However, once the U.S. realizes the consequences of the strategic confrontation and they respect and care for each other’s core interests, there is no reason for the two sides to become opponents.”⁵¹

Chinese leaders communicated that they did not believe that the U.S. had been respectful of China’s interests in the region or of its national resolve. They condemned U.S. joint military drills with the Philippines and Vietnam near the South China Sea, U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, and U.S. surveillance operations off China’s coast. Xinhua declared these issues represented “China’s core interests and therefore [they] need careful handling on the side of the United States if it expects to have a healthy relationship with China.”⁵²

The *Global Times*’ English-language publication that is read by many foreign visitors and residents of China, and which also has a substantial audience outside China, published many articles about these “core” issues during and after Mullen’s visit. The arguments over China’s legitimate interests in the “South China Sea” were described as a reason for the lingering tensions, and for the “small-scale war of words” between Admiral Mullen and General Chen. “The US has repeated that it does not intend to intervene in the South China Sea issue, but its behavior has given off opposite signals,” *Global Times* quoted General Chen Bingde as saying after talks with his US counterpart.⁵³ In the same issue, the *Global Times* warned “In the South China Sea, the US has spoken of participating in ‘reconciling’ the disputes among China, Vietnam, the Philippines and others. There could be armed clashes if they stepped over China’s bottom line.”⁵⁴

The *Global Times* reported:

Since last June, there have been 20 joint military exercises held by the U.S. with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. U.S. military power appears ubiquitous. This year, the U.S. has held joint exercises with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam, all of which envisaged China as the potential enemy. These military exercises have unsurprisingly created quite a stir around China.”⁵⁵

The same article reported that in response to the U.S. actions China conducted joint exercises with Indonesia, Thailand, and Chile, and that there were advocates in China who wanted joint drills with many other nations. The article concluded: “in recent years, China has strengthened its military diplomacy. But compared to the U.S., China holds fewer joint exercises with other countries. This is related to China’s diplomatic mindset that focuses on building a harmonious world.”⁵⁶ The slow pace of Chinese efforts to reach out to conduct joint exercises was thus not a reflection of a desire for secrecy, but resulted from the Chinese mindset that it was important to avoid war, for “we are strongly against the use of violence and direct conflict, and this points to the type of military strategy we have adopted at the moment. What we do in exercises is to largely focus on self-defense, military rescue or anti-terrorism.”⁵⁷

China’s “bottom line” was mentioned by Wei Guoan, who emphasized the U.S. decision to sell new arms to Taiwan was an obstacle to the creation of mutual trust. The article declared: “as regards the Taiwan question, [the] US is expected to keep the current status to curb any further moves on China’s part. If the US clings obstinately to its own course and Taiwanese leaders resort to extreme measures, there might be an increasing possibility of collision.” Wei Guoan, also warned that “If [the] US continued to take similar moves, [and] keeps [sic] on selling weapons to Taiwan . . . [improved] Sino-US military relations could only be a wish and fantasy as their insincerity might politically cripple the mutual trust.”⁵⁸ Shi Yinhong, director of the US Study Center at the Renmin University of China, told the *Global Times* that because

the issue had divided the two nations over many decades it should be understood that “Contradictions over arms sales to Taiwan will neither disappear nor be solved overnight.”⁵⁹ He argued, however, that the nations should work to repair their relationship to avoid the potential escalation into conflict.

China also cast U.S. spy missions off its coast as insulting and as an assault on its sovereignty. At a joint press conference with Admiral Mullen on July 11, General Chen Bingde pointed out that recent missions by unmanned US surveillance spy planes had come as close as sixteen *nautical* miles off the Chinese coast, and that two Chinese Sukhoi-27 fighters attempted to intercept a US U-2 reconnaissance plane over the Taiwan Straits on June 29. *The Global Times* cited the official statement offered by the Ministry of National Defense: “we demand that the US respects China’s sovereignty and security interests, and take concrete measures to boost a healthy and stable development of military relations.”⁶⁰ The order to send out Chinese planes to intercept US spying activities was explained by Song Xiaojun, a Chinese military expert as “to show China’s resolution to defend its sovereignty” since “it is impossible for China to deploy the electronic countermeasures needed to set up a so-called protective electronic screen in the air to deter reconnaissance.”⁶¹ Another *Global Times* story mentioned the spy plane collision over the South China Sea in 2001 as an example of an incident that might have created a serious military clash to illustrate how direct military conflict would certainly disrupt the bilateral relationship. The article warned, however, that: “Ten years ago, China was much weaker than today. The incident was soon forgotten due to the 9/11 attacks. Had the collision happened today, the consequences would be far more difficult to predict.”⁶²

The declaration that China’s military expansion was for self-defense was not surprising, and certainly not new. Geng Yansheng, a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of National Defense declared “China . . . firmly abides by a defensive national defense policy, does not take part in military confrontations and does not pose a military threat to any country. We ask the U.S.... to stop remarks

and behavior that are not beneficial for mutual trust between the two militaries.”⁶³ The Chinese media explicitly contrasted China’s foreign and military policy with that of the United States. While the United States was a global hegemon eager to interfere in the interests of sovereign states around the globe, China was internally focused and had no such ambitions to dominate its neighbors. As the *Global Times* reported:

The US quartered hundreds of thousands of military troops, set up dozens of military bases and continuously planned battles across the world. After the Cold War ended, it actively expanded its forces to the east and started the strategic envelopment of China.

In contrast, China did not dispatch a single soldier or establish an overseas military base in foreign countries, let alone to attack and capture other territories.⁶⁴

Chinese spokespersons also suggested that the U.S. should not be anxious about China’s investments in its military since China remained far behind the U.S. in its military capabilities. For example, after Chen Bingde’s visit to U.S. early in May in 2011, Xinhua (Chinese version) reported that Chen had observed that although China made rapid progress in building its military strength in recent years, this progress was a compensation for the deficiencies of the past. Chen summarized the military distance between the U.S. and China as huge; and that while “US defense spending stands at \$700 billion a year and China spends 800 billion yuan (\$123.6 billion), China’s military equipment is about 20 to 30 years behind the U.S.”⁶⁵ Still another article argued: “the U.S. needs to adjust its attitude. It has to accept that China is growing into a militarily powerful country, and it should stop trying to frustrate this. Chinese military modernization is unstoppable, and any policy of blockade, sanction, or containment will only have a negative effect on Sino-American military relations. The only way forward is to welcome and accept the rise in China’s military strength.”⁶⁶

Admiral Mullen had declared before his visit to China that along with “greater military power must come greater responsibility,

greater cooperation and greater transparency”, the need for further transparency of China’s military development was one of the most important positions that Mullen communicated to his Chinese counterparts during his visit. To answer this, a story in the *China Daily* reported that the decision to allow U.S. Admiral Mullen to visit a military base near Beijing was a significant step forward for China and an expression from the Chinese military that it was willing to be increasingly transparent. “The (U.S.) must have noticed it,” said Zhao Weibin, a researcher at the Academy of Military Science run by the PLA.⁶⁷ This optimistic view was challenged by a more sober assessment offered by the *Global Times* that warned:

A handshake cannot hide the truth of how these militaries have studied to guard against each other. Should even a sliver of the worst scenarios imagined actually happen, it would mean calamity for the Asia-Pacific region. However, how to prevent this from happening is more important for the two militaries, and a key step for major powers in moving from a zero-sum game to win-win politics.⁶⁸

The newspaper also spoke directly to Chinese military leaders coaching a more transparent style of interaction, declaring “military officials do not have to fake smiles when they meet. They can guide both the media and public opinion. The Chinese military can make things better by being more direct, in addition to showing U.S. counterparts around Chinese military facilities the PLA’s low profile tradition unnecessarily compromises the intention it wants to display, and easily clashes with U.S. curiosity.”⁶⁹

To answer Admiral Mullen’s declaration that “the United States did not intend to abandon its commitments to the Asia-Pacific region”, *China Daily* published an article written by Wen Zhao, a senior research scholar from the Center for US-China Relations at Tsinghua University. Wen commented that “In fact, the U.S.’ increased military presence in the Asia-Pacific region is a very important part of its ‘return to Asia’ strategy, as indicated by Washington’s strengthened military presence in Northeast Asia in 2010 following the rise in tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in

Southeast Asia this year. Maintaining military superiority in Asia-Pacific, in Washington’s eyes, is an important way of sustaining and prolonging its predominant status in the region.”⁷⁰ According to the author, however, it is Mullen’s belief that China is developing military capabilities targeting the U.S. that challenges the long-established predominance of the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region. “The establishment of a long-term and reliable military relationship between China and the US is in the interests of both countries, as Mullen has claimed. It is hoped that the US will do more concrete work in a bid to clear away obstacles and push bilateral military ties to develop in a stable and sustainable fashion.”⁷¹

It is noteworthy that brazenly aggressive views were rare in the Chinese press. Most articles urged that “China should remain calm and continue its development to cope with any changes and work out a way for cooperation under the current framework of bilateral relations.”⁷² Such moderate views were also offered in detailed interviews conducted by the *Global Times* with three Chinese academics who specialized in international relations. For example, Shen Dingli, the Dean of Fudan University’s Institute of International Studies observed:

After ten years of fighting against terrorism, U.S. national strength is exhausted. With factionalism in U.S., the slowdown of the financial industry and the steady progress of economic globalization, the U.S. can hardly find a way out. So it has become more anxious and lacking in confidence. Over the past decade, the Chinese economy grew by 450 percent in dollar terms, which was 10 times the U.S. economic growth rate over the same period. The U.S. hasn’t adjusted to this new reality. But China’s stand-off with the U.S. is still within the normal range of international relations. A stable situation in Asia is still the core U.S. goal.⁷³

This moderate view was echoed by Shen Jiru, a research fellow in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who argued:

Through dialogues at various levels, we should warn the U.S. that its greatest interest in Asia lies in making joint efforts with China to build a kind of cooperative relationship based

on mutual respect and mutual benefits, in order to advance the two countries' common interests and meet the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. We should actively commit to the guiding principle of friendship and partnership with neighboring countries and the policy of securing an amicable, tranquil and prosperous neighborhood. We should try to build a harmonious Asia together with various Asian countries and prove by actions that China's development is an opportunity for Asia and the world instead of a challenge.⁷⁴

Huang Ping, the director of the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences argued: "China will stick to the opening-up policy and the road of peaceful development, mutual benefits and harmonious relationships. Specific problems will be resolved specifically. Divergences are settled through negotiations. As long as what the U.S. does is beneficial to China's peace, prosperity and stability, China will always welcome it."⁷⁵

The Chinese press did give a voice to a few hawks who expressed very different views. For example, an unnamed author identified as a strategic analyst of the Energy Fund Committee wrote in the *Global Times*:

The strategic goal of the U.S. in the South China Sea is maintaining a situation of no war and no peace. The U.S. has no direct concerns in Asian ocean disputes. So why does it take such a strong role in the dispute? This is part of the global strategy of the U.S. balancing power in different regions, as it has done in the past. It also interfered in the Taiwan Strait and causes tension on the Korean Peninsula. However, the U.S. feels that this is not enough to disturb China's development, and now it's trying to stir up Southeast Asia to make trouble for China. . . . China insists on peace. However, the U.S. and other countries make use of this insistence as a tool to press China now. We should stop insisting on peace when other countries are challenging our bottom line again and again. As long as China becomes strong and powerful in right way [sic], the countries that pay most attention to their own security interests will stop their defiance and get back to the friendship and partnership with neighboring countries.⁷⁶

Another *Global Times* article sharply criticized Japan for a strategy that seemed intended to contain China by “...joining hands with the U.S. and its allies, and prove[ing] its power through competition and friction with China.”⁷⁷

One Step Forward, One Step Backward

The visits by U.S. and Chinese political and military leaders in 2011 revealed that both nations wished to improve their military-to-military diplomacy and used the media to communicate their respective positions to multiple audiences. The combination of public statements by the officials and media coverage of the visits indicate that there were many substantial differences to be resolved along the way, however, including the persistent fly in the ointment: U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Chinese leaders expressed opposition to these sales at every opportunity. As an example, General Chen Bingde said that China was prepared to cooperate with the U.S. in such areas as fighting sea pirates and providing disaster relief, but if the arms sales continued, Chen said that future relations would suffer.⁷⁸ When asked how bad the impact of another sale would be, he replied that it would depend on the nature of the weapons sold.⁷⁹ Despite the warnings, in September, 2011, the U.S. announced a new arms sales package worth \$5.85 billion to upgrade 145 of Taiwan’s fighter jets. Hong Lei, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, warned that the move would damage U.S. military and security relations with Beijing. He declared: “The Chinese government and people strongly opposes [sic] it. The mistakes made by the U.S. inevitably hurt bilateral relations and cooperation in military and security of the two countries. The U.S. takes full responsibility for that.”⁸⁰ In the wake of the announced arms sales, China suspended several of its military exchange programs with the United States that were the fruit of the multiple visits and conversations that had occurred throughout the year.⁸¹

A U.S. spokesperson downplayed the weapons sales and told the *Global Times* that the equipment sold to Taiwan was out-dated and should not be “seen as a challenge to China.” Furthermore, he

suggested that the arms sales reflected the “obligation that the U.S. has to the security of Taiwan.”⁸² The spokesperson also explained the dynamics of U.S. domestic politics with regard to Taiwan: “Our political system is a very complicated one, and I’m sure there were many influences on what must have been a very difficult decision for our president. And of course, he made the decision which was less than what had been asked for, and less than what was pressured. For example, some 46 senators wrote to the president and wanted a higher level of arms sales and many friends of Taiwan encouraged it. So it is a balancing process.”⁸³ The Chinese were not persuaded, and frankly, given how U.S.-China relations have arisen as an issue in the U.S. Republican presidential campaigns, it is not surprising that this explanation was unpersuasive.

Perhaps motivated by domestic political pressures, in January of 2012 President Obama set aside the carrot and reached for the stick. The Pentagon released the 2012 Strategic Defense Strategy Document which emphasized the importance of military investments in Asia and doubled-down on its commitment to the region. As the Iraq and Afghan Wars wound down, the U.S. announced that it:

will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region...
 The maintenance of peace, stability, the free flow of commerce, and of U.S. influence in this dynamic region will depend in part on an underlying balance of military capability and presence. Over the long term, China’s emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the U.S. economy and our security in a variety of ways. Our two countries have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a cooperative bilateral relationship. However, the growth of China’s military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intentions in order to avoid causing friction in the region. The United States will continue to make the necessary investments to ensure that we maintain regional access and the ability to operate freely in keeping with our treaty obligations and with international law. Working closely with our network of allies and partners, we will continue to promote a rules-based international order that ensures underlying stability and encourages the peaceful rise of new powers, economic dynamism, and constructive defense cooperation.⁸⁴

The strongly worded document admitted that the U.S. actions were intended to counter China: “States such as China and Iran will continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter our power projection capabilities, while the proliferation of sophisticated weapons and technology will extend to non-state actors as well. *Accordingly, the U.S. military will invest as required to ensure its ability to operate effectively in anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) environments.*”⁸⁵

Despite all of the earlier rhetoric about cooperation, the U.S. signaled to the Chinese government, to its allies in the region, and to the American people that it would not reduce its military commitments even in the face of China’s assertions of dominance in the region. The linkage of China, its most important trading partner, with Iran, an international pariah state, must have stung in Beijing; and, of course, it most likely reduced the likelihood that in the near future there would be significant military-to-military collaborations between the two nations.

Conclusion

Scholars of media and the discourses of international relations understand that the confluence of domestic politics, international events, and even the personality characteristics of leaders can alter relations between nations. In February 2012, China joined Russia and vetoed a resolution in the United Nations Security Council which condemned Syrian violence against its own citizens and which called upon Syrian President Bashar Assad to resign. The vetoes were strongly condemned by the Obama administration.⁸⁶ Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. declared that her country was “disgusted” by the vote.⁸⁷ In March 2012, China made clear that it would continue to develop its military capacity when it announced that it would increase military spending by 11.2 percent this year over last.⁸⁸

From January 2011 to February 2012 the U.S. and China systematically pursued strategies that would improve military-to-military relations and deepen trust and understanding between the two nations. Yet it can only be concluded that the two nations

failed to make significant progress. The U.S. seems locked in a Cold War historical narrative that compels continuing arms sales to Taiwan and that mouths understanding but really seems unable to accept that a now economically strong China will wish to expand its military capabilities in order to deter any possible threats to its economic well-being and to protect itself from a possible blockade. China, on the other hand, seems unable to acknowledge that a combination of U.S. pride, commitment to its allies in the region, economic interests, and domestic political pressures will cause it to continue and even step up its military presence in the Asia-Pacific. However there is some promise for the future. Each nation advanced its arguments for its foreign policy positions forcefully through the media, so even in the absence of substantive agreement, one can find slivers of evidence that they may come to better understand their competing perspectives and interests. We believe that progress will occur only when the narrative itself begins to shift away from a focus on the past – a focus on historical slights, offending incidents, and time worn perceptions of good and evil – and toward a narrative that emphasizes the future. We also think that each nation should exert less energy in constructing criticisms of the other and should attempt to be more self-reflective about the ways in which its own policies or articulated arguments explaining and accounting for those policies might contribute to mutual tension or spark suspicion. Simply put, these two nations need each other to continue to grow and prosper. China needs markets for its manufactured goods and the U.S. needs access to the affordable commodities that China produces and to Chinese capital. Both nations need access to secure sea-lanes to maintain their economic health and well being, as do the other nations in the region. War – even the hostile words that entertain the possibility of war – is bad for business and bad for economic growth and development. An incident that might spark a kinetic conflict between the world's two largest economies would undermine decades of economic progress even if it could be contained before it led to tens of thousands of deaths. The political leadership and the citizens in both nations must come to understand that such a conflict is unthinkable.

Even as the foreign policy and military relations between the nations seemed to be worsening – a sign that the defense and military leadership in the two nations had been unable to overcome the historical and political obstacles to the development of significantly closer relations between the two militaries – there were renewed efforts by the political leaders to create dialogue. In February 2012, Xi Jinping, the vice president of China, who will assume leadership of the Communist Party in the fall and ascend to the presidency in 2013, visited the United States. In Washington, Xi spoke to business leaders and declared that he wanted to deepen the relationship between the two countries. Xi’s theme, once again, was respect: “China welcomes the United States playing a constructive role in promoting the peace, stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region, and at the same time we hope the U.S. will truly respect the interests and concerns of countries in the region, including China.”⁸⁹ Xi also visited Muscatine, Iowa, and met with the family that had hosted him almost thirty years ago when he visited local farms to learn about agricultural techniques. He was fondly remembered as a friendly and unassuming man as the cameras snapped photographs and the reporters conducted interviews that would be played on media outlets in the United States, China, and around the world.⁹⁰ Xi then headed to Los Angeles to meet with business leaders, members of the local Chinese community, and toured the Port of Los Angeles where much of the manufactured goods from China enter the U.S. Xi’s visit was a reminder that even though there may be difficult moments in U.S. – China relations, these nations are economically yoked together and must continue to work with each other.⁹¹

Xi’s visit to the United States captures the essence of contemporary diplomacy. The direct face-to-face meetings and exchanges between the government leaders and officials are important, but so too are the mediated statements, interviews, photos, and opportunities to make one’s case for domestic and international audiences through the media. To fully understand diplomacy in the age of globalization, one must acknowledge the power of the media and one must cultivate the skills of media engagement.

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Author Biographies

Thomas Hollihan is a professor of communication at the University of Southern California Annenberg School. Hollihan chairs the executive committee of the USC US-China Institute, and is a faculty fellow in the USC Center for Public Diplomacy, and the Center for Communication Leadership and Policy. He publishes in the areas of argumentation, media and politics, contemporary rhetorical criticism, and the impact of globalization on public deliberation. He is the author of several books including *Uncivil Wars: Political Campaigns in a Media Age*, *Arguments and Arguing: The Products and Process of Human Decision Making* (with Kevin Baaske), and *Argument at Century's End: Reflecting on the Past and Envisioning the Future*. In addition, Hollihan has published more than sixty articles and book chapters. He has been interested in US-China relations over many years. He served as a visiting professor at Renmin University and the Communication University of China, and has lectured at Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Xian Foreign Languages University, and Chinese University Hong Kong. Hollihan also serves as a Research Associate of the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, California. Finally, he serves as a communication consultant for many governmental, non-governmental, and for profit businesses and organizations.

Zhan Zhang is a doctoral student in the Communication Sciences Institute of Media and Journalism at Lugano University in Switzerland. She also serves as a member of the University's Chinese Media Observatory. Zhang received an MA in TV Journalism from the Communication University of China, and a second joint MA from Aarhus University (Denmark) and the University of Florence (Italy), where she was the recipient of the Erasmus scholarship, and followed the CoMundus Programme "Arts in Media, Communication and Culture Studies." She worked both for Chinese media (CCTV, KaiMing Publisher) and western media (The Independent, Variety) before pursuing her doctoral studies. She is the author of two books:

The Legend of A Prince and The Development of the International Mathematical Olympiad in China. She has also published chapters in two edited books and has had several articles published in Chinese journals. She has undertaken comparative studies of media, including a focus on the construction of China's image based upon an analysis of the news coverage in the New York Times and the China Daily. Her current research focuses on a comparative media analysis of how European media is representing China and also of China's soft power diplomatic strategies.

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