Strengthening Understanding and Engagement with China's Air Force

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Since the historic coming together of China and the United States in 1972, this strategic relationship has benefited both our nations and fostered an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region. Our relationship with China, however, has had its ups and downs over the past four decades. In recent years, growing distrust and increasing misperception have made the need to improve lines of communication between our two governments and militaries all the more urgent.

Recently, we traveled to China at the invitation of the Chinese government. This was the first visit for a U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff in 15 years. The visit was constructive and substantive in its outcomes, and our hope is that it will lead to future exchanges that foster greater understanding and transparency between our two air forces.[1] The visit came in the wake of several milestones achieved between our two countries this year, the most important being the June 2013 summit meeting between Presidents Obama and Xi in California, where both leaders affirmed the need for greater understanding between our two nations and our two militaries. Together with other important recent military exchanges such as Chairman Dempsey's visit to China and People's Republic of China (PRC) Defense Minister Chang's visit to the United States, our visit was part of a larger effort to improve understanding between our two armed forces as well as reduce military-to-

military friction. We look forward to continuing these efforts well into the future.

Continuing exchanges with China will not be at the expense of the strong relationships the United States enjoys with key partners and allies. Indeed, improved relations between China and the United States are not a zero sum dynamic. There is wide agreement among our friends and allies that a constructive relationship between the United States and China is fundamental to the continued stability and prosperity of the Asia Pacific and the world.

As America's security interests are global, we are keenly aware of China's growing importance on the world stage and support its constructive contributions to world peace and prosperity. Not only has China risen to become the world's second-largest economy but also this year marked the first time the PRC imported more oil from the Arabian Gulf than the United States. China therefore, just as we do, has a vested interest in maintaining uninterrupted and secure international trade and flow of energy.

Our shared security interests include fundamental concerns for both our nations, with nuclear nonproliferation high on the list. China shares our objective for North Korean and Iranian denuclearization, knowing the destabilization that would ensue in Asia and the Middle East should nuclear weapons be allowed to proliferate. While we may sometimes disagree on the means to achieve our shared goals, it is evident China recognizes that nuclear proliferation is contrary to its national interests.

Both of our countries share a deep appreciation for history. Even before the United States entered the Second World War, American and Chinese airmen fought and died side by side as part of the famed Flying Tigers. The combined endeavor continued throughout that war and contributed greatly to our eventual victory. Many of our fliers in China were downed in enemy-held territory, and they owed their survival to the Chinese villagers who were well aware of the sacrifices Americans were making in support of China in its darkest hour. If you

visit China's aviation museum in Beijing, the Pacific Aviation Museum on Ford Island in Honolulu, or museums in Kunming, Chongqing, or those in other Chinese cities dedicated to the Flying Tigers, you will see tributes to the bravery of American and Chinese airmen in that difficult war. The legacy of the Flying Tigers lives on today within our Air Force through the 23rd Fighter Group located at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia.

Our Chinese hosts made clear their appreciation for the historical context of our visit from the very beginning of our meetings. The importance China placed on our visit and on improving our Air Force engagement efforts was underscored by People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) Commander, General Ma Xiaotian, when he welcomed us at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. There, General Ma pointed to the historical significance of the venue, where President Richard Nixon and Premier Zhou Enlai ended over two decades of hostile relations between our two countries in 1972, and where subsequent U.S. Presidents were hosted. This venue, General Ma said, was appropriate given the importance that his government placed on improving relations between our militaries and our air forces. Our meetings with Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, General Xu Qiliang, and other senior People's Liberation Army (PLA) and PLAAF officers were similarly cordial, candid, and substantive.

Both sides agreed that as two of the largest economies in the world, we should have no illusions as to the dangers that conflict in this region would pose to our respective nations, let alone global security writ large. As our discussion turned to regional issues of concern to both our countries and to other nations in Asia, our delegation emphasized the need to take great care in managing differences in the Asia Pacific. Both sides underscored the need to resolve disagreements between all countries in a diplomatic and peaceful way.

We conveyed to our hosts the increasing complexity in our interactions and engagements, the potential for miscalculation or misunderstanding, and the need for more transparency, cooperation, and famil-

iarity with each other's procedures and processes. We addressed the growing frequency and proximity at which both the Chinese and U.S. militaries operate in international waters and in the airspace above the maritime domain. We also highlighted the importance to both of our nations of maintaining the highest levels of safety and professionalism in our military interactions. We can and must do better at managing friction.

Our week-long itinerary was full, as we traveled from Beijing to Tianjin and Hangzhou, then to Hong Kong via Shenzhen. While in Beijing, we held meetings at the Ministry of Defense and visited the PLA's Aviation Museum, Aviation Medicine Research Institute, Capital Air Defense Command Center, and National Defense University. In addition, we conducted base visits to Yangcun Air Base in Tianjin, Jianqiao Air Base in Hangzhou, along with Shek Kong Air Base and PLA Garrison in Hong Kong.

Although most of these sites had previously been visited by U.S. defense and military officials in the past, we could see the changes that have taken place in the PLAAF over the years. For example, during the last China visit 15 years ago, then-USAF Chief General Michael Ryan was shown a fleet of J-8 II fighters, perceived at that time as the most advanced fighters in the PLAAF inventory. During our visit, we watched the much more capable J-10 in a flying exhibition performed by the PLAAF's Bayi performance team along with JH-7s on a low-altitude flying exercise. Though we were not shown China's J-20, it is no secret that China continues work toward fielding fifth-generation fighters in the not-too-distant future. Along with providing us a chance to inspect these more sophisticated platforms and weaponry, our Chinese briefers described the efforts of the PLA/PLAAF to improve recruitment, training, and retention.

There is little doubt that China's air force will continue to modernize and serve as an increasingly important component of China's military. The role of the PLAAF has been prominent in operations from the evacuation of PRC nationals from Libya to the delivery of disaster-relief

supplies both within and outside China. Another telling indicator of the growing role the PLAAF is playing in China's military modernization is the appointment of an Air Force General, General Xu Qiliang, to be the first Air Force Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission. This visit, therefore, had significant implications for our air-force-to-air-force relations. As our two air forces begin to renew and regularize engagements in the areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, USAF/PLAAF participation under the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, flight safety, aviation medicine, and student exchanges between our educational institutions, both sides agreed that we must do more to foster understanding. *Air and Space Power Journal–Chinese*, now entering its seventh year of publication, continues to serve as a forum for the exchange of airpower concepts between our two air forces. These initiatives can succeed only if done in the spirit of reciprocity and transparency through continuous air force engagements that will allow opportunities to exchange views on the international security environment while improving understanding. We were pleased that our discussions in China marked a positive step in that direction.

During our President's most recent meeting with President Xi at the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg just before our trip to China, both leaders reaffirmed their commitment, as President Obama succinctly stated, "to build a new model of great power relations based on practical cooperation and constructively managing our differences." President Obama also underscored America's long-standing policy toward China that the United States welcomes the continuing peaceful rise of a China that plays a stabilizing and responsible role not just in the Asia Pacific but around the world.[2] Our national leaders clearly understand that relations between our two nations are essential not only to our respective self-interests but also to the interests of the region and the world at large.

The United States Air Force and the People's Liberation Army Air Force both seek engagement that aims to both support this shared vi-

sion and build upon our past record of air-force-to-air-force interaction. It is imperative that our two nations work to ensure continued stability and security in the Asia Pacific into the 21st Century. A sustained and substantive military-to-military relationship between our two countries will be important to achieving that end. ✪

Notes

1. The visit took place 24–30 September 2013. "CSAF Begins Counterpart Visit in China," U.S. Air Force, 25 September 2013, accessed 18 October 2013, http://www.af.mil/News/ArticleDisplay/tabid/223/Article/467207/csaf-begins-c ounterpart-visit-in-china.aspx.
2. "Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People's Republic of China before Bilateral Meeting," White House, 6 September 2013, accessed 18 October 2013, http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/09/06/president-obamas-bilateral-meeting-president-xi-china#transcript.

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