

U.S.-China Military Dialogue and the Triangular Relationship with Taiwan

| Shih-chung Liu

Background

When China and the United States held their third Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Washington in May, China for the first time sent high-ranking officials to the talks. Shortly afterwards General Chen Bing-de, Chief of General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, also visited the capital. Several statements in connection with Chen's U.S. visit have hit sensitive political nerves within the triangular relationship between China, Taiwan, and the United States. First, Chen stated that China "does not have missile deployments across from Taiwan," then, Adm. Michael Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, had a slip of the tongue in talks with Chen saying "I certainly share the view of the peaceful reunification of China." And last, Chen interpreted talks with U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, as an assurance that Washington "supports" Beijing's one-China policy which claims that there is only one China in the world and that Taiwan is part of China. The U.S. government immediately clarified the remarks by saying that U.S. policy toward Taiwan remains unchanged, and 45 U.S. Senators signed a letter to U.S. President, Barack Obama, urging him to consider selling F16C/D fighter jets to Taiwan. But there is no doubt that all these changes give rise to concern that the triangular relationship between the U.S., China, and Taiwan is out of balance.

The Process of U.S-China Military Dialogue

Given that China is rapidly expanding its military power and the Chinese defense budget has been growing at a double-digit rate in recent

years, the U.S. has been eager to promote high-level bilateral military dialogue to gain insight into China's untransparent national defense system. Since Beijing clearly understands this, it frequently breaks off U.S.-China military dialogue to gain diplomatic leverage over Washington. When George W. Bush notified the U.S. Congress before leaving office in 2008 that he would let through arms sales to Taiwan, Beijing immediately declared that it would sever bilateral military dialogue. Only after Obama took power in 2009 the talks were gradually resumed. When Obama announced in January 2010 the first arms sales to Taiwan since assuming the presidency, China again broke off military dialogue, although the F16C/D aircraft – Beijing's red line – were not included.

Originally, Washington reckoned that Beijing was only using the same old trick again. Therefore, it was caught by surprise when China rejected an ice-breaking visit to Beijing by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates in mid-2010 that aimed to ease bilateral tension over China's declared "core interests," North East Asia, and Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Only in January this year, as Chinese President Hu Jintao prepared for a state visit to Washington, Gates was allowed to visit Beijing, ending the year-long low in bilateral military exchanges. When the third Strategic and Economic Dialogue took place in Washington in early May this year, high-ranking military officials from both sides were included for the first time. In the future, the systemization of U.S.-China dialogue on political, economic and military issues will lay the foundation for closer bilateral interaction. Nevertheless, at the current stage U.S.-China military exchange prospects

are still hampered by a lack of consensus and characterized by mutual second guessing and suspicion.

The Strategic Objectives of Chen's U.S. Visit

Chen's high-profile visit aimed to satisfy Obama administration's expectations for a resumption of bilateral military exchanges, but he also did not forget to exploit the visit for an international propaganda campaign that played down the perceived "China threat" and last year's discords with the United States. Consequently, Chen stressed that "China will never challenge the U.S.," and even said that the Chinese Navy "lags behind the U.S. at least 20 years." But he also clearly pointed out that current bilateral military relations are hampered by three major obstacles, including U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, U.S. reconnaissance flights over China's exclusive economic zone, and U.S. domestic laws that discriminate against China.

Recently, Beijing has displayed a keen attitude toward bilateral military exchanges, mainly for the following political motives:

- Based on the consensus reached in previous U.S.-China Joint Statements issued by Hu and Obama, it wants to further strengthen the impression that China and the United States are "regarding each other as equals," while shunning the responsibilities that an international power ought to assume.
- It wants to settle the wars of words and disputes that marred bilateral relations during the previous year.
- Taking advantage of improving bilateral ties, Beijing wants to solve the three major issues that it raised previously, in particular U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.
- Beijing's ultimate objective is making the U.S. adjust its policy on arms sales to Taiwan or even amend the Taiwan Relations Act, and sign a fourth Joint Communiqué. Therefore, Chen distorted the content of his talks with Clinton, while also emphasizing that the Taiwan Relations Act interferes with China's domestic affairs.

China's Policies Toward the U.S. and Taiwan

During his visit, Chen demanded that the U.S. stop using arms sales to Taiwan as a bargaining chip and told blatant lies to play down Chinese missile deployments against Taiwan. In fact, Beijing's strategy of using bilateral high-level dialogues to gradually pressure Washington into reconsidering, reducing and even permanently terminating arms sales to Taiwan and abolishing the Taiwan Relations Act have proven effective early on. The Chinese strategy includes the following approaches:

- China lobbies heavyweights in the U.S. Congress to question the policy of the Obama administration. Dianne Feinstein, Chairperson of the Senate Intelligence Committee, last year questioned Gates how U.S. policy should respond should China "redeploy" its missile deployments opposite Taiwan. Although Gates stressed that Washington's policy toward Taiwan remains unchanged, there are clear signs of Beijing enlisting the support of important Congress members to influence the Obama administration's Taiwan policy.
- China takes advantage of opinion pieces

authored by some U.S. scholars and the officials that urge a reexamination of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Such views have been recently voiced in public appeals or in written form by former U.S. Diplomat, Chas Freeman, former U.S. Ambassador to China, Joseph Prueher, retired U.S. Pacific Command chief Admiral, Timothy Keating, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia James Shinn, and international affairs expert Charles Glaser.

- China exploits all possible means to push for the signing of a Fourth Joint Communiqué. On the fringes of the Obama-Hu talks in January, it was rumored that China is exerting utmost pressure on Washington to accept its demand for another communiqué.

The main argument that Beijing uses in lobbying the U.S. is that cross-strait relations have improved since the government of President Ma Ying-jeou took office and that relations won't get tense anymore so that arms sales to Taiwan are no longer justified and the U.S. no longer needs to shoulder any responsibility for defending Taiwan. Although this line of argument has not yet become mainstream opinion in Washington, it is gaining ground. China's "grassroots lobbying" efforts – actively using its commercial 'pork barrel' clout in the electoral districts of important members of Congress – are also increasingly paying off.

Since the Ma government presently adopts a "diplomatic truce" with Beijing and follows a policy of rapprochement with China, the above mentioned arguments fall on fertile ground in Washington. As a result, the Taiwan issue is getting sidelined. Therefore Taiwan clearly underestimates the fallout from U.S. officials slipping up or the administration, Congress, and scholars making confusing statements on Washington's cross-

strait policy, if it only clarifies the situation after the fact to reassure itself. The "security dilemma" surrounding the current arms deal has as much to do with Beijing's enormous monetary lobbying clout as with the Ma government's "unwillingness to buy arms" and its "inability to prevent a military imbalance in the Taiwan Strait."

Since taking power, the Ma government's foreign policy has centered on China. While the technocrats in the Ministry of National Defense have been working painstakingly for the U.S. arms deal, top leader Ma has been sending mixed signals to the U.S. Also add the fact that Beijing's influence is rising by the day and rumors that the Ministry of National Defense is pulling funds from the arms procurement budget to finance Ma's campaign pledge of introducing an all-volunteer army. These developments have only deepened the already existing impression in Washington decision-making circles that "the Kuomintang does not have the intention" to go ahead with the arms deal.

If Taiwan's political leaders are not willing and not able to boost Taiwan's self-defense capability, and only engage in wishful thinking that the U.S. will continue to give us security guarantees, despite strengthening U.S.-China relations and, perception wise, a continuous weakening of Washington's defense commitment to Taiwan, then without doubt, Taiwan's national security is in a perilous state. With just eight months to go before the presidential election, this will become the focal point when the presidential candidates of the two leading political parties debate issues concerning national security. **BT**