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Amid Taiwan Tensions, Airline Spat Shows Sino-US Failure to Communicate

By Matt Schrader

On May 25, while the United States passed a weekend of rest and remembrance in commemoration of Memorial Day, Taiwan's air force scrambled fighters to trail two H-6 heavy bombers, sent by the PLA Air Force to trace a half-circle around the island's south and east ([ROC Ministry of Defense](#), May 25). The flight came a day after Burkina Faso switched its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC, leaving Taiwan with only one official relationship in Africa, the tiny nation of Swaziland ([SCMP](#), May 25).

These were the latest manifestations of an intensifying PRC pressure campaign against Taiwan. Another such recent incident—a written PRC government order sent to more than 40 foreign airlines, demanding that they stop listing Taiwan as a separate country on their websites—illustrates the spill-over risks of a dangerous Sino-US communications gap on cross-Strait issues. Put simply, the United States' policy towards Taiwan's status is not what many people in the PRC believe it to be, a misperception that helps foster confusion and outrage within China.

PRC domestic media coverage framed the demand to foreign airlines as falling well within the PRC's diplomatic rights, since the carriers' home countries recognize Taiwan as a part of China, a claim

which included American carriers. “This being the case,” as one widely reprinted article put it, “what exactly is wrong with the mainland requiring American airlines to delete any content that [portrays] Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao as countries independent of China?” ([TaiwanNet](#), May 8).

This is a misrepresentation of the United States’s One China Policy. Although the US’s position on the status of Taiwan is intentionally ambiguous—which has given both the US and China room to maneuver in the years since Nixon met Mao—it has never included explicit written agreement that the PRC exercises sovereignty over Taiwan. [1]

Both the US and the PRC bear responsibility for this misrepresentation’s existence. Its origins are complex, and rooted in the delicate negotiations that led to official US recognition of the PRC in 1979. Nothing represents the perception gap better than the two sides’ interpretation of a key line on Taiwan from the 1978 joint communique normalizing Sino-US relations.

In English, the text reads:

“The Government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.” [2]

The word “acknowledge” in English connotes understanding and awareness, but not necessarily agreement. The official Chinese version of the same line uses the verb *chengren* (承认). *Chengren*’s meaning is very different than “acknowledge”. It connotes recognition or agreement. It can also mean “confess” or “admit”. In this case, *chengren* implies that the US is admitting the *correctness* of the PRC’s position, rather than simply signaling an awareness of it, as is implied by the English text.

Among other possible explanations, Richard Bush, a scholar and former US diplomat, speculates that this ambiguity may have been introduced as a way for both sides to sell the agreement to their respective domestic constituencies, in the hopes that with time, the Taiwan issue would fix itself.

That has not been the case. And as the cross-Strait power differential has shifted increasingly in the PRC’s favor, the gap in understanding has only become more glaring. Neither the US nor the PRC seem in a hurry to correct it. Partially as a result, online conversations expressing sentiments like “even America recognizes (the PRC’s) One China Policy, why is it we still can’t get Taiwan back?” are not difficult to find on the PRC internet ([Douban](#), January 8 2017). [3]

Nor is the misperception limited to internet and media commentary. It is held even among specialists. In a recent conversation with the author, when told the US’s One China Policy does not admit that Taiwan is a part of the PRC, a young scholar of international relations from the PRC said “[that] is not the perception of China”, adding that the US’s position was “deceptive”.

This communication misalignment has been exacerbated by recent events. White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders famously described China’s threats towards foreign airline corporations as “Orwellian nonsense” ([SCMP](#), May 22). A statement using the same language was posted to the official Weibo account of the US Embassy in Beijing ([The News Lens](#), May 8). As of this writing, the statement remains viewable by PRC internet users.

Although many foreign carriers have complied with Beijing's demand to recategorize Taiwan, most American carriers have applied for and received one-month extensions to the compliance deadline ([Bloomberg](#), May 27). It remains unclear whether they will comply, or what discussions, if any, are happening between the companies and the US government. [4]

Sanders' remark also comes at a time when the US Congress is also signaling its consideration of a more assertive approach on Taiwan, exemplified by its recent passage of the Taiwan Travel Act ([Focus Taiwan](#), May 28). The bill, which obligates the US executive branch to send high-level officials to Taiwan ([Lawfare](#), March 20), was met with a furious response in PRC official media.

Some of the outrage was probably manufactured. But some of it was undoubtedly genuine, the product of a widely held belief that the United States has long said one thing about its position on Taiwan, while it does another.

For many years the deliberate ambiguity, even vagueness, of the US's position has been useful. It has allowed both sides to sidestep the thorny question of Taiwan's status as economic ties have flourished. But as the PRC's relationships with both Taiwan and the US grow more tense, and the US moves towards a firmer stance, such a large degree of ambiguity may no longer be beneficial.

Paradoxically, addressing the problem and placing US-PRC relations on a clearer footing might not require a shift in the substance of the US's position. It would simply require the US to begin pointing out, more frequently and more publicly, that its One China Policy is not what the PRC imagines it to be.

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Notes

[1] For a more complete description of what the US's One China Policy is and isn't, and how it has changed over time, see this [useful primer](#) by Richard Bush of the Brookings Institution. *At Cross Purposes: U.S.-Taiwan Relations Since 1942*, also by Bush, is excellent for understanding how changing US policy goals shaped the negotiation of the foundational documents of US-PRC-Taiwan relations, including the Three Communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act.

[2] Both the English and Chinese joint declaration texts referred to are drawn from the website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America. The English version is accessible [here](#), the Chinese version [here](#).

[3] In the conversation linked above, despite responses from a number of commenters, none pointed out the discrepancy in the US and PRC positions.

[4] Several Japanese carriers have also applied for and received extensions.

The Many Sides of Tentative Sino-Japanese Rapprochement

By Willy Lam

A recent, unexpected rapprochement between China and Japan has emerged more quickly than many observers thought possible. And unlike previous instances since the two countries recognized each other in 1972, the initiative this time seems to have come from the Chinese side. It must be noted, however, that links between Asia's two richest countries are still far from the previous high point in relations reached during former president Hu Jintao's landmark visit to Japan in 2008. Moreover, the major reasons behind the warming up of ties have to do with the deteriorating relationship between China and the US as well as dramatic developments in the Korean Peninsula.

During Premier Li Keqiang's participation in the reconvened trilateral talks held in early May in Tokyo between the heads of governments of China, Japan and South Korea, Li conducted separate discussions with counterpart Shinzo Abe. It was Li's first-ever visit to Japan as Chinese premier. The most eye-catching achievements of the Li-Abe quasi-summit was the establishment of a "maritime and air liaison mechanism... [so as to] jointly manage and control maritime crisis, in a bid to make the East China Sea a sea of peace, cooperation and friendship." Even before Li's tour, it was understood that President Xi Jinping would go on a state visit to Japan next year after his expected participation in the G20 meeting in Osaka. ([HKO1.com](#), May 4). And in a rare gesture, Xi and Abe spoke via phone on May 4 regarding ways they could improve bilateral ties in the wake of celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the two nations ([Xinhua](#), May 4).

At this stage, it is unclear whether such confidence-building measures can by themselves lower tensions. Chinese submarines, naval vessels, jet-fighters and drones have vastly boosted their activities near the disputed Diaoyu-Senkaku Islands and in the vicinity of Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone. ([NHK News](#), April 19; [Asahi Shimbun](#), January 30). Yet it cannot be denied that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda machinery has reined in nationalistic and inflammatory rhetoric against Japan. For example, Xinhua in early May called for the removal of anti-Japanese movies and dramas—which emphasize Japanese atrocities during WWII as well as the larger-than-life exploits of Chinese soldiers fighting the invaders—from Chinese television. Calling these products "cultural rubbish" and "a blasphemy of the nation's [collective] memory," Xinhua said they basically "went against historical common sense" ([Xinhua](#), May 2).

A good gauge of whether a genuine Sino-Japanese détente is in the offing is to compare the on-going amelioration of ties with the achievements notched by ex-president Hu when he visited Tokyo in 2008 to mark the 30th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship (hereafter "the Treaty"). The agreement that Hu reached with then-counterpart Yasuo Fukuda (the son of former prime minister Takeo Fukuda, who signed the Treaty on behalf of Japan), was considered a win-win, with sweeping consequences for all aspects of bilateral endeavors (See [China Brief](#), October 17, 2007). Firstly, both parties agreed to pursue "a strategic and mutually beneficial relationship in an all-round way." Apart from the theoretical acknowledgment of the "East China Sea a sea of peace, cooperation and friendship," both sides agreed on joint exploration of oil and gas that might be located in undersea spots close to the "mid-point line" in the East China Sea. Equally significant was the fact that the document made no reference to either historical issues or disputes regarding islets claimed by both countries ([Xinhua](#), May 8, 2008). However, the agreement never came into operation due to vehement opposition from anti-Japanese nationalists in China. [1]

Why is Xi seeking rapprochement with Tokyo? Beijing sees the on-going trade dispute with the US as but a relatively superficial manifestation of efforts by the US and its allies to throttle China's advancement towards full-fledged superpower status. Washington's decision last month to ban US manufactures of microchips, software and other core components from doing business with ZTE Corporation—one of China's flagship high-tech firms—has been interpreted as part of a multi-pronged "conspiracy" to thwart China's much-publicized

Made in China 2025 industrial policy, which envisages the PRC overtaking the US, Germany and Japan in a number of cutting-edge tech sectors by the year 2025 ([Apple Daily \[Hong Kong\]](#), April 23; [Xinhuaapp.com](#), April 4). This is despite US President Donald Trump's announcement last week that Washington might relent on its devastating punishment of the Shenzhen-based giant.

Beijing wants Tokyo's support in building a united front of nations opposed to Trump-style trade protectionism. After all, Trump had threatened to levy punitive duties on steel, aluminum and other products from Japan and South Korea as well ([Hindustan Times](#), March 9; [Reuters](#), March 9). At the same time, Beijing hopes to firm up arrangements with Japanese firms for procuring microchips and other core technologies that have remained beyond the reach of China's tech firms. The fact that NTT DoCoMo, a major manufacturer of chips, announced that it would not sell core technologies to ZTE indicates that a Li-Abe agreement about high-tech cooperation may not pan out in this respect, at least in the short term ([United Daily News \[Taiwan\]](#), May 4).

The Xi administration also wants to upgrade ties with Tokyo in view of fast-shifting realities in the Korean Peninsula. Xi, who has always looked down upon DPRK dictator Kim Jong-un, was shocked by early signs that President Moon Jae-in and Kim might want to cut China out of talks on DPRK denuclearization. As Central Party School professor Zhang Liangui, one of Beijing's top expert on the Koreans, told the Hong Kong media, it was "foreseeable" that both Seoul and Pyongyang would not want China to get involved in the talks. "This was inevitable because both Koreas have been wanting to cast off Chinese influence," he said ([South China Morning Post](#), April 29).

Xi's fears about losing China's traditional role as the prime arbiter of Korean developments was vindicated by the Panmunjom Declaration signed between Moon and Kim after their historic tete-a-tete on April 27. Both parties envisaged "trilateral meetings involving the two Koreas and the United States, or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the United States and China" to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula ([Korea Herald](#), April 27). This opened the door to a settlement negotiated only among the two Koreas and the US. Prior to the Moon-Kim summit, Xi summoned Kim for secret talks in Beijing in late March, in which he apparently impressed upon the 34-year-old Korean dictator that Beijing would not only provide economic aid to the DPRK but also ensure the safety of the Kim clan ([South China Morning Post](#), March 28; [Japan Times](#), March 28). Less than 40 days later, the two leaders met again for two days in a beachside resort in northeastern Chinese province of Liaoning ([Xinhua](#), May 8).

One line of thinking in Beijing holds that, irrespective of the results reached between Trump and Kim in their mini-summit in Singapore on June 12, final arrangements for major issues such as denuclearization and economic reform for the DPRK have to be endorsed by four-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US and China ([Lianhe Zaobao \[Singapore\]](#), May 8). Despite Japan's long-standing alliance with the US, the Xi leadership hopes that Tokyo can be persuaded to back the four-party talks, and with them the implicit notion that China remains a critical arbiter of future developments of the Korean Peninsula.

What does the Xi administration have to offer Tokyo? For one thing, given the likelihood that the dismantling of the DPRK arsenal will be an incremental process, Beijing could help the Abe administration by ensuring that short-range missiles that could reach Japan are destroyed as early as possible. For Tokyo this is especially important, since Washington's top priority will be the removal of long-range missiles that can reach Alaska and the US mainland. Tokyo may also seek Beijing's help in ensuring that the Kim administration will not demand, at least in the near to medium term, the removal of American troops from South Korea. This is due to Tokyo's perception that a reduction of US troops in Korea would have a detrimental impact on America's overall commitment to defending Japan and other Asian nations ([Japan Times](#), May 1; [Stripes.com](#), March 15).

In spite of the devastating damage that Japan inflicted upon China from 1937 to 1945, Tokyo perhaps deserves credit for pulling China out of diplomatic isolation, as well as helping it industrialize in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Liberal Democratic Party Government recognized Beijing in 1972, fully seven years before the US government. Apart from ethnic Chinese businessmen, Japanese firms were the first to invest in China during the second half of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). After the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, then-Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiki Kaifu was the first leader of a democratic country to visit China, at a time when the PRC was still boycotted by many Western countries. (*Apple Daily*, May 11; *People's Daily*, December 3, 2004). However, these breakthroughs in bilateral ties, including the 2008 agreement between Hu and Fukuda, took place when Japan was still the most powerful nation in Asia. Given President Xi's nationalistic tendencies, and evident desire to highlight China's quasi-superpower status, it remains to be seen whether the traditional symbiotic relationship between the two neighbors can be revived.

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Notes

[1] One reason why the Hu-Fukuda agreement has never come to fruition is that it also provides for Japanese oil corporations to invest in the Chunxiao Gasfield, which is located to the west of the midway line of the East China Sea. Then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi noted that Japanese companies investing in Chunxiao were no different from Western firms such as Shell and Unocal participating in the exploitation of oil and gas in different parts of China. Yang also emphasized that Japanese firms engaged in the Chunxiao Gasfield would fully abide by Chinese law. (*China News Service*, June 24, 2008) Explanations of the authorities, however, failed to satisfy "patriotic" Netizens and other young nationalists. Their vehement opposition to Japan's involvement in the Chunxiao was one reason why the entire agreement was put on hold. For a discussion of the diplomatic tug-of-war, see, for example, Xinjun Zhang, "Why the 2008 Sino-Japanese Consensus on the East China Sea Has Stalled: Good Faith and Reciprocity Considerations in Interim Measures Pending a Maritime Boundary Delimitation," *Ocean Development and International Law*, Vol. 42, 2011, Issue 1-2, pp. 53-65.

Chinese-Russian Defense and Security Ties: Countering US Encirclement

By Annie Kowalewski

China recently announced plans to contribute to Russian support of the Assad regime in Syria, just one of many ways in which Chinese-Russian security ties have strengthened over the past five years (*MOFA*, May 14). Since the early 2010s, the two countries have been brought together by common threat perceptions and similar outlooks on the international security environment. Both claim to share a similar political ideology that centers on state sovereignty and non-interference, and each fears encirclement by the United States. These shared threat perceptions have led to an increased number of combined military exercises, more advanced military-technical cooperation, frequent high-level military-to-military contact, and unified stances on regional security issues across Asia.

Despite the fact that neither country has publicly broached a formal security alliance, the United States should remain wary of this partnership. Historically, the two countries tend to lean on each other for security/economic assistance in the face of US pressure. To prevent shifts in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific, therefore, the United States should manage its relationships with the two countries in a more coordinated, comprehensive fashion, and avoid providing incentives for the two to deepen cooperation.

History of Chinese-Russian Security Relations

Russia and the USSR normalized ties in 1989, bringing to a close nearly three decades of estrangement. Since then, the Chinese-Russian relationship has been the strongest when the United States targets one or the other with economic sanctions, and weakest when one country announces new military initiatives or surpasses the other in a new way. This fits with the overall character of the relationship, which has generally been one of convenience, rather than one based on shared ideology.

After the normalization of relations in 1989, the two countries began negotiating force reductions along their shared border, eventually establishing a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” (全面战略协作伙伴关系) as a first step towards addressing historical grievances and securing their continental flanks ([Xinhua](#), July 26 2017). Arms sales were another component of the renewed relationship: between the late 1980s and early 2000s, China lacked its own arm design capability and was largely cut off from Western arms sales after the tragedy at Tiananmen Square. Russia, on the other hand, had lost much of its export market for weaponry following the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

As such, in the early 2000s the two countries began conducting high-level dialogues on security and military affairs, and Russian arm sales to China grew. Between 1999 and 2006, China was Russia’s largest client for arms, accounting for between 30 and 60% of total Russian exports of major weapons ([SIPRI](#), July 5 2017). Sales foundered in the late 2000s due to Russian concerns about China’s military modernization. Moscow also feared that Russian technology had been reverse engineered. But eventually the two countries re-established their arms sales and military technology cooperation after US and European sanctions on Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 ([USNI](#), March 20 2017). The \$7 billion sale of four advanced S-400 SAM systems in 2015 was, by itself, worth more than the entire total of Russian arms sales to China during the five years prior (SIPRI)

Since then, Chinese-Russian security and defense ties have continued to improve, largely in response to the US’s strengthening of NATO, and of its security alliances in the Indo-Pacific ([CPIFA](#), 2017). From the west, the United States expanded NATO’s missile defense shield and condemned Russian aggression against the Baltic States. In the east, the United States deemed China a “strategic competitor” and moved to strengthen military interoperability with Asian allies, and its freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.

Today, US tariffs on Chinese goods, and ongoing sanctions on Russian businesses also make clear that the United States aims to compete with Russia and China across all domains of power, not just militarily. In response, China and Russia have made it a point to increase security and defense ties, and to present a joint political front focused on cooperation and shared interests. In other words, as will be discussed further, the modern relationship between the two countries is deeply rooted in a shared threat perception of US encirclement from both the east and the west; thus the aim of strengthened defense and security ties is to signal that they will counter-balance the United States in Asia and beyond.

An Alliance, Or a Partnership of Convenience?

More strategic and sophisticated joint military exercises, including large exercises in sensitive areas such as the Baltic and South China Seas, have given rise to academic discussions of a more formal security alliance between the two countries ([China Brief](#), September 20 2017). Yet increased cooperation has come in tandem with actions on the part of the US, suggesting that the relationship may be more of a partnership of convenience rather than a strategic plan. However, this does not preclude the possibility of a more formal alliance, and there are a number of ways increased Chinese-Russian cooperation on defense issues could still threaten US security interests, even if the cooperation is not institutionalized.

First, moving away from arms sales and agreements to maintain continental peace, Russia and China are now engaged in military exercises focused on combined operations and missile defense, both of which suggest a strategic shift to power projection and area denial ([CPIFA](#), 2017). These capabilities could allow Russia and China to directly counter US operability in the region and expand their security interests beyond the borders of their respective homelands.

For example, the confirmed delivery earlier this year of Russian S-400 missile systems to China have several potential benefits for the latter: improving the PRC's ability to defend its major cities against emerging missile threats from US security partners such as Japan, assisting the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in achieving air superiority over Taiwan, and in enforcing potential air defense identification zones over the East and South China Seas ([Press TV](#), April 4). This coincides with China's growing efforts to project power beyond the first island chain, establish control over sea and air lanes in its adjacent waters, and pressure Taiwan, all of which must confront the US presence in East Asia and US support of Taiwan's defense forces. The S-400's long range missiles will allow China to counter US E-3 Sentry Airborne early warning and control systems (AWACS) stationed in Japan, undercutting the United States' ability to step in quickly to protect its Asian allies against PLA attack.

Meanwhile, in 2016 China and Russia conducted their first joint computer-simulated missile defense exercise: "Aerospace Security" ([Russian MOD](#), April 29 2016). While both countries claimed the exercise was "not pointed against third parties," it occurred against the backdrop of United States and NATO negotiations to place defensive missile bases in Romania and Poland, as well as US-ROK discussions of a potential deployment of the terminal high altitude area defense (THAAD) system in South Korea.

The shift towards more missile defense exercises runs the risk that the two countries may eventually shift focus to missile offense, particularly as both become more advanced in their own missile systems' quality, quantity, and mobility ([CSIS](#), February 7; [CSIS](#), May 25). This would fundamentally shift the nature of the Chinese-Russian security relationship from one that is mostly reactionary to one that is actively undermining the United States' and its allies' missile defense systems and the US' ability to operate and uphold its security commitments in the region.

Flourishing high-level military contacts also reinforce the notion that Chinese-Russian ties are strengthening in light of perceived US encirclement. At the Moscow International Security Conference this year, PLA General and PRC Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe (魏凤和) explicitly said that his visit was intended to "show the world... a firm determination of [Chinese] armed forces to strengthen strategic cooperation" with Russia, and to work with Russia in their "common struggle" against a US-led and -dominated international world order ([TASS](#), April 3). Russian Defense Minister General Sergei Shoigu reaffirmed that Russian-Chinese relations today have reached a "new, unprecedented" level ([Russian MOD](#), April 3).

While neither government has publicly broached a formalized security alliance, Chinese and Russian scholars have written on the strategic benefits of an alliance ([CFAU](#), 2018). Moreover, across major security issues in Asia and the Middle East, both Russia and China have made a point to establish their mutual view. A 2016 joint declaration on the "promotion and principles of international law" and a 2018 joint statement on the joint comprehensive plan of action are just two examples of instances where China and Russia have come together to solidify their shared perspectives on ongoing international security issues ([Russian MOD](#), June 25; [Russian MOD](#), May 5).

Given the two countries' high volume of arms trade, increased frequency and sophistication in military cooperation, and demonstrated intention to cooperate on common international security issue, warming Russian-PRC ties should not be dismissed as political theater. Instead, the United States should recognize that this relationship is one that will continue to strengthen, and which has the potential to develop into a security alliance aimed at counter-balancing US influence in the region and beyond.

Implications for US Policy

That said, the Sino-Russian relationship at present is largely one of mutual convenience, and is susceptible to US influence. In cases where the United States isolates one country, the two countries have increased their shared cooperation; recent PRC support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria is but one example. A formalized security alliance is far from fruition, and there are opportunities for the United States to delay or counter the development of one. The United States should thus not only engage with each country on its own, but also consider policies that could undermine the relationship as a whole.

Historic mistrust plays continues to drive a wedge between the two countries, and the two countries still lack the operational capability to conduct complex integrated military operations or streamline intelligence sharing on mutual threats such as early-warning missile tracking. For example, China's military modernization presents a unique complication to Russia, which drives Russia to seek defense cooperation with countries that Beijing considers potential threats, such as Vietnam and India ([USCC](#), March 20). Moreover, China's continued reverse-engineering of Russian arms mean that the two countries will face obstacles if it wishes to engage in a security alliance with interservice operability ([SIPRI](#), 2017).

The United States should thus identify and respond to these facets of friction to avoid Chinese-Russian counterbalancing. That is, the United States should focus not only on countering Russian and Chinese power projection individually, but also Chinese-Russian security and defense ties as a whole, particularly as the two begin to cooperate against US interests.

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Why India Won't Play Its 'Tibet Card'

By Sudha Ramachandran

On February 22, India's Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale issued a directive calling on leaders and government officials to stay away from events planned by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)—the Tibetan government-in-exile—to mark the 60th anniversary of the Dalai Lama's exile to India. In his note, Gokhale pointed out that the "proposed period" when the Tibetan events would happen was "a very sensitive time" for Sino-Indian relations ([Indian Express](#), March 2). Either on its own volition or under instructions from the Indian government, the CTA subsequently canceled the interfaith meeting and shifted the public event to Dharamsala, the headquarters of the CTA ([Phayul.com](#), March 16). The Indian government's distancing from the Tibetan events is at odds with its proximity to the Dalai Lama and the CTA the past four years.

Upon coming to power in May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) adopted a more muscular approach to China than its predecessors. As part of this, it was not averse to using the Dalai Lama and the CTA to gain leverage in its dealings with China. Its recent move to put distance between itself and Dharamsala reflects an understanding that playing the 'Tibet card' brought India no benefits. In fact, the failure of the BJP's four-year gambit reaffirms what many Indian diplomats and scholars have been saying for decades: there is no 'Tibet card' for India to play.

Needling Beijing

The BJP government signaled a willingness to play the Tibet card as soon as it came to power in May 2014. It invited Lobsang Sangay—then the CTA's prime minister and now its president—to Narendra Modi's swearing-in as India's prime minister. Sangay was accorded treatment almost on par with other South Asian heads of state present at the inaugural ([The Telegraph](#), June 8 2014). In December 2016, the Dalai Lama was invited to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, (India's presidential palace) for a ceremony honoring Nobel Peace prize winners, where he shared the stage with India's then-president, Pranab Mukherjee ([The Pioneer](#), 15 December 2016). In March 2017, the Tibetan spiritual leader was permitted to travel to Tawang, a town in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and one of the main sites of contention in an escalating Sino-Indian border dispute ([China Brief](#), January 13 2017). In July, even as Sino-Indian tensions at Doklam were soaring, India allowed Sangay to unfurl the Tibetan flag at Pangong Tso on the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh ([The Wire](#), July 9, 2017). [1]

Indian leaders have met the Dalai Lama in the past, and the Tibetan spiritual leader has visited Tawang before. However, the frequency of the meetings and visits of the past four years appeared to be part of a systematic strategy, rather than periodic, undirected needling. As the Sino-Indian war of words escalated in the run-up to the Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang, *India also roped in the US; then-US Ambassador to India Richard Verma visited Tawang, much to China's chagrin* ([Indian Express](#), October 22, 2016). Moreover, the Dalai Lama was escorted on his visit to Tawang by India's junior Minister for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju, *which was interpreted by Chinese media as an unambiguously official stamp of approval* ([Global Times](#), April 6, 2017).

Beijing's Reaction

China reacted strongly to India "openly" using the Dalai Lama "as a diplomatic tool to win more leverage" ([Global Times](#), April 5, 2017). It issued India a demarche after Sangay participated in Modi's inaugural ([Times of India](#), June 5, 2014). In the run-up to the Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused India of "providing a stage for anti-China separatist forces" ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China \[PRC\]](#), October 29, 2016). Calling on India "to immediately stop its erroneous move of using the Dalai Lama to undermine China's interests" it pointed out that this "not only violates India's commitment on Tibet-related issues but also "severely hurts" the bilateral relationship ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC](#), April 5, 2017). China hit back at India in various global forums on issues of high interest to Delhi. Besides continuing to block India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Beijing defeated India's efforts to get the UN Security Council to list the Pakistan-backed, anti-India *Jaish-e-Mohammed* leader Masood Azhar as a global terrorist ([Deccan Chronicle](#), May 5, 2017) .

China also stepped up pressure on India along their disputed border. According to reports, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) transgressed into the Indian side of the LAC 415 times in 2017, a 48% increase over the previous year ([Indian Express](#), January 10, 2018). Then in June 2017, China began constructing a road into Doklam Plateau in western Bhutan, a move with serious potential implications for India's national security. [2] As the crisis escalated the two countries reinforced their troop presence in the area. The possibility of war loomed ([The Hindu](#), August 8, 2017). The crisis was defused in late August, when the two sides agreed on "an expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam" ([Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India \[GOI\]](#), August 28, 2017). However, China kept up the pressure on India. Within weeks of the 'disengagement' of troops, satellite images revealed heavy deployment of Chinese soldiers, concrete structures, helipads and trenches near the previous faceoff site ([The Print](#), December 16, 2017).

Contrary to the Modi government's expectations, playing the Tibet card did not prompt China to soften its approach to India. It not only drew Beijing's ire, but also seriously undermined bilateral relations, bringing the two countries to the brink of war. Reports in January of a fresh Chinese build-up near the previous face-off site triggered Indian anxiety over a possible "bigger confrontation", causing the Modi government to rethink its China policy ([South China Morning Post](#), March 17).

Resetting Relations

In contrast to June-August 2017, beginning in January 2018, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) downplayed reports that China was building a new road to the Jampheri Ridge. In fact, it maintained that there were no "new developments at the face-off site" ([NDTV](#), January 17). In addition to avoiding confronting China over Doklam, India backed down on using the Tibetan issue to rile Beijing. By February, the Modi government had begun outreach to stabilize relations, and shelved the Tibet card in its bid to normalize relations with Beijing. Indeed, it informed Beijing of its plans to distance itself from the Tibetan events even before sending out the note to its officials ([Indian Express](#), April 24).

On February 22, India and China took steps to signal sensitivity on issues of importance to the other, including Foreign Secretary Gokhale's note to the Cabinet Secretary. Meanwhile at the Paris meeting of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental money laundering watchdog, China lifted its objections to Pakistan's inclusion in a grey list for not doing enough to freeze the assets of Pakistan-based anti-India terror outfits ([The Print](#), February 29).

The following day, Gokhale was in Beijing where he met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as well as State Councilor Yang Jiechi, China's top foreign policy official. It was during this visit that the idea of an 'informal summit' between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping was first mooted. Modi then called up Xi to congratulate him on the extension of his tenure. It was during this call that the two leaders agreed in principle to the informal summit. Several meetings between high-level functionaries followed, culminating in the April 27-28 'informal summit' between Xi and Modi at Wuhan.

At Wuhan, Xi and Modi agreed to provide "strategic guidance" to their respective militaries to improve communication, implement various confidence building measures and strengthen existing institutional mechanisms to prevent and manage situations in the border areas. In addition, they have decided to co-operate on a joint economic project in Afghanistan ([MEA](#), April 28).

Modi's U-Turn

Modi and Xi's Wuhan meeting won applause in both countries ([The Hindu](#), April 30 and [Global Times](#), May 1). However, the Modi government also came in for criticism at home. It was raked over the coals for "rolling over and restricting Tibetan activities to please Beijing" ([Times of India](#), March 7). This was described as "appeasement," even "kowtowing" to China's "browbeating diplomacy" ([Asian Age](#), March 5).

Strong domestic reasons are said to have played a role in Modi's decision to appease China. Elections to several state assemblies are due later this year and India will vote in general elections in May 2019. Modi is keen to ensure that "China will not trouble India too much" along the LAC or in Doklam in the coming months as he "does not want to be distracted" by another Sino-Indian border crisis or "have the Chinese make him look ineffective on foreign policy as he moves into election mode at home" ([Business Standard](#), April 26). Since its "muscularity" vis-à-vis China "didn't bring any dividends" and "only hardened" China's attitudes to India, the Modi government seems to have decided to avoid baiting Beijing on the Tibetan issue for the time being ([Rediff.com](#), March 9).

Is There a 'Tibet Card'?

In theory, New Delhi should have had a strong 'Tibet card' to play against China given the fact that it is in India that the Dalai Lama, the CTA and the roughly 100,000-strong Tibetan exile community reside. However, there are several reasons it does not. For one, there was never a 'Tibet card' to begin with. The Tibetans themselves gave up their demand for independence under the 17-point agreement they signed with China in 1951 ([The Wire](#), March 30). Indeed, even the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way Approach does not question the idea

of 'One China' but only seeks 'genuine autonomy' for all Tibetan areas within the PRC through dialogue," pointed out Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, an expert on Tibetan issues. [3]

Besides, India surrendered the 'Tibet card' decades ago. Under a 1954 agreement with the PRC it accepted Tibet as a "region" of China (MEA). It went further in an agreement in 2003 when it recognized that "the Tibet Autonomous Region is part of the territory of the People's Republic of China" and reiterated that it "does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India" (MEA). This "has traditionally involved carrying out preventive arrests of Tibetans in India and enforcing restrictions on freedom of assembly during visits of Chinese leaders. [4]

Having surrendered the 'Tibet card' decades ago, there is little space for India to play this card now (The Wire, March 30). To revive the card and play it effectively against China would require India to go back on all agreements signed with Beijing since 1950. This would be meaningless given the consolidation of Beijing's political and military control over Tibet. Since Tibet is a 'core' issue for China, a shift in India's position on this matter would be seen as "a challenge to China's territorial integrity." China can be expected to react to this with violence (The Wire, Jan 13, 2017).

Conclusion

Over the past four years, New Delhi's overt displays of proximity to the Dalai Lama served to rile Beijing, without yielding tangible dividends. Arguments that India has a 'Tibet card' and should play it to get Beijing to be sensitive to its security concerns are out of sync with the reality on the ground.

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Notes

[1] The LAC is the de-facto border between the two countries.

[2] China and Bhutan claim the Doklam Plateau, which is close to the India-Bhutan-China trijunction. It is currently under Bhutanese control. China's road into this plateau would undermine India's national security as it would ease deployment of PLA troops in the region, threatening India's strategic Siliguri Corridor.

[3] Author's Interview, Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, April 20.

[4] Author's Interview, Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, April 20.

China's Evolving Naval Force Structure: Beyond Sino-US Rivalry *By Christopher Yung*

During a recent discussion with PLA analysts, one interlocutor observed to the author that American strategists are slaves of their own history. That is, in interpreting the facts on the ground Americans cannot help but look to their own history to interpret the nature of strategic threats. By this he meant that Americans necessarily see China's naval force structure development through the lens of the US's own rise to maritime supremacy, and

imagine the PRC on an inexorable rise to naval power. While we could dismiss this as a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) talking point, it is an assertion that is worth examining, because it does contain an element of truth. A closer examination of the PLA Navy (PLAN) force structure over the past two decades reveals not an unstoppable march towards a fixed objective, but an evolving set of objectives designed to partially address a number of national security threats.

Figure 1 displays the size of the PLA's force structure in five year increments dating back to 2000. Unquestionably the development of China's navy has seen substantial changes; it is no longer the 1970s-level naval force that it was in the 1990s. The numbers also do not reflect the fact that the vessels are more modern, have longer range weapons systems, and have moved beyond point defense to area missile defenses. Senior Asia security analysts have expressed concern that the numbers and types of ships acquired by the PLA Navy (PLAN) reflect its evolution into a sea control navy.

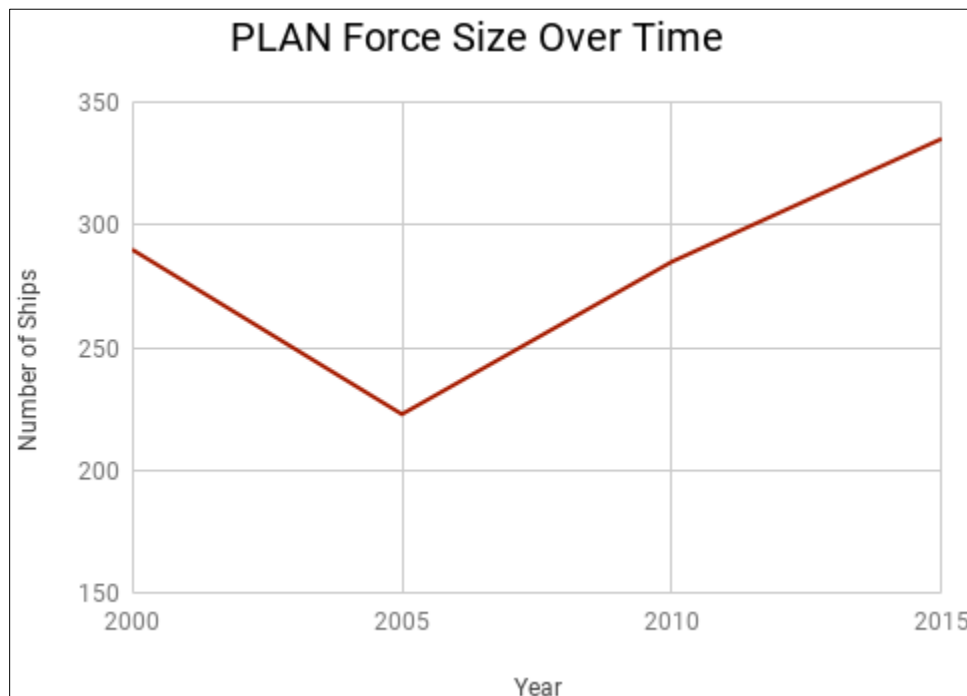


Figure One: PLA Navy Force Structure, 2000-2015. Source: O'Rourke, CRS, 2017.

These concerns could be borne out. At the same time, other parts of the US national security analysis community tend to rely on monocausal analysis, attributing the PLAN's rising ship numbers solely to a deliberate pursuit of maritime dominance: at best, this is incomplete analysis.

An in-depth look at Chinese naval force structure development since the mid-1990s reveals a more complex dynamic, one that does not resemble a mad dash to assert regional dominance. Since that time, the PLAN has built three attack submarines, seven to eleven destroyers, and approximately 20 frigates, while reducing its number of amphibious ships and missile patrol craft. Compared with the Imperial Japanese Navy in the twenty year run-up to the Second World War, we are confronted with substantially different rates of force structure growth. Japan constructed nine aircraft carriers between 1922 and 1941, in addition to over 125 destroyers, twenty light cruisers and eighteen heavy cruisers.

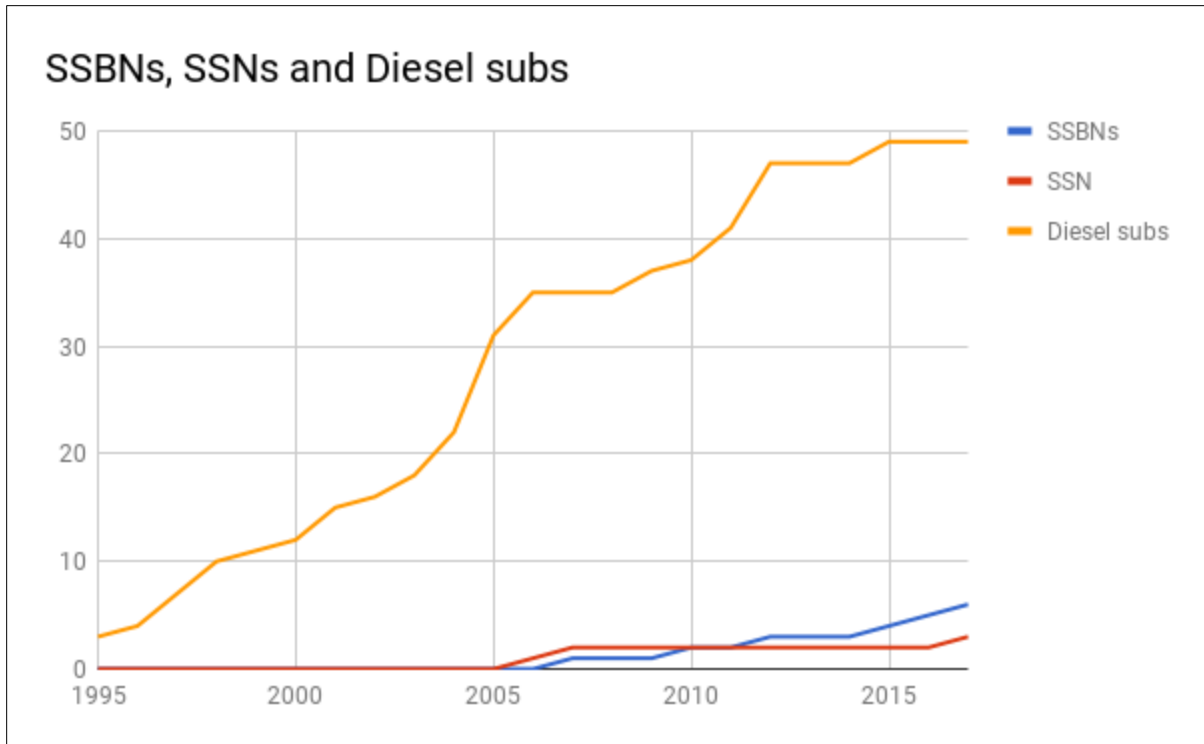


Figure Two: PLAN Submarine Commissions (1995-2017). Source: O'Rourke, "China's Naval Modernization: Issues for Congress", 2017

Secondly, PLAN vessel development since the mid-1990s does not seem to reveal a force focused on acquiring the naval capabilities needed for global, or even regional dominance. Figure Two shows that the PLAN still possesses only a handful of nuclear attack submarines (SSN). Instead it has focused its attention developing and acquiring diesel submarines, tripling the number between the mid-1990s and the present. Diesel subs are arguably a platform more suited to keeping naval forces out of the region than projecting power within it. Additionally, if the Chinese leadership was intent on challenging the United States, why only three to five SSBNs? Similarly, the acquisition of underway replenishment ships (now approximately eight) did not become a focus of PLAN force structure development until the 2010s, after China embarked on sustained "out of area" counterpiracy missions.

Also, although much has been made of China's development of its first aircraft carrier (the *Liaoning*), according to the memoirs of PLAN Admiral Liu Huaqing, the development of such a platform was long vetoed because of a belief that China's external environment did not warrant such an expense. [1] It was not until 2004 that China's expanded overseas interests prompted Hu Jintao to green-light the *Liaoning* (SCMP, January 19 2014). This pace of acquisition—one carrier over the course of twenty years—illustrates that China's force structure development calculus is not prefaced on a relentless drive toward regional and global hegemony.

Third, if China's ultimate goal during the decades prior was regional or global dominance, it would be logical to first resolve security issues closer to home, such as Taiwan, before seeking to topple the US. But the evolution of the PLAN's force structure does not reflect a strong focus on resolving "the Taiwan question"; it possesses less than sixty amphibious capable vessels. [2] Four of these L-class ships are Landing Platform Dock (LPD) capable ships useful for long-range expeditionary missions, each capable of lifting only a battalion, and not especially useful for rapidly generating a force ashore for a blunt amphibious assault on Taiwan. Had the CCP been interested in sprinting towards domination, the first order of business, beginning in the 1990s, would have

been the production of enough LSTs to give the PLAN the lift needed to conduct a landing on the wayward province. This has not turned out to be the case.

What then does the evolution of the PLAN force structure suggest about China's long-term strategy? Although basing speculation about a country's strategy on its military force structure is not without its hazards, evolving orders of battle leave fingerprints from which we can infer intent.

Broadly, we can describe this intent in three statements:

1) The evolution of the PLAN's force structure the past twenty years reflects the CCP's concern about many national security contingencies, rather than a single-minded drive for global domination.

This evolution is marked neither by a relentless pursuit of the Taiwan problem, nor a rapid push to quickly take on the US both regionally and globally. It appears designed to partially address a number of larger national security threats: coercing Taiwan; keeping the US out of China's operational space; counter-deterrence; coastal and regional defense; protecting maritime rights; and far seas protection and out of area operations.

2) The evolution of the PLAN suggests a contingent element of force structure development.

Put differently, the CCP is uncertain of its future security environment. They are therefore willing to slowly develop their naval capabilities, reexamine mission requirements, and adjust the development of their acquisitions before proceeding forward. Case in point: China did not start to acquire an underway replenishment capability (AORs) in any significant numbers until after the requirement to sustain China's counter-piracy operations emerged in the 2010s. Another example: The PLAN tinkered constantly with its destroyer designs until 2013, strongly suggesting that its designs changes with the shifting of maritime mission requirements. Yet another example: The PLAN's approval for an aircraft carrier acquisition did not come until 2004, after Hu Jintao and the CCP articulated a new security doctrine known as the "New Historic Missions".

3) The development of China's naval force structure suggests that the CCP is attempting to balance a range of competing, overlapping and complex mission sets for the purposes of attaining larger political objectives.

This explains the acquisition of more modern L-class ships (LPDs and possibly LHDs) which can be used to exert coercive pressure on Taiwan, but are less useful in a Taiwan assault than larger numbers of modernized LSTs. These newer L-class ships can also be used to address far seas missions such as non-combatant evacuation operations, counter-piracy, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. This larger rationale explains the dual emphasis on both diesel-powered and nuclear-powered submarines: diesels, for the purposes of keeping the US Navy at arm's-length; nuclear attack submarines for "out of area" operations, slowing the arrival of US Navy forces from out of theater, and potential future counter-deterrence missions (e.g. SSBN hunting).

Implications

None of the foregoing analysis should be construed to mean that the PLAN will not, in the long run, develop a blue water, power projection navy that can be used to contest American power both inside the region and out. That is a distinct possibility, if not an inevitable result. This analysis does not contradict calls for the US to refocus on shipbuilding, and develop a naval force structure sizeable enough to meet the demands of contested sea control in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

What this analysis does suggest is that the US Navy might need to rethink the specifics of its approach to acquisition over the next few decades—perhaps an impossible task given current processes. Adherents to the idea that China and the US are entering into a period of great power competition tend to assume that US Navy's force structure should emphasize sea control missions. However, since China appears to be "crossing the river

by feeling the stones”, a mad dash to build out a US naval force structure designed entirely for contesting maritime supremacy with the Chinese might not be optimal [3].

As an example, a US force structure that emphasized sea control would most likely come at the expense of expeditionary platforms (e.g. big deck or medium-sized amphibious platforms), or smaller, more vulnerable platforms like the Littoral Combat Ship, which are focused on non-traditional missions and well suited to cooperation with Asia-Pacific partners. Ironically, since meeting the Chinese challenge appears to require flexibility, these might be some of the platforms most useful in a political wrestling match with the Chinese in the East and South China Seas in a decades-long runup to a possible US-China contest for maritime supremacy.

The preceding analysis should also inform how US naval forces are deployed to address a rising Chinese naval challenge. Since PLAN force development appears to take into account the broad political objectives of the CCP, US naval operations should be ideally designed to blunt some of the political effects of PLAN force deployment. Questions to consider include: Should greater PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean suggest an alteration of Seventh Fleet deployment patterns in the Indo-Asia Pacific Region? Which emerging US Navy operational concepts are best if PLAN force structure development is meant to realize specific CCP political objectives?

Conclusion

PLAN force structure development, as is the case with larger PRC defense and foreign policy, is posing a vexing problem for US strategists and policy makers. The PRC has grown its force in ways that make it difficult for competitors to formulate a proper strategic response. Rising to the challenge on the US's part will require a degree of self-reflection. It will require the US to rethink its ship acquisition process, how it formulates maritime strategy, its employment strategies in the Indo-Pacific, and its contingency planning. Although difficult, it is not a challenge from which we can afford to shrink.

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Notes

[1] This anecdote can be found in *Liu Huaqing Hui Yilu* (流华清回忆录), published in 2004 by the China People's Liberation Army Publishing House (人民解放军出版社).

[2] These and subsequent quoted ship numbers are drawn from *PLAN Submarine Commissions (1995-2017)*. Source: O'Rourke, "China's Naval Modernization: Issues for Congress", 2017.

[3] "Crossing the river by feeling the stones" (摸着石头过河) was a proverb coined by Deng Xiaoping to describe how the PRC works towards its objectives over time, shifting plans as the political and security environment changes.

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