

An Old Chinese Proverb Says...Beware Chinese Generals Offering Advice

Written by Harry Kazianis

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HARRY KAZIANIS, JUL 17 2011

Nothing was more telling about the state of US/Sino relations than the recent meeting of both US and Chinese heads of their prospective militaries. Both nations have been attempting recently to improve direct military ties. The idea behind such meetings is to bolster direct military cooperation to lessen tensions and to promote understanding between both nation's armed forces. If both sides understand each other's intentions and can develop personal relationships, the chances of conflict turning into a shooting match can be reduced

Direct military contacts are a great idea...generally. If both parties can look past military posturing, stated doctrine and jingoistic press bantering, tensions can be avoided as one always has a personal relationship to fall back on.

A great example of such contacts is where I intern at the US Naval War College. Officers from all over the world work together in classes learning national security strategy and naval tactics. Relationships and quite often friendships develop between officers from various nations. If an international incident is in the offing and officers from allied coalitions have already built a rapport, it makes the chances of a misstep of a potential ally that much easier to avoid.

Military ties can transcend diplomatic speak and officially stated positions, cut through red tape, and make a true difference. To use a native phrase from my hometown of Cranston, RI spun with an Italian American accent befitting the Sopranos, "It's good to know people". In this case, knowing people can save lives.

Military to Military ties take time to develop. A sense of trust needs to be built over years of personal engagement without large political pressure. They can't be faked. They can't be just made to happen.

Which brings us to today's example. The meeting of the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his Chinese counterpart to promote the restart of direct military to military contact is a positive development. With tensions in the South China Sea escalating over the last year, China building a "blue water navy" equipped with a new aircraft carrier, modern diesel and nuclear submarines, Anti Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) systems that threaten US Aircraft Carriers, there is much to discuss with China's military. With China increasing its military spending and deploying new capabilities rapidly, there is a large degree of ambiguity, tension, and lack of strategic understanding between both parties. One must also take into account the perception of American refocus into Asian affairs. This was highlighted by Secretary Clinton's comments offering to assist in negotiations in the South China Sea stalemate a little over a year ago that angered the Chinese. There is much visible tension in the US/China relationship. Therefore, direct talks between both militaries, however scripted, can accomplish a lot.

Let there be no doubt, China and the US are competitors. The United States is rapidly moving away from its "war on terror" foreign policy goals and moving quickly into a post Iraq/Afghanistan/Osama Bin Laden world. With Asia's rapidly expanding economies and geopolitical rivalries, the US finds itself back in the game of great power politics. Anything that can lessen the chances of competition becoming conflict is worth trying.

The United States, despite its economic problems, is still the world's most powerful nation. The American economy is

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still three times as large as China's. The United States outspends the Chinese 6:1 in military spending. For all the hype over the new Chinese stealth fighter, the J-20, the most important part of any fighter aircraft, its engine, is Russian, not Chinese. Much of the technology inside was copied from other nations, including the US. China's much talked about new aircraft carrier was originally laid down in a Ukrainian shipyard in 1985 and is hardly a showstopper. When one looks past the hype, China has a long way to go to catch up to the United States in military and economic capabilities. The gap however is closing at an accelerated rate. These factors make direct military talks all the more important.

While this new attempt at military contact is certainly better than no ties at all, it gives people on the outside a look at just how much tension there is between the US and China. The most significant outcome of this recent meeting was the candid remarks made by Chinese General Chen Bindge. The general remarked that US priorities were "misplaced". There was a very tense exchange on the South China Sea debate. Admiral Mike Mullen reiterated long-standing US policy to promote freedom of the seas. He also elaborated that US maneuvers with the Philippines and Vietnam were routine and no cause for concern. Admiral Chen responded that US maneuvers with its allies were "inappropriate" considering recent tensions and that China also respects all nations rights to free navigation of the sea. He also described US posturing as an "excuse to implement its own policies", which seems to be a reference to the US strengthening relationships with Vietnam and the Philippines in a time of tension in the area.

As if such an exchange was not tense enough, things would escalate. Admiral Chen would seem to move past the obvious scripted talking points. To paraphrase his comments: "I know the U.S. is still recovering from a financial crisis, still having some difficulties in its economy, while at the same, the U.S is still spending so much money on the military. And isn't it placing too much pressure on its taxpayers?" He would go on to say, "If the U.S. could reduce a bit military spending to spend more on the improvement and livelihood of the American people and also do more good things for world people, wouldn't it be a better scenario?"

Ouch. It seems the general went out of his way to make some direct reference to current US budgetary problems. I found the comment a little hypocritical, considering in many ways China funds the current US deficit by the purchase of US treasury bonds. When one is attempting to foster good relations, it seems common sense not to point out ones weaknesses.

Such commentary points to the limits of top-level military exchanges, especially of two nations with such massively competing interests. If such exchanges were of great importance, maybe a press conference where people naturally look to score points with their constituencies could be eliminated. The creation of such ties at the top levels of both parties will not be as important as possible ties between midlevel officers and flag officers on the high seas in tense disputed areas such as the South China Sea. If these officers are allowed to exchange ideas and develop relationships, this may have the desired affect of reducing tensions that such ties aim to accomplish. It will certainly be better than advice delivered to so called "friends" for the domestic audiences consumption back at home.

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About the author:

Harry serves as Editor-In-Chief for The Diplomat as well as a CSIS: WSD Handa Fellow. He has served in the past as Deputy Editor for e-IR. He specializes in security studies with a keen interest in modern Chinese military strategy and foreign policy. Harry has written in publications including The Diplomat, East Asia Forum and the Foreword Report.

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