

With “Strategic Partners” Like This, Who Needs Competitors? Europe Needs to Change its Military to Military Relations with China

By Matthew Joyce

In his address to the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping declared that China has entered a “new era.” A clear departure from the foreign and security policy restraint of the past,” Xi’s new era is marked by global strategic ambition, growing military power, predatory economic practices, political influence operations abroad, and an authoritarian crackdown at home. For the past decades, the United States and its allies have sought a constructive relationship with China, which extended into the field of military diplomacy. Increasingly though, China has demonstrated that years of overly cooperative engagement has facilitated the rise of the West’s greatest strategic competitor. The United States has gradually shifted its thinking on military diplomacy with China and Europe now should follow suit.

Just as Europe acknowledges the need to confront China on its economic practices and influence operations, it should re-examine its military to military relationship with China as well. Policy and structural adjustments are necessary to properly address this challenge, including regulation, centralization, and multilateralization.

Military diplomacy is the non-combat interactions of a nation’s armed forces to achieve national objectives, including varied activities such as defense dialogues, military exercises, ship visits, arms sales, functional and academic exchanges, senior leader visits, and others. Since Xi Jinping took power five years ago, The People’s Republic of China has increased military diplomacy as an important component of its overall diplomatic efforts.¹ In his speech at the 19th Party Congress, Xi stated, “we will modernize our military across the board in terms of theory, organizational structure, service personnel, and weaponry” with the goal of a “modernized” military by 2035 and “world-class” forces by mid-century.² While the Chinese leadership seeks to achieve various security aims through its military diplomacy efforts, most important for the United States and its allies is that Beijing aims to facilitate its ongoing military reform and modernization through training, operational experience, professional development, equipment and technology acquisition, intelligence collection, and international legitimization — all of which can be achieved to varying degrees through its military to military activities.

China’s official 2015 Military Strategy white paper plainly discusses the importance of military interactions to promote “mutual” learning in areas such as multi-domain joint operations, personnel training, manning and equipping, logistics, professional military education, and bilateral and multilateral exercises, with the explicit aim of “extend[ing] the subjects of such training and

1 习近平：进一步开创军事外交新局面 January 29, 2015 新华网 (Xi Jinping: Further Create a New Phase in Military Diplomacy, Xinhua Wang)

2 Ibid.



exercises from non-traditional to traditional security areas.”³ This means that China wants to expand military to military interactions into more sensitive combat and combat-support activities that would be more conducive to improving the warfighting capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).⁴

The recent Chinese emphasis on military diplomacy has corresponded with a growing desire to learn from the more advanced U.S. military and a growing confidence in the PLA's ability to hold its own as a capable, professional military in international interactions.⁵ However, China's desire to deepen military relations — and thus learn from other militaries — applies not just to the United States, but to European allies as well. This was stated in China's 2015 Military Strategy white paper, 2014 EU white paper, 2010 National Defense white paper, and certain PLA writings.⁶ It is an advantage for China to conduct military to military interactions with European countries because they provide similar learning opportunities for PLA modernization and reform, but lack the same level of scrutiny and actual legal restrictions that they face when dealing with the United States.

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Through its military diplomacy, the current Chinese leadership seeks to stabilize China's periphery, gain influence in the developing world, promote Chinese arms exports, promote a view of China as a responsible global actor capable of protecting its citizens and provide global public security goods, protect Chinese investments abroad, and counter what it labels the “China threat” narrative.⁷

The U.S. View of Mil-Mil with China

U.S. optimism regarding military to military interactions with China has changed in recent years. Following the U.S.–China bilateral summit at Sunnylands with then-President Obama early in Xi Jinping's first term, the United States has generally approached military to military interactions with China according to three parallel lines of effort: sustained and substantive dialogue and high-level visits; practical cooperation in areas of mutual interest; and risk reduction aimed to reduce the chances of accidents or miscalculation.⁸ Despite this initial optimism toward U.S.–China military to military interactions, divergent strategic interests combined with China's display of incremental coercion led to a distinct recalibration toward competition over cooperation. A glance at the last three U.S. National Security Strategies (NSS) from 2010, 2015, and 2017 clearly demonstrates this declining trust.

In 2010, the United States sought a “positive, constructive, and comprehensive” relationship with China and “disagreements” are downplayed in favor of cooperation “essential to address the major challenges of the 21st century.”⁹ The 2015 version sought a “constructive” relationship with China with “cooperation on shared regional and global challenges,” but the United States would “manage

3 "Full Text: China's Military Strategy. Xinhua," Xinhua, May 26, 2015. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001_7.htm.

4 Kenneth Allen, Phillip C Saunders, John Chen, "Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications," National Defense University Press, July 2017.

5 Phillip C. Saunders and Julia G. Bowie "U.S.–China Military Relations: Competition and Cooperation," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 39: 5-6, 662-684, 2016.

6 "Full Text: China's Military Strategy". Xinhua; 中国政府发表《2010年中国的国防》白皮书（全文）(China's Government Releases "China's National Defense in 2010" White Paper, Full Text.), http://www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2011-03/31/content_4249942.htm; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Policy Paper on the EU: Deepen the China–EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit and Win-win Cooperation," April 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wjzcs/t1143406.shtml; 李大光: 习近平军事外交思想内涵与特色. 人民网-人民论坛, Li Daguang: Characteristics and Implications of Xi Jinping's Thinking on Military Diplomacy. Renmin Wang- Renmin Forum, February 18, 2014, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0218/c367550-24393699-3.html>.

7 Ibid; 汪红伟: 中国梦与中国军事外交的战略功能. 探索 2014 6th ed (Wang Hongwei, "The Strategic Function of Military Diplomacy and the China Dream. Exploration," 2014, 6th Ed); 董川: 新中国军事外交战略演变 — 纪念中国人民解放军建军90周年. 长春市委党校学报 ; 2017年 05期 (2017 / 11 / 20) (Dong Chuan, "The Evolution of New China's Military Diplomacy Strategy — Celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Changchun Municipal Party Committee Party School," 2017, 5th Ed.)

8 Annual Reports to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. 2014–2017. www.defense.gov. [anything more specific?]

9 United States, "National Security Strategy of the United States," May 2010. <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2010.pdf>.

competition from a position of strength.”¹⁰ By 2017, China was acknowledged as a “revisionist power” that seeks to “shape a world antithetical to U.S. interests.”¹¹

Building upon the 2017 NSS, the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy identified China as a “strategic competitor” that seeks regional hegemony in the near term and global preeminence in the long term.¹² From the perspective of some in the U.S. military familiar with the issue, years of over-emphasis on the cooperative aspect of military to military interaction has supported China’s ongoing military development and legitimized revisionist behavior with little in return.

The European View of Mil-Mil with China

Pressing security interests close to home with a resurgent Russia in the East and chronic instability on its southern flank have stretched European defense capacity. This has led the EU to look to the Chinese military as an additional provider of public security goods that it cannot completely tackle on its own. Examples include peacekeeping operations in Africa and counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

In stark contrast to the recent U.S. strategic policy statements, the two 2016 documents that form the EU’s China strategy still refer to the relationship as a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” a term adopted by both sides in 2003. They broadly characterize EU–China interactions as “based on a positive agenda of partnership coupled with the constructive management of differences.”¹³ As recently as May 2018, the Council of the European Union report on security cooperation in Asia stated the importance

of deepening security cooperation with its “Asian strategic partners: China, India, Japan, and the Republic of Korea,” and that among its “immediate priorities” regarding security engagement include “complementing existing or future dialogues with capacity building where appropriate, training programs and joint exercises,” and expanding mil-mil contacts.”¹⁴ A

recent European Council on Foreign Relations report, while acknowledging a “new wave of European realism” relating to economic relations with China and a growing global bi-polarity between the United States and China, recommends upgrading military to military interaction with China in the Horn of Africa as a “trust-building exercise” to enable maritime escorts, humanitarian assistance, vnon-combatant evacuations, and suggests a new field of cooperation in countering sea mines.¹⁵

Though there is growing consensus on the need for EU cohesion in dealing with China, there is no mechanism for coordinating EU member states’ military to military interactions.¹⁶ The strategy simply states that they “should” coordinate with the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and other member states. Given the growing willingness of EU member states to work together counter Chinese sharp power in the economic and social influence realms, it is also time for the EU to come to a new understanding of how military to military interactions with China should be governed.

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10 United States, “National Security Strategy of the United States,” Feb 2015. <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015.pdf>

11 United States, “National Security Strategy of the United States,” Dec 2017. <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017.pdf>

12 U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the U.S. National Defense Strategy 2018,” <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

13 Council of the European Union, “EU Strategy on China, Council Conclusions,” July 18, 2016. <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11252-2016-INIT/en/pdf>; European Commission, “Elements for a New EU Strategy on China,” June 22, 2016, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/joint_communication_to_the_european_parliament_and_the_council_-_elements_for_a_new_eu_strategy_on_china.pdf.

14 Council of the European Union, “Outcome of Proceedings: Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia,” May 28, 2018, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35379/st09265-en18.pdf>

15 Mathieu Duchâtel and Alexandre Sheldon Duplaix, “Blue China: Navigating the Maritime Silk Road to Europe,” European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2018.

16 Francois Godemont and Abigail Vasselier, “China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU–China Relations,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2017.

Recommendations:

1) **Allies should reach a consensus on the intent of military to military relations with China that reflects the strategic realities of the “new era.”** The United States and Europe already agree on the need to confront and respond to China’s predatory economic practices and influence operations. There needs to be consensus in the military realm as well. The PLA is rapidly modernizing to be capable of fighting and winning wars against the United States and its democratic allies/partners in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁷ Asia is vital to continued European prosperity and it is in Europe’s interest to support democratic partners in Asia against autocracy and coercion. It is no longer appropriate for Western allies to conduct “cooperative” military to military engagements with China which ultimately improve the PLA’s capabilities. A good example of this is the proposed EU–China cooperation in countering sea-mines in the Persian Gulf. While it is true that the EU and China share this interest in the Persian Gulf, both offensive and defensive mine warfare would feature prominently in a PRC-Taiwan conflict.¹⁸ Thus, whatever the potential benefit of this Persian Gulf cooperative exercise, another outcome is that Europe would be helping the PLA improve its capacity to defeat Taiwan.

While it is true that the PLA will eventually attain more advanced capabilities in hardware, joint operations, professional military education, and other factors on its own, it is time Western allies agree to no longer facilitating the process.

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- The focus of military to military interactions with China should be on operational safety, deconfliction, risk reduction, and crisis management rather than cooperation, interoperability, or “strategic trust.” Deepening military to military cooperation at all levels to increase “strategic trust” in the face of clearly divergent strategic interests is a losing proposition for the United States and Europe. The United States has learned the importance of operational safety issues as the PLA increasingly challenges the long-standing presence of U.S. forces in the South and East China Seas. For Europe, this is no longer a question of distant seas and U.S.-only strategic interests. Operational safety, deconfliction, and risk reduction are becoming increasingly relevant for Europe as well, as the PLA operates on Europe’s doorstep — in Africa, the Middle East, even the Baltic Sea. A positive example of an existing mechanism is the U.S.–China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), which brings together Navy and Air Force operators from both sides to discuss concrete examples of operational interactions and how they can be made safer. The United States should invite EU observers to this event to begin contributing to shared transatlantic awareness on this issue.
- EU Military Staff should create a set of guidelines which govern the EU’s military to military interactions with China. Other than the EU arms embargo, which has been very effectively sidestepped,¹⁹ no regulations exist to guide member states’ behavior in their military to military relations with China. Instead, they are negotiated on an ad hoc basis according to disparate Chinese and EU member state interests. This provides leverage to China, as it is able to exploit the bilateral power imbalance and the strong European desire for “security cooperation” in order to gain access to advanced tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), and potentially even access to technology and equipment conducive to their

17 "Full text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," October 18, 2017. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm

18 紀永添專欄：水雷、空中加油機與台灣的戰略性武器，May 2017 (Ji Yongtian, "Column: Sea Mines, Mid-air Refueling and Taiwan's Strategic Weapons,") https://www.upmedia.mg/news_info.php?SerialNo=16299; Scott C. Truver, "Taking Mines Seriously: Mine Warfare in China's Near Seas," *Naval War College Review*, Spring 2012. Vol 65, No 2.

19 Individual member states have great leeway in interpreting the specifics of the embargo. In practice, this means that European countries have sold billions of dollars in military end items and components to China since 2000. Huotari, Mikko; Gaspers, Jan; Eder, Thomas, Lagarda, Helena; Mokry, Sabine. "China's Emergence as a Global Security Actor: Strategies for Europe," Merics.

military modernization goals. Joint exercises also provide international legitimization of revisionist behavior.

- As a starting point, the EU Military Staff could use the regulations passed in the United States' National Defense Authorization Act 2000 Section 1201, which restrict the U.S. military from engaging China in 12 key operational areas, including force projection, combined arms and joint operations, surveillance and reconnaissance operations, and logistics.²⁰ A codified EU version would greatly improve EU coherence and cohesion in what has up to now been a disparate process. China would condemn the move as Cold War era thinking and highlight it as an “obstacle” to deeper EU–China military to military ties as they repeatedly do with the United States. Deeper military to military ties should never be an end in and of themselves.

2) Increase European Leverage, Maintain Reciprocity, and Reduce Unwanted Capability “Spillage” by Multi-lateralizing Military to Military Interactions with China. The lack of NATO–China military to military interactions could be an instructive example. Despite an increased emphasis on military diplomacy pushed by Xi Jinping himself, China has not made anything but brief probing attempts to increase military to military interactions with NATO. While this can be partially explained by China's residual mistrust of the alliance, the more plausible explanation is that China views the interactions not worth the effort. Chinese participation in the vast majority of NATO exercises and courses from which it would benefit the most would require consensus from all 29 NATO member states. Why bother expending that kind of effort when it can achieve its goals with far less scrutiny and far more leverage on a bilateral basis with the militaries of individual member states?

- Create an EU Military Staff working group charged with planning, negotiation, and oversight of European military to military interactions with China. Individual member states should propose interactions which could then be shaped,

approved, or disapproved by the working group. The working group would meet with the Chinese side to negotiate an annual plan for approved EU–China military to military interactions. Based on the proposed consensus and guidelines discussed above, centralized control would inject much needed strategic coherence into the EU–China military relationship, increase EU leverage, maintain reciprocity, and reduce Chinese exploitation of allied seams.

- Replace bilateral member state dialogues and exercises with centrally approved, multi-lateral events. High level defense dialogues with China should be held at the EU level or not at all.
- Increase transparency and inform public debate by releasing an annual report on completed and planned EU–China military to military interactions with China. None of the interactions should be classified and thus unreleasable to the public. Citizens deserve to know what their militaries are doing to potentially enable the party-army of the CCP to better coerce and threaten democratic allies and partners in the region, better suppress dissent, or better repress troublesome minority populations at home.

3) Do not reward behavior that is inconsistent with international norms and transatlantic values. The United States finally disinviting China from the upcoming 2018 Rim of the Pacific naval exercise (RIMPAC) is a step in the right direction. An outdated American desire for “cooperative” military to military relations with China combined with the hope that inclusion in prestigious multilateral exercises such as the biennial RIMPAC would ultimately nudge China in a more positive direction resulted in invitations for China to participate in 2014, 2016, and 2018 iterations.

China participating in RIMPAC despite their incremental militarization of the South and East China Seas, was emblematic of a failing approach to military to military interactions with China and sent the wrong message to U.S. allies in the region. Tellingly, in July 2016, while PLA Navy sailors practiced gunnery with the United States and its allies

²⁰ National Defense Authorization Act FY 2000, SEC 1201: <https://legcounsel.house.gov/Comps/106-65.pdf>

and partners at RIMPAC, the CCP leadership was launching a propaganda and investment initiative to render irrelevant the international tribunal ruling on the South China Sea which ruled against China. Since then, China has increasingly deployed military hardware to its artificial islands there and flexed its muscles in an unprecedented show of military force. Just weeks ago, after years of a sustained trend of SCS militarization, U.S. leadership took the necessary and long-overdue step of rescinding China's invitation for RIMPAC 2018.

- Re-think standing invitations of Chinese officers to EU member state military staff courses. The purpose of professional military education is to develop the theoretical and practical skills for military leaders to succeed at higher levels of service and includes training in joint planning, doctrine, and command and control. In Xi Jinping's "new era," it is no longer appropriate to contribute to the professional military education of the PLA's officer corps.

Conclusion: The Chinese leadership's approach to security policy requires a new assessment of European military to military relations with China. While the EU wants China to provide public security goods on its periphery, transatlantic allies should hold no illusions that they are in any context in a cooperative partnership with the PLA. While China has the right to modernize and develop the PLA, the transatlantic allies should agree to stop helping the process.

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