Journal of Military and Strategic Studies

VOLUME 19, ISSUE 1

Structural Dissonance: The Failed US-PRC Defense Relationship, 1979-1989

Eric Setzekorn

Since the mid-2000s, as the PRC's military power, essentially its naval forces, have grown, numerous US policymakers and analysts have stressed a robust military to military exchange program to build trust and cooperative engagement. Historical lessons drawn from the 1979-1989 US-PRC defense relationship offers an understanding of long-term challenges of pursuing governmental engagement with fundamentally dissimilar structures of political authority. While military exchanges are a low-cost policy with few obvious downsides, this case study of the 1970s and 1980s also suggests caution in pursuing a relationship with a dissimilar political and military partner. The Carter, Reagan and Bush administrations all struggled to achieve a useful security relationship despite substantial effort and time expended by US military and political leaders.

This article traces the development of the US-PRC defense relationship from 1979-1989 and focuses on the structural and organizational issues that proved difficult to resolve. Initial problems were often a result of US bureaucratic resistance to closer military engagement with the PRC, especially if engagement meant the transfer of

ISSN : 1488-559X

weapons or technology that could negatively impact the security of other Asian partners such as South Korea or Taiwan. As the relationship deepened and the US bureaucracy became more supportive, further difficulties emerged within the PRC defense structure. Specifically, control of the PLA by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) added a non-transparent chain of authority operating at all levels of the PLA chain of command that American officials struggled to understand. The decentralized structure of the PRC defense establishment also meant that Chinese organizations without a role in the US-PRC rapprochement took actions to benefit their bottom-line, but which harmed the overall defense relationship. This is most clearly demonstrated by the behavior of PRC arms export companies, which sold "Silkworm" anti-ship missiles to Iran, significantly increasing threats to shipping in the Persian Gulf. By 1989, enduring problems within the US-PRC defense relationship had extinguished the optimism of the 1984-1986 period, and the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 definitively ended a US-PRC military relationship.

Academic research into the specifics of the US-PRC military relationship during the 1980s has been limited. Critical analysis of the relationship during the 1980s was particularly weak during what Harry Harding has described as a period of "euphoria" in the mid-1980s, with both American political leaders and the general public having a sense of "warmth" towards the PRC that perhaps precluded objective assessments.[1] Robert Ross' prescient 1989 article "From Lin Biao to Deng Xiaoping: Elite Instability and China's US Policy," was among the only works to suggest structural barriers between the two countries. Ross noted that the restraining influence of domestic PRC military and economic institutions was increasing in the 1980s because some constituencies with privileged positions were hurt by closer relations with the United States.[2] Unfortunately, that insight has not been extensively researched as political analysis by US scholars has often focused on the role of the President in driving American foreign policy with the PRC, and have inadvertently minimized bureaucratic

[1] Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China Since 1972* (Washington: Brookings Press, 1992), p. 169.
[2] Robert S. Ross, "From Lin Biao to Deng Xiaoping: Elite Instability and China's U.S. Policy," *The China Quarterly* 118 (June 1989), p. 298.

and military inclinations.[3] S. Mahmud Ali's excellent 2005 work *US-China Cold War Collaboration, 1971-1989* considers military relations but emphasizes the U.S-PRC relationship *vis-a-vis* the USSR, rather than enduring and distinctive patterns of engagement.[4]

This article draws upon newly declassified documents from the Carter and Reagan Presidential Libraries and US National Archives, and oral histories with former officials in an effort to reconstruct the pattern of interactions between the US and PRC. Unfortunately, access to Chinese sources is limited. In addition to presenting a vital period of the US-PRC relationship, this article is relevant to broader diplomatic and military issues because the PRC is not the only nation to have divided, overlapping and non-transparent spheres of government authority. During the 2015 Iranian nuclear negotiations Carnegie Endowment analyst Karim Sadjadpour noted that traditional diplomacy was proving difficult because, "A perennial challenge is that the most powerful Iranian officials are inaccessible and the most accessible Iranian officials aren't powerful."[5] In Russia, Vladimir Putin has relied on an informal network of former security and intelligence friends (*siloviki*) that have created an interconnected financial and political system with unclear positions of formal authority.[6] In these kind of governing structures, American military engagement might be difficult due to organizational dissimilarity.

Divided, overlapping and non-transparent can also be used to describe the US defense establishment, and the U.S-PRC military relationship during the 1970s and 1980s illustrates the extreme caution of the Department of Defense in forging new relationships. Initiatives begun officials in the Carter and Reagan administration were

[3] Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000); James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Random House, 2000).
[4] S. Mahmud Ali, *US-China Cold War Collaboration, 1971-1989* (Oxon: Routledge Press, 2005).
[5] David Sanger, "As Nuclear Talks Drag On, U.S. and Iran Finding it Harder to Hear Each Other," *The New York Times*, 31 March 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/world/middleeast/as-nuclear-talks-drag-on-us-and-iran-find-it-harder-to-hear-each-other.html?_r=0 (Accessed 3 June 2015)
[6] Karen Dawisha, *Who Owns Russia: Putin's Kleptocracy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2014), pp. 7-8.

successfully stalled and watered down as the policies were implemented. Overall, while military exchanges are a low-cost policy with few obvious downsides, this case study of the 1970s and 1980s also suggests caution because of limited upside despite substantial effort and time expended by US military and political leaders.

Pushing the US Bureaucracy, 1979-1983

The Nixon administration made overtures to the PRC beginning in July 1969 and after an initial reluctance, the PRC responded with a variety of unconventional public diplomacy signals, such as the visit of US journalist Edgar Snow to Beijing and the visit of the US Ping-Pong team to Shanghai in 1971. Military contact during the initial US-PRC rapprochement was limited, but the weak PRC security situation created the potential for mutually beneficial future cooperation.

The PRC desperately needed American assistance in deterring a military threat from the Soviet Union. In 1973, the US Central Intelligence Agency estimated that the "Soviets now have deployed 43 combat divisions in positions which indicates that they would be used in the early stages of any major conflict with China." Even more threatening to the large, but infantry based PLA, were Soviet Air Force deployments that between 1965 and 1973 "has grown from less than 200 aircraft to some 1,150 aircraft, including 500 fighters, 400 fighter-bombers, 50 light bombers and 200 reconnaissance planes," according to the CIA.[7]

In countering the USSR's increasing military deployments, the PLA was constrained by a lack of modern military equipment. A CIA assessment of PLA forces in 1972 stated that, "The Chinese Army for its size and by US and Soviet standards has relatively little armor, has only been moderately well equipped with light and medium

[7] Central Intelligence Agency, National Intelligence Estimate 11-13-73, 20 September 1973, p. 5. (http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/china-collection)

artillery, and has no heavy artillery. Tactical air support for ground troops is limited, and shortages of vehicles restrict mobility and logistic support."[8]

The makeshift dialogue between the PRC and United States, begun during the Nixon Administration (1969-1974), was accelerated by his President Gerald Ford (1974-1977). The Ford administration reduced international restrictions on trade with the PRC, ending US objections to the export of high technology "dual use" equipment with potential military uses. In October 1976, the Ford administration allowed the sale of sophisticated computers to the PRC, despite the objections of multiple US government agencies that the computers could be used for nuclear research and anti-ballistic missile systems.[9]

After taking office in 1977, President Carter sought to institutionalize the transfer of technology and dual-use items to the PRC as a normal part of the strategic relationship. On 5 April 1977, Carter ordered a full analysis of defense trade with the PRC in Presidential Review Memorandum 24.[10] National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was heavily in favor of modernizing the PLA through the transfer of US defense equipment, and he sought to pressure the State and Defense Departments to develop relations with the PRC in order to develop the PLA into a more capable deterrent force to the USSR in East Asia.[11]

The CIA concurred with Brzezinski's bold stance, and identified foreign military sales as an opportunity for the US to grow its strategic connections with the PRC, and possibly to influence the military balance between the US-USSR-PRC. A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) from November 1977 concluded, "Several factors have caused the Chinese to move towards purchases of advanced military technology. Primarily, the usefulness of copying Soviet design technology of the mid-1950's in

[8] Central Intelligence Agency, National Intelligence Estimate 13-3-72, China's Military Policy and General Purpose Forces, 20 July 1972., 22. (http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/china-collection)
[9] "Ford Approves Computer Sale to China," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 12 October 1976.
[10] Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Presidential Review Memorandum 24 (NSC 24) Subject: PRC, 5 April 1977.
[11] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar-Strauss-Giroux, 1983), p. 203.

nearing its end. The Chinese are experiencing technical difficulties in developing some follow-on weapons systems, such as a sophisticated high performance fighter."[12]

The optimism of National Security Advisor Brzezinski was not shared by all senior members of the Carter administration. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance argued that previously negotiated agreements made to western allies in the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM) should guide US policy toward a more limited technology transfer program.[13] Vance wrote to President Carter, "Our China policy is one of the important achievements of your Administration. It has been of obvious strategic value…But this does not mean we should move into a military security relationship with China,"[14]

Vance's position matched that of many foreign policy analysts, who believed arms sales to the PRC would be interpreted as a provocative act by the USSR and as a sell-out by American allies in East Asia. Concerns among Asian allies was especially salient because of President Carter's planned de-recognition of Taiwan and proposal to withdraw US troops from South Korea. Doak Barnett, a long-time "China Hand" and senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, used one word to describe his advice on arms sales "caution."[15] Other experts asserted that despite the combative rhetoric used by Beijing to describe the Soviet military deployments, PRC military spending was actually declining, suggesting that the Chinese were manipulating security concerns to get access to US technology.[16]

Department of Defense internal studies on the utility of direct military ties to the PLA and the transfer of military technology to the PRC reached no definitive conclusion and no senior military leader or official in the Ford or Carter Department of Defense

[12] Central Intelligence Agency, NIE 13-76 PRC Defense Policy and Armed Forces, 11 November 1977**,** p. 28.
[13] Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 113-114.
[14] Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XIII: China. Memorandum from Secretary of State Vance to President Carter 18 September 1979, p. 986.
[15] A. Doak Barnett, "Military-Security between China and the United States," *Foreign Affairs* 55:3 (April 1977), p. 596.
[16] Lucian Pye, "Dilemmas for America in China's Modernization," *International Security* 4,1 (Summer 1979): pp. 3-4.

leadership was directly identified as a proponent of closer US-PRC ties. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown was initially not in favor of increasing engagement with the PRC on defense issues. As late as 1979, Secretary Brown disagreed with National Security Advisor Brzezinski, "Are we prepared to encourage and/or help subsidize rapid modernization of China's armed forces? If we are, is there anything that we could do in the near-term either directly or indirectly that would make a major difference? The provisional answer to both questions is probably no."[17]

A combination of high-level visits and global events broke the deadlock in Washington. Following the visit of Deng Xiaoping to the United States in early February 1979, Secretary of State Vance approved the guidance that "COCOM restrictions on the Soviet Union and on non-weapons sales to the PRC should remain intact despite our position that arms sales to the PRC should come to us bilaterally at the highest political level rather than through COCOM."[18] Later in 1979, the geo-strategic importance of US-PRC defense ties increased dramatically after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 ended the period of détente between the US and USSR, and heightened PRC concerns about Soviet military forces along its borders.

Less than one week after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Brown visited Beijing to discuss technology transfers and strategic connections. After the January 1980 visit of Secretary Brown, PRC requests for equipment with the potential for "dual-use" i.e. civilian and military functions, would be given the "China preferential" with reduced US scrutiny. Brown spoke on record at a press conference, "It is clear that we have to re-examine the whole technology transfer issues, because, as you are aware, as part of our reaction to Soviet actions in Afghanistan, we are reviewing

[17] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XIII: China*, Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Brown to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski**)** March 23, 1979 SUBJECT Sino-American Relations, 849.; Banning Garrett, Statement before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives in hearings on The United States and The People's Republic of China: Issues for the 1980s 96th Cong., 2nd Sess., 26 August 1980, pp. 96-108.

[18] Memorandum for Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski from the Department of State Subject: Third Country Sales to China, 6 February 1979. (Digital National Security Archive DDRS-267213-i1-2).

technology transfer to the Soviet Union are likely to be more restrictive in that. Well, that is no reason to be more restrictive with respect to the PRC."[19]

As an example of this shift in policy, Secretary Brown announced that the PRC request for a Landsat ground station, capable of receiving satellite photos for geological exploration, but with clear military intelligence capabilities, which had been pending for over a year, was now formally approved by the US government.[20] While in Beijing Secretary Brown also stated that "I am prepared to discuss arrangements for expanding such professional contacts and exchanges," including visits by senior US military officers.[21] Following his return to Washington, the Munitions Control Letter, which specified countries and types of military-related equipment for export, opened multiple categories of "dual-use" items to the PRC.[22]

The increased willingness of the US to transfer technology and equipment with military applications brought new problems to the surface. Secretary Brown wrote to President Carter that this new military relationship would be difficult to manage, "We foresee a number of problems: -The gap between Chinese expectations and US inclinations on technology and hardware transfers is still wide.; -The Chinese are much more interested in acquiring technology; we are emphasizing sale of end-items."[23] Brown also noted that, "The Chinese had come with an enormous shopping list to our meetings in Beijing," and that it was a challenge to lower expectations without negatively impacting the relationship.[24]

Despite the change in US policy, elements in the Department of Defense continued to be skeptical of the logic of pursuing a significant partnership on the

[19] Public Statements of the Secretary of Defense: Harold Brown, 1980, p. 15.
[20] Staff Writer, "U.S. Plans to Sell Satellite Ground Station to China," 9 January 1980, *The New York Times*, p. 1.
[21] *American Foreign Policy Basic Documents* (AFPBD), *1977-1980* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 1001.
[22] Henry Kenny, *Underlying Patterns of Arms Sales to China*, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers*, *1986* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1987), p. 61.
[23] Memorandum for the President by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, 11 April 1980, Department of Defense FOIA Reading Room.
[24] Oral History Interview with Dr. Harold Brown, 1 March 1993, p. 11, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office Oral History Collection.

grounds that the scale of the changes required to make the PLA a capable fighting force was too daunting. In September 1980, the Under-Secretary for Development, Research and Engineering (DoD) William Perry conducted a tour of PRC defense facilities to survey future requirements. Following the visit, Perry's military aide, General William Odom, summarized the backwardness of the PLA: "production technology stagnated at the level provided by the USSR in the 1950s …Technical stagnation has reduced the PRC military capability to insignificance except for masses of infantry troops. Chinese tanks are so poor that they have dropped to 15–20 percent of output capacity to avoid arming the PLA with equipment that will only cause casualties to itself and not to Soviet or Vietnamese forces."[25]

Despite the gap between political rhetoric and reality, Brzezinski's opinion that US-PRC defense connections could benefit the US in opposing the USSR was continued by the incoming Secretary of State, Alexander Haig. During his 1981 Senate confirmation hearings, Haig was openly dismissive of critics who believed aiding the PLA would harm the security of Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. Haig stated, "At this juncture I do not see a particular threat to other nations of the area as we look at the overall assets of the People's Republic of China. For example, they have a long, long way to go before they could be considered a military threat, in my view, to the people of Taiwan, to Japan."[26]

Secretary Haig's optimism that US-PRC defense relations could create pressure on the USSR was not shared by senior US military commanders. A report prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that "The United States should proceed *cautiously and discreetly* [emphasis added] in continuing to develop the security relationship with China, with the objective of improving Chinese military capabilities in accordance with mutually advantageous goals."[27]

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[25] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, *1977-1980 Volume XIII: China*, Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter Subject: NSC Weekly #155 26 September 1980, pp. 1134-1135.
[26] *American Foreign Policy Current Documents*, *1981* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 946.
[27] 17 April 1981. Report by the J-5 to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on United States-China Security Relationship, Gale Digital National Security Archive, p. 7.

A top secret Army War College study of the US-PRC defense relationship concluded, "If security cooperation is to play a positive role in future US-China relations, it should not become the leading element of the relationship."[28] A National Defense University report from March 1980 similarly concluded that, "Ultimate Chinese objectives do not seem to be in complete harmony with the US objective of achieving a series of strong independent states in Asia."[29] Another analysis by an Army area specialist concluded that despite a shared enemy, the Soviet Union, the PRC remained "an ideological foe," and would be a difficult security partner.[30]

These pleas for caution were dismissed by Haig, who sought to pressure the US government bureaucracy to move faster. While on a visit to Beijing in June 1981, Secretary Haig unilaterally, and unexpectedly, announced that the US would sell defense equipment to the PRC on a "case-by-case basis" and planned to further liberalize exports of restricted technology.[31] In addition, Secretary Haig stated that the United States viewed China "as a friendly nation with which the United States is not allied but with which it shares many interests."[32] John Holdridge, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs stated in a later interview, "…Al Haig absolutely flabbergasted those of us who had worked on the NSDM, National Security Decision Memorandum on arms sales to China. When Al Haig went to China he was not supposed to have said anything on this subject other than to invite the Vice Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army to come to the US in the fall, at which time we would tell them about our decision and look at his list…Why he did it then instead of following the outline of the NSDM, I have no idea whatsoever."[33] In his memoirs Haig

[28] 17 August 1981, "Implications for U.S.-China Security Cooperation," U.S. Army War College, Gale Digital National Security Archive, p. 42.
[29] William Heaton, *A United Front Against Hegemonism: Chinese Foreign Policy into the 1980's* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1980), p. 42.
[30] Thomas Marks, "Two Chinese Roads to Military Modernization-And a U.S. Dilemma," *Strategic Review* (Summer 1980), p. 44.
[31] Don Oberdorfer and Michael Weisskopf, *The Washington Post*, A1, "U.S. Reaches Accord with China on Arms Sales," 17 June 1981.
[32] Don Oberdorfer and Michael Weisskopf, *The Washington Post* "U.S. Reaches Accord with China on Arms Sales," 17 June 1981.
[33] Ambassador John Holdridge, 20 July 1995, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, pp. 125-126, www.adst.org.

was unapologetic about his strange announcement, and viewed his trip as a great opportunity to "drive the bureaucracy."[34]

Despite criticism of his methods, changes to the US conventional arms policy in June 1981 gave Haig ex post facto authority to support his statements, but bureaucratic and military concerns continued to delay Haig's plans.[35] In his 1984 memoir, *Caveat*, Secretary Haig assailed the Joint Chiefs for using "veto after veto" to slow technology transfers.[36] The Joint Chiefs of Staff also sought to slow the pace of Haig's initiatives by pointing out the difficulty modernizing even a small fraction of the PLA with US military equipment. In a July 1983 memorandum to the Secretary of Defense, a Joint Chiefs of Staff assessment concluded that, "Even with significantly improved access to US military technology, improvements that could ultimately result in substantially upgraded defenses against the USSR would not be fully realized until the mid-1990's."[37] In the interagency Steering Committee on export controls, the JCS successfully argued that broadening transfers of US technology to develop the PRC economy was a much better long-term solution to countering the USSR than transferring American weapons.[38]

The JCS was also able to use National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 11, which specified that, "U.S. munitions/technology transfers should not contribute significantly to improvements in Chinese offensive and power projection capabilities."[39] NSDD 11 outlined that "consultations" with Congress and "Allies and friends" should

[34] Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company), p. 205.
[35] National Security Council Meeting 6 June 1981. Subject Presidential Decisions, Gale Digital National Security Archive, pp. 1-4.
[36] Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company), p. 212.
[37] "Assessment of the Risks and Benefits in the Transfer of Advanced Technology and Conventional Arms to China," 15 July 1983, IV. Department of Defense, Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.
[38] "Implementation of Export Control Changes for China," 30 August 1983, Department of Defense, Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.
[39] National Security Council, National Security Decision Directive 11, 22 September 1981, Accessed 17 December 2014
http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/NSSDs.html#.VKvxInv-XVI

be held during the transfer approval process, an ambiguous statement that could be used delay military technology transfers.

Secretary Haig's desire to accelerate equipment transfers was also stalled by Chinese leaders, who sought to leverage US-PRC defense cooperation to reach an agreement banning American arms sales to Taiwan. The 17 August 1982 Communiqué on US arms sales to Taiwan was sufficiently vague for both the US and PRC to consider the issue settled and move forward.[40]

Despite the large amounts of time and effort invested in the US-PRC military relationship between 1979-1983, tangible benefits were negligible. Military exchanges, defense technology transfers and PLA reform remained largely theoretical. US bureaucratic restraints on executive branch policies, had slowed the development of connections but by 1983, the consistent application of pressure by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Alexander Haig had eroded opposition on the US side.

Apogee, 1984-1986

The 1984-1986 period was the "Golden Age" of US-PRC defense relations, with an ongoing series of high-level visits, significant agreements on weapons transfers, and general optimism.[41] Moreover, economic reforms undertaken in the PRC, such as the return to some elements of a market economy and increased openness to tourism and trade, suggested that the US and could help China become "safe, secure and progressing," in the words of Secretary of Defense Weinberger.[42]

Intensified defense contacts began in February 1983 with a visit by Secretary of State George Shultz to Beijing. Schultz outlined changes to the authorized list of high-

[40] United States Department of State website Milestones: 1981-1988, The August 17, 1982 U.S.-China Communiqué on Arms Sales to Taiwan, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/china-communique.; Robert Ross, "China Learns to Compromise: Change in U.S.—China Relations, 1982-1984," *The China Quarterly* 128 (Dec. 1991): pp. 772-773.
[41] Ambassador James Lilley, 21 May 1998, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 103, www.adst.org. (Accessed 12 February 2015).
[42] Public Statements of the Secretary of Defense, 1982, Caspar Weinberger, p. 1622.

tech exports and discussed future liberalization of COCOM restrictions.[43] In March 1983, Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige visited the PRC to finalize changes to the technology export-control program and coordinate the PRC bureaucracy as they prepared commercial bids and contract procedures for US defense companies, something Chinese officials had never done before.[44] This momentum was continued during a September 1983 visit of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to Beijing. Traveling with Weinberger was a massive delegation with several key players the in Reagan administration foreign policy team, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Richard Armitage, State Department Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Paul Wolfowitz. General Colin Powell, a military assistant to Secretary Weinberger, seen as a rising star in the Reagan administration, was also a member of the delegation.

PRC Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian and Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang traveled to Washington in the fall of 1983 to confirm the details of President Reagan's trip to China, scheduled for April 1984. Prior to his departure, Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 120, which ordered executive agencies to move forward a broad engagement agenda with the PRC.[45] President Reagan's visit to the PRC was primarily symbolic and no important agreements were reached during his trip. The tension between CCP political control and American desires for a more open dialogue created complications during the visit, including the deletion of portions of Reagan's speech from PRC TV broadcasts. Despite these problems, the Presidential visit helped to solidify an economic relationship that continued to grow rapidly, with commercial exports to the PRC increasing from roughly $500 million in 1982 to over $5 billion in 1985.[46]

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[43] George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1993), pp. 393-394.
[44] James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Random House, 2000).
[45] Reagan Library, National Security Decision Directive 120, 9 January 1984, pp. 1-3. (http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/Scanned%20NSDDS/NSDD120.pdf)
[46] James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 140.

On 12 June 1984 President Reagan announced that the PRC would be allowed to purchase military equipment through the foreign military sales (FMS) program handled by the Department of Defense.[47] The FMS program allows foreign nations to acquire US produced military equipment with the Department of Defense acting as the intermediary. A normal FMS transfer begins with a foreign country submitting an official request, the purchase of US produced weapons by the Department of Defense, and finally the transfer of the equipment from the Department of Defense to the foreign country with full payment of all fees and expenses.[48]

US emphasized that the weapons transfers were defensive oriented and would be used for deterring Soviet military forces rather than threatening US regional allies. In a public speech, Edward Ross, Assistant for China, OSD International Security Affairs stated that, "four military mission areas have emerged as the focal point for China military technology cooperation. The four mission areas are: anti-tank, artillery, air defense, and surface-ship antisubmarine warfare."[49] In an oral history interview with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, Richard Armitage was explicit that, "We limited our weapons cooperation to ones that would not threaten any friends and could only be applicable against the Soviet Union: anti-armor, artillery rounds, and the F-8 aircraft and certain avionics."[50]

US military assistance also sought to counter the growing Soviet Far East Fleet, which increased dramatically in size and capabilities during the late-1970s and early 1980s, challenging US Navy dominance of the Western Pacific. To improve PRC's naval defense capabilities, the US allowed the sale of sophisticated anti-submarine and

[47] Kerry Dumbaugh and Richard Grimett, "U.S. Arms Sales to China," *Congressional Research Service*, 8 July 1985, p. 37.
[48] Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Foreign Military Sales. Accessed 6 January 2015. (http://www.dsca.mil/programs/foreign-military-sales-fms),
[49] Statement by Edward Ross, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs, 28 January 1986, p. 6. (http://ewross.com/US-China_Military_Relations_1986.pdf)
[50] Oral History Interview with Richard Armitage, Office of the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, 8 January 1997, p. 43.

anti-missile defense systems, such as the advanced Mark 46 torpedoes.[51]. The approved naval hardware also included the computer controlled Phalanx anti-missile system.[52]

The most important military-technology transfer involved the upgrading of PLA air defense capability. The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) relied on obsolete Soviet designs from the 1950s and had struggled to independently improve its aircraft engines, avionics, and radar capabilities through indigenous development. The PRC had begun to develop an indigenous interceptor aircraft, the F-8, in the mid-1960s, but design problems and a weak engine hindered the F-8 from competing with advanced Soviet fighters.

In 1986, the Reagan administration announced that it had administratively approved an avionics upgrade program for 50 F-8 fighters. The F-8 "Peace Pearl" joint program was brokered by the US Department of Defense between Grumman Aerospace and the PLA Air Force. The $550 million program specified that Grumman would develop upgrade kits that included pulse Doppler radar with a look-down/shoot-down target acquisition capability.[53] Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Lilley argued that, "the proposed program for an upgrade of 50 F-8 air defense interceptor aircraft, to be completed about 1995 or 1996, will contribute to China's ability to defend its airspace against the threat from the Soviet Union."[54]

The most important Chinese purchase, in dollar terms, was the sale of 24 Sikorsky S-70 "Blackhawk" helicopters in 1985. Although the helicopters did not come equipped with any specialized military features, they were eagerly sought by the PLA for their utility in high altitude environments, such as Tibet and Central Asia. Upon delivery, the PLA formed a small Army Aviation Corps, to develop its helicopter

[51] Kerry Dumbaugh and Richard Grimett, "U.S. Arms Sales to China," *Congressional Research Service*, 8 July 1985, p. 19.
[52] Wayne Biddleb and John F. Burns, "U.S. Said to Plan to Sell Naval Weapons to China," 13 January 1985, *The New York Times*.
[53] Richard Bitzinger, *Chinese Arms Production and Sales to the Third World*. (Santa Monica: RAND, 1991), p. 21.
[54] *American Foreign Policy Current Documents* 1986 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), p. 519.

doctrine and eventually modified several of the Blackhawks into helicopter gunships.[55] Arms sales were not unidirectional, and the United States Air Force acquired nearly 20 Chinese jets, copies of Soviet models, for training purposes.[56]

High-level military to military contacts intensified after the visit of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey and US Pacific Commander (PACOM) Admiral William Crowe in 1985.[57] This was followed by the visit of three US Navy ships to Qingdao in November 1986. Chief of Staff of the Army, General John Wickham, visited the PRC in November 1986 and personally invited PLA officers to attend US military schools.[58] In September 1987, the USAF Thunderbirds demonstration team visited Beijing and flew in an aerial demonstration at a local air show.[59]

A major part of military to military ties was to promote reform of the PLA military education system and PLA doctrine, both of which were based on Soviet models. The PLA military system was designed to bolster CCP control over the PLA and obstruct the development of an independent military identity. A key feature of the Soviet model was the sharp segmentation of air force, navy and ground force components, a structural issue that American officers felt would hinder combat operations. With American encouragement, in September 1986 the PLA opened a new "National Defense University" for the training of senior officers from Army, Navy and Air Force components in a joint environment. Secretary of Defense Weinberger became one of the first foreign visitors to speak at the school, in October 1986, and was supportive of the more open style of education.

Despite the close relations during the 1984-1986 period, the total value of US arms delivered remained small in the global context. The 1985 Department of Defense annual report reported, "we continue our efforts to develop an enduring relationship with the People's Republic of China" but noted that lofty rhetoric made during the

[55] Memo, China: Blackhawk Update, 29 July 1987, Box 3, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.
[56] Daniel Byman and Roger Cliff, *China Arms Sales* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1999), p. 53.
[57] *American Foreign Policy Current Documents*, 1985 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 700.
[58] "U.S. Military Invites China to Send Officers," 25 November 1986, *The Washington Times*.
[59] Walter J. Boyne, *Beyond the Wild Blue: A History of the United States Air Force, 1947-1997* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1997), pp. 409-410.

visits of senior leaders often went unfulfilled.[60] Between 1982-1986 less than $90 million worth of military equipment was actually delivered to the PRC, although hundreds of millions was officially contracted. This discrepancy highlights the disconnect between senior leaders pushing for closer ties and practical difficulties experienced by the two bureaucracies in making those ties function.[61]

Ambiguity and Frustration, 1987-1989

The bilateral defense relationship created through political visits and military discussions began to crumble after 1986. In February 1987, a "roadmap" prepared by Karl Jackson, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (East Asia), noted that the easy parts of the relationship had been achieved but that "substantive US-military ties" with the PRC remained elusive and that dialogue on critical issues was "lacking in depth."[62] On both sides of the US-PRC relationship, defense connections became less important due to shifting geo-political concerns and the belated recognition that critical differences between the two government bureaucracies imposed enduring barriers to achieving substantive and long-lasting cooperation.

While none of these issues was insurmountable, in the background of all of these issues was the ongoing problem that American political and military leaders had in dealing with the structure of a one-party state, specifically identifying which Chinese leaders and what organizations held decision making power. Political scientists such as Kenneth Lieberthal have referred to the overlapping and often conflicting Chinese party-state-military bureaucracy as a "fractured authoritarian model."[63] It became evident to US officials in the late-1980s that many of the most accessible PRC *government*

[60] *Annual Report to Congress*, Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, Fiscal Year 1985, p. 40.
[61] Henry Kenny, *Underlying Patterns of Arms Sales to China*, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers*, *1986* (Washington: U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1987), p. 62.
[62] Memo, Edward Ross to Doug Paal, 9 February 1987, U.S.-China Military Relations: A Roadmap, Box 2, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.
[63] Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton (eds.), *Bureaucracy*, *Politics and Decision-Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 1-4.

officials held little actual power, while unapproachable and even retired *party* leaders held the real authority.

One example of the ambiguity occurred in the spring of 1987, when a planned US Navy visit to Shanghai was abruptly cancelled, with no explanation given. Fearful that this signaled a cooling of the military-to-military contacts, American officials scrambled to determine why this surprise cancellation was made and who had made the final decision. The State Department, National Security Council and US Pacific Command were all unable determine who gave the order to cancel the visit. Responding to US queries, the PRC Foreign Ministry explained that it was due to a full PLA training schedule, a Defense Ministry official stated that it was "too early" for another US ship visit, while a PLA Admiral stated that the port of call had been merely postponed until a planned visit by the New Zealand Navy was conducted.[64] This dysfunction reached the point of comedy when Admiral Wang, Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLA Navy, was asked about the cancelled ship visit and was "visibly surprised" to hear the port of call had been cancelled and asked the Americans if the PRC Foreign Ministry made the decision.[65]

This continuing friction became especially salient due to the proliferation of missile technology by the PRC to the Middle East. PRC exports of the "Silkworm" HY-2 anti-ship missile to Iran shocked many American officials and created massive political complications for US military officers and defense officials.[66] PRC exports of the DF-3 intermediate range ballistic missile to Saudi Arabia further inflamed American concerns about a lack of transparency in the PRC-US defense relationship.[67] The inability of US and PRC officials to work together on this issue demonstrated the structural limitations of the relationship and eroded trust on both sides.

[64] Cable, American Embassy-Beijing to Secretary of State Schultz-Washington D.C. 19 March 1987, Box 3, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.
[65] Cable, American Embassy-Beijing to Secretary of State Schultz-Washington D.C., 13 March 1987, Box 3, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.; Cable, American Embassy-Beijing to Secretary of State Schultz-Washington D.C., 24 March 1987, Box 3, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.
[66] Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), p. 395.
[67] Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents* (Washington: Brookings Press, 2018), pp. 93-95.

The United States had sought to restrict the flow of weapons to the Persian Gulf. Operation Staunch was launched in 1985, after both Iran and Iraq began attacking oil tankers, including those of neutral nations such as Kuwait.[68] In a memo from May 1987, Secretary of State Shultz was informed, "One of the major concerns of this program [Operation Staunch] has been the PRC's increasingly important arms relationship with Iran, Iran's February testing of Chinese supplied HY-2 (Silkworm) anti-ship missiles represent a qualitative upgrade in Iran's ability to threaten commercial shipping."[69] In May 1987, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs Richard Murphy publically affirmed that "The (Communist) Chinese decision to sell such weapons (Silkworm) to Iran is most unwelcome and disturbing." He reiterated that "We have made clear to both Iran and Red China the seriousness with which we consider the Silkworm threat."[70]

Attempts at more subtle and personal interaction with Chinese officials produced a similar lack of progress. After meeting with a senior Foreign Ministry official from the PRC Embassy, National Security Advisor for East Asia Douglas Paal reported that, "I told him [Qian Yongnian] that in such cases, China would do itself a favor by carefully controlling and monitoring sales of weapons like the silkworm." Qian's response was that a gray market in arms existed, and he would only agree to cable American concerns to Beijing.[71] In August 1987, Secretary of Defense Weinberger sent a personal letter to Zhang Aiping, Minister of Defense, to ask him "to do everything possible to prevent Chinese-built HY-2 [Silkworm] missiles from being delivered to or employed by Iran."[72] Although Weinberger was following protocol in addressing the letter to his rank equivalent in the bureaucracy, Zhang Aiping was not a

[68] Ronald O'Rourke, "The Tanker War," *Proceedings Magazine* 114 (May 1988).
[69] Department of State Telegraph, Subject: Chinese Arms Trade with Iran, 21 May 1987, Gale Digital National Security Archive.
[70] "Red China's Arms Sales to Iran Raise Alarm in U.S.," *Central News Agency-Taiwan*, 21 May 1987.
[71] Memo, Douglas Paal to Robert Oakley, 12 March 1987, Box 3, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.
[72] Letter, Caspar Weinberger to Zhang Aiping, 27 August 1987, Box 3, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

member of the important CCP Central Military Commission and had no ability to control military affiliated state-owned industries.[73]

The Silkworm missile was sold by Poly Technologies, founded in 1983 by the PLA as an arms export company. Poly Technologies was run by He Ping, Deng Xiaoping's son-in-law, who was appointed as President of Poly despite having no business or managerial background. Poly Technologies Vice Presidents include the daughter and son-in-law of Yang Shangkun, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and the most powerful uniformed military officer.[74] Yet another senior Poly Technology executive was the son-in-law of Zhao Ziyang, General Secretary of the Communist Party and presumed successor to Deng Xiaoping.[75] Despite the negative effects of arms sales on the overall US-PRC, the ability of functionally autonomous PLA "corporations" to sell arms despite the objections of government departments such as the Foreign Ministry.

In September 1988, Secretary of Defense Carlucci visited Beijing and accepted "assurances" from Deng Xiaoping, who was described in US documents only as an "elder statesman" with no official government positions, that the PRC would not sell further intermediate-range missiles. No official PRC government statement was made to corroborate Deng's private statement.[76] It has been reported that the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs objected to the DF-3 sale as provocative and a source of potential problems with the US, but the large profits and political connections of Poly Technologies apparently overruled Foreign Ministry counsel.[77]

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[73] Yuwu Song, *Biographical Dictionary of the People's Republic of China* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., Inc., 2013), p. 386.
[74] R. Bates Gill, *The Challenge of Chinese Arms Proliferation: U.S. Policy for the 1990's* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 1993), pp. 2-3
[75] Eric Hyer, "China's Arms Merchants: Profits in Command," *The China Quarterly* No. 132 (December 1992), p. 1113.
[76] Memo, A U.S. Initiative on Missile Proliferation (Draft), National Security Council, Box 3, Douglas Paal Files, Ronald Reagan Library.; Dinshaw Mistry, *Containing Missile Proliferation: Strategic Technology, Security Regimes, and International Cooperation in Arms Control* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), p. 58.
[77] John Lewis, Di, Hua and Xue Litai. "Beijing's Defense Establishment: Solving the Arms Export Enigma." *International Security* 15, 4 (Spring 1991): pp. 87-109.

The missile proliferation issue, but more importantly the lack of clear communications and productive interactions revealed as the missile proliferation issue was discussed corroded US trust and faith in the relationship. Lt. Col Eden Woon, a key US military liaison to the PRC wrote that the lack of candor, "eroded the earlier goodwill toward China felt by many in the [US] defense establishment. Some even questioned the basic worth of a military relationship with China."[78] Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Denny Roy proclaimed that "if Americans do not perceive modernizing China as acting in ways that are compatible with US interests, then our ability to expand economic ties with China in high-technology areas will be inevitably be constrained."[79] The combined result of these friction points was to severely limit the depth of the US-PRC relationship and to constrain the defense relationship long before the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989.

Although the defense relationship between the US and PRC during the late 1970s and 1980s has left little bureaucratic legacy, it serves as a useful historical case study of political optimism becoming separated from problems at the working level that arose due to basic structural differences. Ambassador Harry Thayer remarked on the period that, "China was oversold in 1978-79…as the 80's moved along and then climaxed by the Tiananmen massacre, the Chinese turned out not to be saints and perfect partners after all."[80] While the US-PRC defense relationship was moderately successful at the strategic level during a tense period of the Cold War, the time and effort expended by multiple Secretaries of Defense, senior US military officers and DoD personnel left few enduring legacies for either side.

[78] Eden Y. Woon, "Chinese Arms Sales and U.S.-China Military Relations," *Asian Survey* 29, 6 (June 1989): p. 612.
[79] *American Foreign Policy Current Documents*, *1988* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 535.
[80] Ambassador Harry Thayer, 19 November 1990, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, www.adst.org (Accessed 13 February 2015).

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