



**U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Staff Research Backgrounder**

The Chinese People's Liberation Army Delegation Visit to the United States, May 2011: A Summary of Key Actors and Issues

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Executive Summary

General Chen Bingde, the Chief of the General Staff Department of People's Liberation Army (PLA), and an accompanying delegation of PLA officers visited the United States from May 15 – 22, 2011. China had previously cut high-level bilateral military relations with the United States after a proposed \$6.4 billion arms sales package to Taiwan in early 2010. The purpose of General Chen's visit was to restore and implement a healthier U.S.-China military-to-military (mil-to-mil) relationship, as agreed upon by Presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao in February 2011.

Historically, the United States has sought to increase transparency and direct communication between the U.S. and Chinese militaries. However, such requests were not prominent in public discussions during Chen's visit.¹ During this round of mil-to-mil talks, China sought political and legislative concessions on its "core interests," including curtailing Taiwan arms sales, reducing U.S. reconnaissance and surveillance operations off of China's coast, and ending legislative barriers to high-tech exports to China.²

At the moment, the result of General Chen's trip appears to be a muted revitalization of the mil-to-mil relationship between China and the United States. However, divergent agendas and perceptions of the military relationship will inevitably present problems in the future. As the United States considers future arms sales to Taiwan, and as China continues to modernize its military, it is uncertain how long this amicable mil-to-mil relationship will last.

Destinations

General Chen's delegation visited:

- The U.S. Army's base at Fort Stewart, Georgia
- U.S. Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia
- Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada
- U.S. Army National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California
- National Defense University, Washington, D.C.

Officials

The high-level officials involved in General Chen's delegation visit included:

United States

- Representative Charles Boustany (R-LA), Co-Chair of the Congressional U.S.-China Working Group
- Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State
- Tom Donilon, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
- Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee
- Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense
- Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), Chair of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
- Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL)
- Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA), Co-Chair of the Congressional U.S.-China Working Group
- Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

¹Dean Cheng, "U.S. Must Focus Military Talks with China," *Heritage Foundation*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/05/US-Must-Focus-Military-Talks-with-China>.

²Mu Xuequan, "China eyes new-type military relations with U.S: Defense Ministry," *Xinhua*, May 12, 2011, http://www.gov.cn/misc/2011-05/12/content_1862447.htm.

People's Republic of China

- General Chen Bingde, Chief of the General Staff Department of the Chinese PLA³
- Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, Deputy Director of Foreign Affairs Office, PRC Defense Ministry
- Major General Qi Jianguo, Assistant to the Chief of the General Staff
- Major General Yang Hui, Director of the General Staff Department Second Department (Military Intelligence)
- General Zhang Haiyang, Political Commissar of the Second Artillery (PLA Missile Forces)
- Major General Zhang Jianping, Jinan Military Region Air Force Commander
- Lieutenant General Zheng Qin, Deputy Commander of Guangzhou Military Region
- Vice Admiral Su Zhiqian, Deputy Commander of Nanjing Military Region and Commander of the PLA Navy (PLAN) East Sea Fleet



General Chen Bingde and other accompanying PLA delegation members at the U.S. Army National Training Center in Ft. Irwin, California.
Source: "Chinese PLA Delegation Visits NTC," May 23, 2011,
[http://www.army.mil/article/56981/Chinese PLA delegation visits NTC.](http://www.army.mil/article/56981/Chinese_PLA_delegation_visits_NTC)

Relevant Legislation

Legislation that was relevant to the PLA delegation visit included:

- **The Taiwan Relations Act (passed in 1979)**, which defines U.S. commitments to support Taiwan's self-defense needs.
- **The FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)**, which prohibits the Secretary of Defense from authorizing any mil-to-mil contact with the PLA if that contact would "create a national security risk due to an inappropriate exposure" of the PLA to 12 operational areas (with exceptions granted to search and rescue operations and humanitarian operations or exercises). One of the cited justifications for the legislation included an alleged incident during a U.S.-China

³ Wang Hanlu, Senior PLA delegation of China to visit US, *People's Daily Online*, May 12, 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/7378250.html>.

mil-to-mil exchange in the late 1990s, when a visiting Chinese military officer learned about a key vulnerability of U.S. aircraft carriers in a conversation with U.S. Navy personnel, and the PLA subsequently acquired weapons targeted against the vulnerability.⁴

Topics of Discussion

The tone of meetings between General Chen's delegation and U.S. counterparts ranged from consensus to disagreement on issues relevant to U.S. and Chinese military development, the Taiwan issue, and U.S.-China military-to-military cooperation. Common themes discussed during meetings included "enhancing mutual understanding, boosting mutual trust, and promoting cooperation, and working to push for fresh progress in the development of relations between the two militaries."⁵ General Chen Bingde's remarks were consistent with previous Chinese public statements on the nature of the U.S.-China military relationship, and on China's professed peaceful military intentions.

Establishing a positive military-to-military relationship

During the PLA delegation visit, General Chen's public statements and Chinese state news highlighted several conditions for a positive military-to-military relationship. These included:

- Respect for each other's "core interests and major concerns, instead of imposing one's own will on the other."
 - China's stated core interests include: stability in the form of government; sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and national unity; and a fundamental guarantee to China's sustainable socio-economic development.
- Bolstering "strategic mutual trust through enhanced dialogues and communication, instead of being prone to suspicion."⁶
- The parties must be "motivated by greater common interests instead of pursuing a unilateral competitive edge."⁷

China's military modernization

General Chen said that the U.S. overstates the threat China poses to countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and that such misperceptions can negatively impact mil-to-mil relations.⁸ Additionally, General Chen emphasized that the relative development of China's military is still far behind that of developed countries. Despite General Chen's attempt to allay concerns about China's military rise, a number of U.S. Senators and Representatives have voiced their concern over the rise of China's military and its strategic objectives.⁹

⁴ Rep. Thomas Delay (R-TX), speech in the U.S. House of Representatives, June 9, 1999. *Congressional Record-House* (106th Cong., 1st sess.), June 9, 1999, p. 12250.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=SmwXC0nU2pYC&pg=PA12250&lpg=PA12250>.

⁵ "Top Chinese, U.S. military officers hold talks," *Xinhua*, May 18, 2011,

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/18/c_13881321.htm.

⁶ "General: China Never Intends to Challenge U.S.," *Defense News*, May 18, 2011,

<http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=6548219&c=ASI&s=POL>.

⁷ General Chen Bingde's speech at National Defense University, May 18, 2011. Notes taken by USCC staff.

⁸ Nathan Hodge, "Beijing's Top General Says U.S. Overstates China Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2011,

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704281504576331702045148840.html>.

⁹ "U.S. Senate Unanimously "Deplores" China's Use of Force in South China Sea," U.S. Senator Jim Webb press release, June 27, 2011, <http://webb.senate.gov/newsroom/pressreleases/06-27-2011.cfm?renderforprint=1>; and

"Senator: Broad Support For F-16 Sales to Taiwan," *Defense News*, May 26, 2011,

<http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=6634106&c=AME&s=AIR>; and "Ros-Lehtinen Criticizes Defense Officials for Providing Chinese Military Access to Sensitive U.S. Facilities," U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, May 18, 2011, http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press_display.asp?id=1826.

Taiwan

General Chen emphasized the strategic importance of Taiwan, and that U.S. actions deterred bilateral military progress by intervening in China's internal affairs. However, there was confusion over U.S. positioning on the Taiwan issue. First, Admiral Mullen went on the record as supporting the "peaceful reunification" of China (before a later addendum clarifying the United States' position on the issue).¹⁰ Second, General Chen posited that Secretary of State Clinton "reiterated the U.S. policy; that is, there is only one China in the world, and Taiwan is part of China."¹¹ Lastly, General Chen said that U.S. lawmakers were considering a review of the Taiwan Relations Act, though members of Congress either denied the assertion or declined to comment on the issue.¹² The ambiguous U.S. stance on the Taiwan issue, and the lack of a strong U.S. response to Chen's claims, could send signals to both China and Taiwan that could be misconstrued.

Bilateral Agreements

Admiral Mullen and General Chen presented a joint statement that outlined bilateral agreements for the U.S.-China military relationship.¹³ Guan Youfei, Deputy Director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense, highlighted three major positive points of consensus:

1. The two sides have reached consensus to **promote new development of military ties** and engage in mutually beneficial efforts;
2. The two sides have conducted **in-depth exchanges of views** on international and regional issues, including the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, piracy, terrorism, humanitarian assistance, and disaster alleviation;
3. The two sides **specified projects** for the next step in pragmatic bilateral cooperation, including direct defense ministry telephone lines, cooperating on maritime security, and executing joint humanitarian assistance drills.¹⁴

Even further, Guan highlighted six specific achievements of the delegation's visit to the United States:

1. The two sides agreed that **healthy, stable and reliable military ties** are an important part of bilateral relations;
2. The two sides agreed that **continuing high-level military contacts and dialogue** will create a positive atmosphere for joint efforts;
3. The two sides reaffirmed their desire to **strengthen joint action** towards maintaining maritime security and reducing potential hazards;
4. The two sides agreed to conduct exchanges on **joint humanitarian and disaster relief efforts** in 2012;
5. The two sides agreed to conduct exchanges in **military medicine**;

¹⁰ "Joint Press Conference with Adm. Mullen and Gen. Chen from the Pentagon," Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), May 18, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4824>.

¹¹ "Joint Press Conference with Adm. Mullen and Gen. Chen from the Pentagon," Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), May 18, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4824>.

¹² Phil Stewart, "Analysis: No review of TRA coming anytime soon," *Taipei Times*, May 25, 2011, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2011/05/25/2003504105>.

¹³ "Joint Press Conference with Adm. Mullen and Gen. Chen from the Pentagon," Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), May 18, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4824>.

¹⁴ "Roundup: China-U.S. military ties to be further advanced with implementation of heads-of-state consensus," *China Daily*, May 20, 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/xinhua/2011-05-20/content_2676085.html; and Yang Liming and Ju Hui, "Three Points of Consensus Reached, Six Specific Achievements in China-US Military Exchanges," *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao Online*, May 12, 2011, OSC ID: CPP20110520787016.

6. The two sides agreed that **sports and recreational exchanges** between the two countries' armed forces will help enhance mutual understanding and trust.¹⁵

Other bilateral agreements as a result of General Chen's visit included:

- China allowed the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson to conduct a port visit in Hong Kong from May 22–25, and the U.S. Navy allowed Chinese officials to visit the ship.¹⁶
- Admiral Patrick Walsh, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, stated that the U.S. military would consider sending officers and cadets to China on study exchange programs if relations between the two countries improve. The effort would be a part of efforts to improve relations with the Chinese military, and “the officer exchange program would provide a better understanding of Chinese culture, goals, and thoughts.”¹⁷
- China invited the U.S. to engage in joint counterpiracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden in 2012.¹⁸

Points of Controversy: China

General Chen and other Chinese government representatives highlighted three major points of controversy that continue to impede positive mil-to-mil relations:

1. Arms sales to Taiwan

The Chinese government has expressed strong opposition to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, and in 2010 cut off all formal military relations with the United States in response to arms sales propositions. According to China, both the sales of arms and the Taiwan Relations Act interfere with China's domestic affairs. General Chen stated that Taiwan arms sales would damage U.S.-China relations, saying that “how bad the impact will be...depend[s] on the nature of the weapons sold.”¹⁹

2. Close-in reconnaissance activities along Chinese coasts by U.S. military aircraft and vessels.

General Chen was quoted as saying that reconnaissance activities by the U.S. military are “a deterrent” to improved bilateral military relations.

3. Restrictions imposed on mil-to-mil exchanges by domestic U.S. legislation (e.g., the FY2000 NDAA).

Major General Qian Lihua, director of the Foreign Affairs Office within the National Defense Ministry, argued that domestic U.S. legislation (e.g., FY2000 NDAA, the Delay Amendment, FY1990-91 Foreign Relations Authorization Act) restricts bilateral military exchanges and high-tech exports to China, and called on the United States to make necessary adjustments or to abolish these laws.²⁰

¹⁵ Yang Liming and Ju Hui, “Three Points of Consensus Reached, Six Specific Achievements in China-US Military Exchanges,” *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao Online*, May 12, 2011, OSC ID: CPP20110520787016.

¹⁶ Su Yiping, “China and the United States Start ‘Treating Each Other With Sincerity’ in Military Exchanges,” *Zhongguo Tongxun She*, May 20, 2011, OSC ID: CPP20110520046003; and “US Carrier Visits Hong Kong After Bin Laden Burial,” *Voice of America News Online*, May 23, 2011, <http://blogs.voanews.com/breaking-news/2011/05/23/us-carrier-visits-hong-kong-after-bin-laden-burial/>.

¹⁷ “Admiral says US would consider sending military personnel to study in China if ties improve,” May 19, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/admiral-says-us-would-consider-military-personnel-studying-in-china-if-relations-improve/2011/05/19/AFhaB76G_story.html.

¹⁸ “Optimism rises over military ties,” *China Daily*, May 20, 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/epaper/2011-05/20/content_12547439.htm.

¹⁹ “Arms sales to Taiwan 'damage US-China ties,’” *Straits Times*, May 19, 2011, http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Asia/Story/STISStory_670177.html.

²⁰ Mu Xuequan, “China eyes new-type military relations with U.S: Defense Ministry,” *Xinhua*, May 12, 2011, http://www.gov.cn/misc/2011-05/12/content_1862447.htm.

Points of Controversy: United States

1. Arms sales to Taiwan

After General Chen's delegation departed, U.S. Senators Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and James Inhofe (R-OK) authored a letter to President Obama expressing Congressional support for arms sales to Taiwan.²¹ The petition urged President Obama to **expedite the sale of F-16C/D aircraft**, addressed military imbalances in the Taiwan Strait, and affirmed a U.S. obligation to maintain peace and stability in the Strait. Forty-five of 100 U.S. Senators signed the letter.

2. PLA visits to U.S. military bases

Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, expressed concern that high-ranking Chinese military officials were allowed to access and survey U.S. military bases. She suggested that Congress review existing prohibitions against granting **Chinese officials access to sensitive information**. She said, "The Chinese military openly regards the United States as an enemy. We should not undermine our own security by thinking we can make friends with self-proclaimed adversaries with hospitality and open arms."²²

Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, also criticized the visit, arguing that visits by Chinese PLA officials **violate limits set by the FY2000 NDAA and create vulnerabilities in U.S. military operations and strategy**.²³

Conclusion

General Chen's visit brought to light divergent views held by the United States and China regarding their bilateral military relationship. The United States places a heavy emphasis on a healthy mil-to-mil relationship with China and increasing military transparency, while China has historically dismissed military relations as a non-crucial aspect of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship.²⁴ This is evident in China's historic lack of reciprocity with the United States in mil-to-mil exchanges, due to a number of factors (e.g., mutual suspicion, transparency issues, or funding).²⁵

China has made it clear that bilateral military ties can progress and develop smoothly as long as the U.S. respects China's "core interests." However, given that China's core interests directly contradict several U.S. laws and legal obligations, as well as many critical U.S. national interests such as freedom of oceanic navigation, the outlook for the U.S.-China military-to-military relationship is far from smooth. Moreover, based on the diametrically opposite responses on key security issues from both the U.S. and Chinese sides, mistrust is still a prominent obstacle in the progression of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship.

²¹ "Senator: Broad Support For F-16 Sales to Taiwan," *Defense News*, May 26, 2011, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=6634106&c=AME&s=AIR>; and "Taiwan Happy With U.S. Senate Push for F-16 Sale," *Defense News*, May 29, 2011, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=6663156&c=AIR&s=TOP>.

²² "Ros-Lehtinen Criticizes Defense Officials for Providing Chinese Military Access to Sensitive U.S. Facilities," U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, May 18, 2011, http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press_display.asp?id=1826.

²³ Bill Gertz, "Chinese to view sensitive U.S. sites: Lawmaker sees violation," *The Washington Times*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/may/17/chinese-to-view-sensitive-us-sites/>.

²⁴ John Pomfret, "U.S.-China's Knotty but Necessary Ties," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 13, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/china/us-chinas-knotty-but-necessary-ties/p24973>.

²⁵ Kurt Campbell and Richard Weitz, "The Limits of U.S.-China Military Cooperation: Lessons from 1995-1999," *The Washington Quarterly* 29: 1 (Winter 2005-06), pp. 169-186; and Nathan Hodge, "Beijing's Top General Says U.S. Overstates China Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704281504576331702045148840.html>.