



Analysis: Superpower rivalry between US, China shows signs of softening

By Alexander Smith
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The superpower rivalry between the U.S. and China is showing signs of softening, following a series of high-level military visits and plans for a rare joint naval exercise between the two nations next year.

Washington invited Beijing to participate in the biennial Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), which has formerly included scenarios such as China itself launching an offensive against U.S. ally Taiwan.

Hosted by the U.S., RIMPAC is the world's largest maritime training operation and features 22 countries. It will be the first time China has participated.

A smaller joint navy exercise last week was the first time Chinese vessels had visited U.S. waters since 2006, The Associated Press reported. Three People's Liberation Army (PLA) ships carrying 680 officers and sailors performed drills on Sept. 6 with USS Lake Erie off Waikiki and Diamond Head, Honolulu.

Two days later, Chinese Admiral Wu Shengli met U.S. Navy Chief of Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert in San Diego, home of the U.S. naval fleet. This followed up on a visit by Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan to the Pentagon in August.

"Our goal is to build trust between our militaries through cooperation," Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel told reporters during Chang's visit.

The state-run China Daily newspaper characterized the admiral's visit to the U.S. as "a move experts described as part of the 'rare, determined and intensive efforts' by Beijing and Washington in recent months to improve military ties."

The exchanges come as part of President Barack Obama's "Pivot to Asia" policy, an eastern re-balancing of military might in the wake of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, which raised eyebrows in Beijing when it was unveiled last year.

Stephen Orlins, president of New-York based National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, said the series of events has the potential to build a significant affiliation between the world's two largest economies.

"It is very meaningful, and it might be just the beginning," said Orlins, who in 2011 led a delegation of U.S. members of Congress to visit a Chinese navy submarine, and has briefed U.S. naval personnel on China.

"The question is: Are these just symbolic actions or are they actually substantive? Whether this is a new relationship between the U.S. and China will depend on actions by both states."

There have also been positive steps on the political front. During this year's meeting at Sunnylands, Calif., Obama and Xi Jinping, general secretary of China's Communist Party, began to ameliorate recent hostilities over alleged cyber attacks by Chinese hackers.

These events -- both military and political -- have huge symbolic value in China, Orlins said: "The meeting with Hagel made the papers in the U.S. but in China it was front-page news."

But not everyone is convinced of the partnership.

Justin Logan, director of foreign policy studies at the Washington D.C.-based Cato Institute, thinks the America's new-found policy toward China is more about containing a military threat rather than working together to solve global issues.

He rejects a 2012 statement by Leon Panetta, who was then defense secretary, suggesting the shift east is about "the challenge of humanitarian assistance and needs." Writing in *The Diplomat*, Logan asked: "Would any American accept such a rationale for China deploying 60 percent of PLAN [People's Liberation Army Navy] assets to the Western Hemisphere?"

Paul T. Haenle, a former NSC china director under George W. Bush and Obama, disagrees. He said he never saw the desire to contain China expressed by either administration.

"Xi Jinping has proposed a new type of 'great power' relations between the U.S. and China to avoid a Cold War or conflictual type of relationship, and to forge a relationship between two great powers that is cooperative and constructive," said Haenle, who is director of the Beijing-based Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy. The drive for closer military ties is an integral part of building this relationship, he says.

Skepticism is not reserved to voices in the U.S., however.

China is locked in several territorial disputes, the most prominent of these being over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands which it contests with Japan, an ally of the U.S.

And referencing this, at a press conference during his visit to the Pentagon, China's defense minister voiced concern about America's bolstered military presence in the Pacific, and hinted at unease over its ties to other countries in the region.

“To a certain degree, these kinds of intensified military activities further complicated the situation in the region,” Reuters quoted Chang Wanquan as saying. “We hope that this strategy does not target a specific country in the region.”

Orlins also foresees there may be an issue reconciling the countries’ human rights records.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in its 2013 report that despite China’s continued urbanization and economic growth it has seen little progress on human rights. The government “places arbitrary curbs” on freedom of expression and religion, and prohibits independent labor unions and human rights organizations, it said.

China also has economic ties with several nations not favored by Washington, such as Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and North Korea.

But Orlins said these issues may not be significant enough to jeopardize the growing partnership.

“China does not have mutual defense treaties with these countries,” he said of China's allies. “In the case of Iran, they are actually supporting more onerous U.S. sanctions. And with North Korea I think it's clear to everyone they have different issues there than we do.”

He also noted that on the subject of Syria, Obama has been far harsher toward Russia than China.

Ultimately, Orlins feels the partnership may prove to be essential – rather than just beneficial – for Beijing.

Hindered by its various territorial disputes – which also involve the Philippines, Taiwan, and Tibet, to name a few -- China needs the stability the U.S. would provide in the region so it can get on with solving its numerous internal problems, he says.

“The Chinese growth needs to last another three decades, and peace and stability on their borders is essential to this,” he said.

With pollution clogging its air, water, and land, 100 million of its people in “abject poverty” and a continued exodus from rural areas, China’s recent slowing of economic growth threatens its future prospects, Orlins says.

“If they are distracted in the Pacific that's going to make dealing with all these things impossible,” he said.