

Chinese, U.S. military ties face opportunity for new development

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By Yang Qingchuan

WASHINGTON, Oct. 29 (Xinhua) -- Gen. Xu Caihou, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, is being under the spotlight when he visits the United States from Oct. 24 to Nov. 3.

He is the first senior Chinese military leader to visit the country since Barack Obama assumed the presidency in January.

The high-profile trip is also the most important event in the China-U.S. military relationship this year, officials said.

An essential backdrop for this visit is the military relationship has regained momentum since Chinese President Hu Jintao and President Obama reached a consensus in April in London to improve and enhance bilateral military ties.

Xu's visit and other recent positive developments send out a signal that China-U.S. military ties are enjoying opportunities for new development despite challenges still in hand, analysts said.

BUSY, FRUITFUL VISIT

Qian Lihua, director-general of the foreign affairs office of China's Department of Defense described Xu's visit as both "busy" and "fruitful."

The schedule shows the U.S. side has set great store by this visit, he told reporters at a recent briefing in Washington.

On Monday, Xu was invited by Washington's leading think-tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to deliver a speech on China's defense policy.

Xu told the audience of nearly 300 U.S. officials, scholars and corporate delegates that China will steadfastly stick to the path of peaceful development and its national defense policy is of defensive nature.

He then had a lunch with former senior U.S. policymakers, including former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, former defense secretary James Schlesinger, former U.S. trade representative Carla Hills, and they exchanged views on global issues.

On Monday night, Xu attended a dinner hosted by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and discussed bilateral and international issues with U.S. Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen, former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft and former secretary of defense William Cohen.

The Chinese general held formal talks with Gates at the Pentagon Tuesday and then met separately with U.S. National Security Advisor James Jones and Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg.

On Wednesday, President Obama met Xu at the White House.

Xu will visit a number of U.S. military installations during the 11-day trip, including the Strategic Command, the Pacific Command, and several military bases.

Noteworthy, the Strategic Command will open its door to a Chinese military leader for the first time.

The trip has yielded many concrete progress as Xu and Gates reached a consensus on seven issues, including:

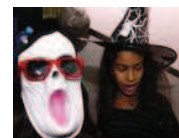
Promoting high-level military visits; enhancing cooperation in the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; deepening military medical cooperation; expanding exchanges between armies of the two nations; enhancing the program of mid-grade and junior officer exchanges; promoting cultural and sports exchanges between the two militaries; invigorating the existing diplomatic and consultative mechanisms to improve maritime operational safety.

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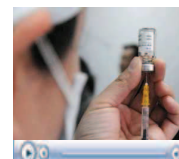
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On broader issues, Xu and his U.S. hosts agreed to further the two-way military relationship and cooperation in a stable and healthy way.

OBSTACLES REMAIN

While hopeful of the prospects for China-U.S. military ties, Xu also expressed China's concerns about several major obstacles that may harm the relationship.

The first and foremost obstacle is the U.S.-Taiwan military relationship. China maintains the United States should stick to the three China-U.S. communiqués and gradually reduce its arms sale to Taiwan towards total termination.

The Taiwan issue is related to the core interests of China and is a core issue that prevents the development of the U.S.-China military relationship.

If the U.S. side can't handle this issue very well, a healthy and stable China-U.S. military relationship will not be possible.

Second, U.S. military aircraft and ships' intrusions into China's maritime exclusive economic zone should be terminated.

China hopes the U.S. military can observe UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and Chinese maritime legislation, and stop such acts which would threaten China's security and interests.

Third, there is some U.S. legislation which restricts the development of the China-U.S. military relationship.

Most notably is the 2,000 Defense Authorization Act passed in 1999.

Another obstacle is the United States lacking strategic trust in China.

China hopes the U.S. side would look at China's military power development in a reasonable way, not to stir up the bogus "China Threat" theory.

The United States should also use proper language to describe China's military and its defense policy in its official reports.

Qian said a major reason for the ups and downs in the China-U.S. military relationship is the U.S.-Taiwan military ties.

To break that "up-and-down" cycle, the United States should handle the Taiwan issue very carefully, he noted.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

In fact, it was the former Bush administration's decision to sell advanced weaponry to Taiwan last October that led to a major setback in the two-way military ties.

The Obama administration has repeatedly expressed wishes to improve the bilateral military relationship.

As a presidential candidate, Obama wrote last year that the United States and China should improve not only the quantity, but the quality of their military exchanges.

The bilateral military relationship has been recovering since the meeting between Hu and Obama in April, with supports from both presidents and efforts of defense departments of both nations.

The two nations held their 10th round of Defense Consultations in Beijing on June 23-24, the highest-level military talks since Obama took office, which marks the resumption of high-level bilateral military exchanges.

U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Gary Roughead and U.S. Army Chief of Staff George Casey paid separate visits to China after that.

Both nations also held candid dialogues on maritime military security.

Xu's visit is a continuation of that trend and presents new opportunities to develop bilateral military ties, observers say.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president of the Cato institute in Washington, said the visit is "an important step to rebuild" the military relationship.

"If the atmosphere in the military relations can be improved," that will be an achievement, he added.

Although U.S. officials have recently made a lot of positive remarks on the military relationship and expressed willingness to make it better, keeping the positive momentum in the relationship depends on whether the U.S. side can truly take care of China's core interests, analysts said.

In short, opportunities coexist with challenges, and it takes active and unremitting efforts from both nations to seize the new opportunities.

In his speech at the CSIS, Xu quoted first U.S. President George Washington's words to describe the situation.

"True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation."

That would also be an appropriate description for developing the China-U.S. military relationship.

Editor: Wang Guanqun

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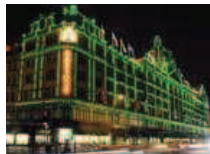
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