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How the U.S. Should Engage the Chinese Military: The Case for Exchanges and Exercises with the PLA

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The United States has withdrawn its invitation to the People's Republic of China (PRC) to dispatch elements of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) for participation in the 2018 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises. A biennial series of naval and air exercises, RIMPAC is described as the world's largest multinational exercise. It typically includes naval and air elements from the U.S. and its key Indo-Pacific allies and friends Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Peru, the Philippines, Singapore, and South Korea, as well as key European allies such as the U.K. and France. The 2018 RIMPAC also includes Brazil, Israel, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam.

The PLAN was first invited to attend the 2014 RIMPAC exercises—an event that was marked by the appearance of not only the participating Chinese ships, but also a Chinese intelligence-gathering ship. This highlighted how RIMPAC constitutes a “one stop shop” for Chinese intelligence gathering on the U.S. and other key militaries from around the world. It remains unclear as to how much consultation occurred between the U.S. and its key friends and allies before the invitation was extended to Beijing.

China clearly considers itself above the rules that govern all other RIMPAC participants. For example, during the 2016 RIMPAC, China refused

to allow Japanese sailors to tour Chinese ships, and only included Japanese participants in a shipboard reception under pressure from the American leadership.¹ This is yet another instance where China feels entitled to dictate the rules that it will follow, without much regard for accepted practice.

Given China's ongoing militarization of the South China Sea (despite a 2015 pledge by President Xi Jinping to President Barack Obama not to militarize the South China Sea, and specifically the Spratlys), withdrawing the invitation is a wise move.

The Future of U.S.–China Engagement

There is some concern that excluding China from participation in RIMPAC will mean an end to communications and dialogue between China and the U.S. However, the U.S. and the PRC have an array of ongoing bilateral and multilateral forums, including the Military Maritime Consultative Arrangement (MMCA) and the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES). Officials from the U.S. Department of Defense meet their Chinese counterparts in forums such as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue and the Defense Consultative Talks at the undersecretary level. Excluding China from RIMPAC will not end all meetings between the two militaries.

However, the American and Chinese militaries must remain engaged with each other. Such interactions provide both sides with an opportunity to better understand the other. This engagement, in part, entails gathering intelligence (which both sides undertake), but also simply understanding each other's basic language and procedures. As China's military becomes more global, U.S. forces will inevitably encounter them with increasing frequency, both in

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Asia and around the world. Both sides will benefit from a better understanding of how each other operates. Balancing information gained with information exposed is the job of intelligence professionals, but utterly refusing to engage the other side is shortsighted at best.

Moreover, having a channel of communications between the two militaries may serve to maintain stability in time of crisis. Chinese behavior in the past offers little reason for optimism in this regard. China has demonstrated a willingness to engage in military confrontations with nuclear powers such as India, where Chinese forces have repeatedly crossed the “line of actual control” into Indian-held territory in the past several years. China’s expanding global presence is likely to lead to increased friction and tensions. In the event of a U.S.–China military confrontation, it would be helpful to have at least a potential channel of communications available, even if not in use.

Policy Recommendations

Any gains in U.S.–China engagement should not be at the expense of the operational security of either the U.S. or its friends and allies. In light of the concerns outlined above, the U.S. should:

- **Preserve its major multilateral exercises as venues for its friends and allies.** Learning how allied forces operate; providing realistic training environments (including the rare opportunity to fire live munitions such as anti-ship torpedoes and missiles); and exercising anti-ship, anti-air, and strike tactics and organizations—such exercises should not occur under the eyes of “revisionist powers.” Realistically, the Chinese (and other states such as Russia) will inevitably undertake efforts to closely observe these activities, as seen with Chinese intelligence-gathering vessels. But the U.S. should not go out of its way to make things easier for those collectors.
- **Undertake limited bilateral exercises with nations such as China and Russia.** As noted, given the likelihood of interactions with Chinese (and other nations’) forces, it is important that there be some degree of mutual familiarization. Moreover, there are certain missions, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, search and rescue, even anti-piracy, where better understanding will quickly pay dividends. U.S., Chinese, European, Indian, and Japanese forces already interact off the Gulf of Aden, to everyone’s benefit. This may serve as a model for expanded bilateral—perhaps even some multilateral—exercises and training events.
- **Adhere to the restrictions on U.S.–China military-to-military contacts laid out in the fiscal year 2000 National Defense Authorization Act.** These restrictions include activities associated with:
 - Force projection operations;
 - Nuclear operations;
 - Advanced combined arms and joint combat operations;
 - Advanced logistical operations;
 - Activities and capabilities associated with weapons of mass destruction;
 - Surveillance and reconnaissance operations;
 - Joint warfighting experiments;
 - Military space operations;
 - Other U.S. military advanced capabilities;
 - Arms sales or military-related technology transfers;
 - Release of classified or restricted information; and
 - Access to Department of Defense laboratories.²

1. Nicole L. Freiner, “What China’s RIMPAC Exclusion Means for U.S. Allies,” *The Diplomat*, May 26, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-chinas-rimpac-exclusion-means-for-us-allies/> (accessed June 15, 2018).

2. Shirley A. Kan, “U.S.–China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress* No. 32496, October 27, 2014, pp. 12–13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32496.pdf> (accessed June 15, 2018).

- **Demand reciprocity for any incorporation of Chinese forces in larger, multilateral exercises.** China participates in a number of multilateral military exercises where the U.S. is deliberately excluded. In particular, there are Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) exercises that involve China and Russia and various Central Asian republics. If China wants to be part of RIMPAC, it should offer the U.S. the opportunity to participate in SCO exercises.

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