



After the Parade: No Talks, No Trust, No Stability

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By Drew Thompson

SYNOPSIS

The PLA parade signalled to Washington that Beijing is committed to using force to achieve political objectives, and it is expanding and modernising its military towards that end. The US is responding by ramping up deterrence against China – a classic security dilemma – made more dangerous by the lack of sustained military-to-military engagement.

COMMENTARY

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) parade on 3 September in Beijing was an impeccably choreographed demonstration of military might, highlighting the PLA's discipline, loyalty to the Communist Party and most noticeably its advanced military capabilities. This show of force sent an ambiguous message to Washington, however. The US and China are caught in a dangerous security dilemma without sustained military-to-military engagement that could provide stability.

A soldier serving in the PLA in the 1990s would not recognise the PLA today, particularly in terms of the role of cutting-edge technology throughout the force. The world's largest military buildup since World War II began in 2000, when then-Communist Party General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission Jiang Zemin undertook reforms, resulting in the PLA divesting itself of commercial interests and focusing on warfighting.

A Formidable PLA

The PLA's budget when Jiang came to power in 1990 was US\$6.16 billion. By 2010, it reached US\$84.9 billion, an increase of 1,283 per cent over two decades. Today, the declared defence budget is US\$247 billion, though the US Department of Defence estimates actual defence spending could be as high as [US\\$450 billion](#). The

PLA describes its defence spending as [“reasonable” and “steady”](#) growth, but the pace, scale and scope of the PLA’s [expansion and modernisation since 2000](#) is staggering.

A military can do a great deal with a 17-times increase in spending over 25 years. By comparison, the US defence budget increased 2.8 times in the same period. The parade showed Xi Jinping and the people of China how well the PLA has spent their money, and how quickly they are catching up to the US.

China is now the second-largest military by defence spending and the largest in scale by most measures. It boasts the world’s largest navy and has the most active-duty troops. Each of its services has developed and acquired advanced technologies, including unmanned systems, directed energy, hypersonics and artificial intelligence, and it operates in all strategic domains, including space and cyberspace. In the past decade, the PLA has developed and deployed a nuclear triad and is believed to be [expanding its inventory of nuclear warheads by up to 100 per year](#). The PLA parade showcasing its most advanced capabilities sent a message to the world about China’s military might.

What is unclear to the US and China’s neighbours is why China’s military has expanded so rapidly and to such an extent. This modernisation and expansion have not been accompanied by a concurrent increase in transparency. Official assurances of peaceful intent ring hollow when outsiders have no insight into the inner workings of China’s leadership and military.

A predictable result is what international relations scholars describe as a “security dilemma”, which occurs when one state takes action to increase its security, causing other states to fear for their own and respond by increasing their defences.

Lack of US-China Military Engagement

Military-to-military contacts between the US and China have atrophied over the past decade. China only holds exchanges when it feels the political atmosphere is good, rebuffing US requests to engage when Beijing is piqued at US actions. Beijing may think they are sending a message to Washington by launching a parade of advanced military equipment, but that message is probably not getting through. What Washington sees is military buildup, expanding capabilities, threats, and coercion. If Beijing wants to send a different message, it needs defence channels that are “all-weather”, not just when it wants.

High-level and policy dialogues exchange authoritative messages to reduce misperceptions and set agendas; functional dialogues build trust and manage the relationship, while operational exchanges, like the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) established in 1998, help reduce the risk of incidents.

High-level visits between the senior-most leaders are symbolic but substantive too, resulting in hours of face-to-face meetings and, importantly, internal preparations for meetings which deepen knowledge, mutual understanding, and executive focus on managing the complex bilateral military relationship. Unfortunately, the last

reciprocal visits occurred in 2018 when Secretary of Defence [Jim Mattis visited China](#) on one trip, and hosted Defence Minister [Wei Fenghe on a visit to Washington](#) later the same year.

Brief meetings on the margins of regional dialogues like the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), are not substitutes for the intensity of dedicated bilateral exchanges. But even those pull-aside meetings on the margins of multilateral meetings can be hard to come by. Defence Minister Li Shangfu rebuffed US requests for a meeting at SLD in 2023. While [Defence Minister Dong Jun met Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin](#) on the margins of the SLD in May 2024, he [declined to meet](#) at the ADMM+ meeting that November.

Lack of Regular Military-to-Military Contacts Impacts Stability

The US Department of Defense's annual report to Congress on China dutifully records military-to-military contacts and exchanges each year. The most recent [report in 2024](#) revealed, "In 2023, the PLA largely denied, cancelled, and ignored recurring bilateral engagements and DoD requests for communication until weeks before President Biden and PRC leader Xi Jinping met in November 2023. Following the leaders' meeting... DoD and the PLA conducted several working-level and senior-level exchanges at the end of 2023 and into 2024." The report notes that one Defense Telephone Link (DTL) call was held, while numerous other proposals, including the INDOPACOM Commander's request to speak to his counterparts, were "refused, cancelled, or ignored".

Recurring exchanges, which stabilise the bilateral relationship through the exchange of views on defence policy and mechanisms to enhance operational safety and prevent crises, are critical. The report dourly reported on 2023 exchanges, "Executed: None."

Following the November 2023 meeting between Xi and Biden, Defense Policy Coordination Talks and a working group of the MMCA operational safety dialogue were held in spring 2024, after having "largely been dormant since 2020 or earlier".

US Ramps Up Its Own Military Transformation

In the absence of dialogue, Washington is responding to China's military expansion with their own transformation. Secretary Hegseth's emphasis on lethality and the rebranding of the Department of War are a rhetorical consequence of the security dilemma. Accelerated development, acquisition and integration of new technologies and capabilities tailored to a future war against a capable, advanced military is tangible. The US Marine Corps' Force Design is perhaps the most dramatic transformation, with the Marines giving up their tanks and artillery tubes, trading them in for anti-ship cruise missiles and rockets fielded by littoral combat regiments training to operate in the Western Pacific.

The Department of War is modernising its own nuclear triad with the new B-21 bomber, the Long-Range Standoff cruise missile and Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, which will replace the venerable Minuteman III ICBMs, while the Department of Energy is modernising the nation's inventory of nuclear warheads.

President Trump [directed](#) the establishment of the Golden Dome missile defence system.

The 3 September parade sent a clear signal to Washington that China is preparing to take Taiwan by force and fight a war against the US. Both countries are modernising and expanding their conventional and strategic forces for that fight. What will trigger that fight, and when it might happen, is not as clear as Beijing's preparations for the conflict.

What is clear is that the PLA is only willing to engage US counterparts when Xi Jinping orders it and will cut off contact when political tensions rise. Successive US administrations have called for strategic stability talks with China, offering to discuss strategic nuclear stability, ballistic launch notifications and other confidence-building measures, but they have been routinely rejected because Beijing does not feel the "[right conditions](#)" for dialogue are present. Beijing's message is clear: demonstrated respect for China's core interests is a precondition for military dialogue and strategic stability.

Beijing does not seek sustained military-to-military dialogue as a means to stabilise the relationship and prevent conflict, as Washington does. Beijing offers dialogue as an incentive to Washington to give up its interests that are inimical to China's. Washington has routinely rejected this approach as Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin affirmed at the 2023 SLD, "The right time to talk is every time. And the right time to talk is now. Dialogue is not a reward. It is a necessity."

The 3 September parade, therefore, sent a signal to Washington that China is committed to using force to achieve its political objectives and it is expanding and modernising its military towards that end. The lack of sustained and substantive military-to-military bilateral dialogue tragically contributes to the security dilemma and resulting instability arising from both sides' respective military modernisation efforts.

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