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Consulting, Studies, and Analysis: Current Issues Brief

No. 34: PLA Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde's Visit to NDU (19 May 2011)

18 May 2011–National Defense University

The National Defense University (NDU) hosted China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde to deliver a presentation titled: "Striving for new developments of China-US military to military relations in an effort to implement important consensus of the heads of state."

Key Points

- ** The militaries must implement a collaborative relationship based on mutual respect and benefit.
- ** Both parties must respect and accommodate each other's core interests and major concerns.
- ** "China cherishes peace; it will never seek hegemony or expansionism; and it seeks internal harmony and development, and external peace and collaboration."

Building on the Hu-Obama Consensus

Chen expressed his desire to "implement the consensus reached by Presidents Hu and Obama of building a sound collaborative relationship of mutual respect and benefit." China and America share tremendous responsibilities for world peace and common development. The question is now "creating a stable and harmonious architect of international relations."

Features of this New Relationship

The new military to military relationship entails a "shakeup" of the previous mindset. "First, both parties must respect and accommodate each other's core interests and major concerns, instead of imposing one's own will on the other."

According to Chen, China's core interests are stability in the form of government; sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and national unity; and a fundamental guarantee to China's sustainable socio-economic development. Second, the relationship "should aim to bolster strategic mutual trust through enhanced dialogues and communication, instead of being prone to suspicion." Chen recognized that in recent years the rapid growth of China's national strength has increased suspicion and discussion of the China Threat. Third, the parties must be "motivated by greater common interests instead of pursuing unilateral competitive edge."

Fresh Progress in Relations?

General Chen offered up areas of mutual interest. Both being permanent members of the UNSC, China and the US share significant responsibilities for world peace. Additionally, as President Obama



General Chen Bingde at NDU

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has said, China and the US are “economically inseparable”. Growing common security concerns also open up a “raw space” for cooperation. The death of Osama bin Laden is a positive development for world peace, “yet the breeding grounds of terrorism are not yet eradicated.” Meanwhile, global issues including climate change, food security, and regional security continue to foment. “Given that both China and the US are Asia-Pacific states with shared security concerns, it is natural and necessary for the two militaries to work together towards a peaceful and stable landscape through enhanced communications and deepened collaboration.”

Changing the Views of China

Chen contended that the “differences in our histories, traditions, culture, and social values lead to a lack of understanding of China in most Americans.” For China, a peaceful and stable external environment conducive to economic growth is essential. Chen offered three key tenets of China’s defense. It cherishes peace, it will never seek hegemony or expansionism, and it seeks internal harmony and development, and external peace and collaboration. Furthermore, “China’s military buildup does not and will not change the defensive nature of its policy.”

Making New Progress in the Relationship

Chen observed “relations between our two nations and two militaries are important but complex.” Looking toward the future, he offered three requirements for improving the relationship. First it is imperative to precisely understand the orientation of the China-US relationship under these new circumstances. In this relationship, “mutual respect is prioritized and although China’s defense and military development have come a long way in recent years, a gaping gap remains between us.”

Second, it is necessary to engage in dialogue and practical cooperation in various military fields. Chen also revealed that Admiral Mullen told him he

is looking forward to visiting China, and Chen already accepted the invitation for his visit.

Third, “it is important to handle differences and sensitive issues appropriately.” “The Taiwan question bears on China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and is where China’s core interests lie.” Chen invoked the memory of Abraham Lincoln and his efforts to preserve the union to encourage the US to “put itself in China’s shoes” vis-à-vis Taiwan.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, General Chen answered two questions. In regard to a counter-piracy question, he stated that he had told Secretaries Gates and Clinton that the UN should “not only fight pirates on the sea but on the ground.” However, he commented that “if the situation continues, it will create big difficulties for us to continue the operations.” China is now in a situation in which if it continues to build new ships, “we will have the constraint of the national budget, and it will lead to China Threat hype. However, if we stop building the ships we will not only be not able to send ships to the Gulf of Aden, but we will also not be able to help international peace.”

General Chen then argued there “still exists a 20 year gap between equipment and weaponry between the US and China.” Nonetheless, he expressed confidence as “each time in history China has won at war, it was underdeveloped.”

In response to the second question, Chen pointed to improvements in the quality and education of its personnel as the PLA’s greatest improvement. Informatization is the area in which the PLA has achieved the smallest level of improvements.

Further Reading

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