

Make Talk Not War: Strategic U.S.-China Military-to-Military Exchanges in the First Half of 2007

James Mulvenon

Following key leadership transitions in the Pentagon and Pacific Command (PACOM), strategic military-to-military meetings have continued apace in 2007, with visits to China by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Pace and PACOM Commander Admiral Keating; reciprocal visits by PLA Navy Commander Admiral Wu Shengli to the United States; and an exchange between Deputy Chief of the General Staff Zhang Qinsheng and DoD leaders at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, where China announced that it would finally agree to a military hotline. While the regular conduct of these exchanges is a net positive for strategic U.S.-China relations, the externals highlight persistent tension and misperceptions about intent and capabilities. Further, the lack of demonstrable progress in some spheres, such as the establishment of any “incidents at sea” protocol under the Military Maritime Cooperative Agreement framework or the scheduling of Second Artillery Commander Jing Zhiyuan’s reciprocal visit to the United States, requires analysis and explanation.

Big Man Politics: Military-to-Military Relations in 2006 and 2007

Following key leadership transitions in the Pentagon and Pacific Command (PACOM), strategic military-to-military meetings have continued apace in 2007. First, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Pete Pace and U.S. Army Command Sergeant Major William J. Gainey visited China in March. PLA Navy Commander Wu Shengli visited the United States at the invitation of Chief of Naval Operations Michael Mullin. Freshly confirmed PACOM Commander visited China in May and Deputy Chief of the General Staff (Intelligence) Zhang Qinsheng interacted with a large DoD delegation, headed by Secretary Bob Gates, at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore in June. This pace is comparable with the 2006 exchanges, in which Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Guo Boxiong visited the United States in July, and former PACOM Commander William Fallon visited China twice.

On the face of it, the tempo and breadth of these exchanges suggest a commitment by both sides to maintain strategic dialogue at the senior military and civilian levels. Designated Chinese “analysts” in official accounts view this trend positively. In May 2007 during the Keating visit, an unnamed analyst offered the following assessment in a Hong Kong newspaper that has acted as a conduit for official Beijing opinion in the past:

Although there have been many twists and turns in Sino-US relations in recent years, the two countries have always been able to overcome various contradictions and frictions and to always maintain a momentum of forging ahead amidst twists and turns. In that process, the two countries' military relations have been able to rise gradually from a freezing point, to exceed historical levels time and again, thus becoming a major driving force in the development of the two countries' overall relations.¹

This same analyst also offered the opinion that senior military dialogue was a welcome antidote to the perceived "anti-China forces" in the United States:

Particularly with the growth of China's overall national strength, some political forces in the United States have spread the "China-Threat Theory" from time to time, thus creating a certain negative impact on the development of the two countries' relations. But thanks to the efforts of the two countries' governments there is constant forward movement in the two countries' relations in various areas, and bright points in military exchanges are becoming more and more apparent in the two countries' relations, playing an important role in increasing mutual trust, reducing mutual miscalculation, and in further raising the overall level of the bilateral relations.²

At the same time, Chinese commentators and senior leaders drummed a steady beat about the Taiwan issue and condemned U.S. pressure for greater military transparency.

On the U.S. side, senior leaders in their public remarks expressed cautious optimism about the relationship, but did not shirk from expressing their dissatisfaction with the PLA's lack of transparency, pushing for lower-level exchanges within the constraints of the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act and a military hotline, and asking uncomfortable questions about the Chinese anti-satellite weapons test in January 2007.

To better understand these positive and negative features of the Sino-U.S. mil-mil, the remainder of this article will examine recent exchanges—including the Pace and Keating visits, as well as the Shangri-la Dialogue—in detail, offering assessments of their content and implications.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace Visits China

Then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace visited China from 22–25 March 2007 at the invitation of PLA Chief of the General Staff Liang Guanglie.³ At his initial press conference at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, General Pace set the tone and messages for his visit. He told the assembled reporters and officials, "the biggest fear I have for the future (of U.S.-Chinese relations) is miscalculation and misunderstanding based on

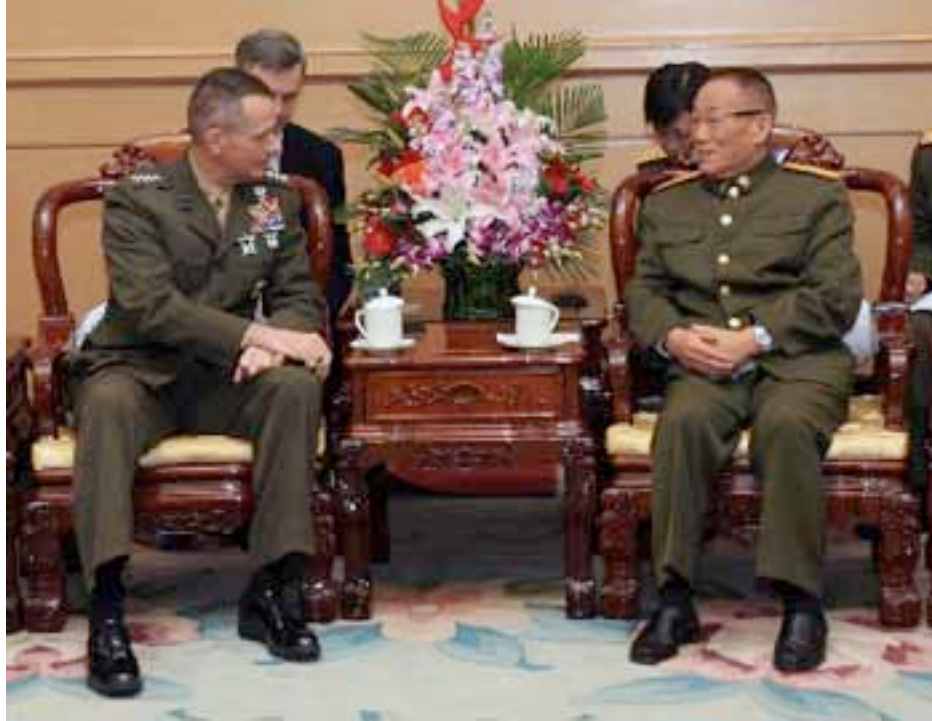
misinformation,” and recommended establishing a military hotline to reduce misperceptions between the two sides.⁴

At the beginning of his visit, Pace attended a troop review at the Defense Ministry’s Bayi Building, near Tiananmen Square. Over the course of his stay in China, Pace met with Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Guo Boxiong, Minister of Defense Cao Gangchuan, and Liang Guanglie, and the official media coverage of the meeting suggested that his Chinese interlocutors hewed closely to traditional platitudes. Pace’s first meeting was with Liang Guanglie.



Liang commented that the overall China-U.S. military ties enjoyed “good momentum of stable development,” and insisted that China would like to further military exchanges with the United States at various levels.⁵ According to official DoD accounts of Pace’s meeting with Liang, the latter suggested three exchange initiatives, including an exchange program for young officers and military academy cadets and midshipmen, an expansion of search-and-rescue exercises, and greater cooperation in humanitarian operations.⁶

Pace’s second meeting was with Cao Gangchuan.



In his opening statement, Cao asserted that “Sino-U.S. relations is the most important bilateral relationship in the world,”⁷ Cao also said China pursues a defense policy that is defensive in nature, and that China’s defense spending is “moderate” (*shidu*).⁸ Cao of course repeated the mantra about China’s position on the Taiwan issue.

Pace’s final senior PLA meeting in Beijing was with Guo Boxiong.



In his remarks, Guo asserted that both the United States and China were “great powers” (*shijie daguo*), with “responsibilities to safeguard world peace and stability.”⁹ Guo told Pace that “the current China-U.S. military ties are not easy to come by, thus the two sides should treasure them.”¹⁰ Guo also reportedly briefed Pace on China’s “road of peaceful development” (*heping fazhan daolu*) and defense policy, and “clarified” Beijing’s position on the Taiwan issue.¹¹

One sore point during Pace’s meetings was China’s January 2007 ASAT test. Commenting afterward, Pace said:

It wasn’t clear what their intent (with the test) was. When the intent isn’t clear, and when there are surprises and you confuse people, you raise suspicions. I think that is one area where we can work harder between the two militaries to make sure . . . we tell each other what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, how we’re doing it (and) what our intents are, so that it is clear.¹²

Pace also held a seminar with researchers from the Academy of Military Sciences,¹³ and met with leaders of Shenyang and Nanjing Military Regions.¹⁴ In addition to his official meetings in Nanjing, Pace visited the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum.



While visiting the Shenyang Military Region, General Pace visited the 1st Air Division at Anshan Air Base, where he was permitted to sit in the cockpit of an Su-27.



Later, he traveled to the Dalian Training Area, where he observed an armored exercise and was permitted to ride on a TC-98 tank.



The irony of General Pace’s visit to China is that, in retrospect, it inadvertently confirmed one of Beijing’s greatest frustrations with Sino-U.S. senior military dialogue. Beijing has often complained since resumption of the relationship in 1993 that many of its visiting U.S. interlocutors are soon-to-retire officers on their final, “swan song” visit, which undermines the goal of developing long-term ties between professionals. Pace may have believed at the time that he would be renewed for the customary second two-year term, but his early retirement in favor of Admiral Michael Mullen nullifies whatever personal connections he may have made during his March trip and leaves it to his successor to begin anew.

PACOM Commander Keating’s Views of China

Even before Admiral Keating visited China in May, Beijing had a glimpse of his views of China and the international security situation from his confirmation hearing questions.¹⁵ His comments were complimentary of Beijing’s recent cooperative behavior in the Six Party Talks, describing China’s leadership as “constructive” and “encouraging,” but also expressing concerns about the fragile stability of the cross-Strait situation. Keating sounded cautiously optimistic about the benefits of military-to-military exchanges, which he said had improved in both “quality and quantity,” and was supportive of their expansion to include exchanges between lower-ranking officers.¹⁶ He appeared wary of Chinese military modernization, assessing that “China is seeking capabilities beyond those needed for a Taiwan situation” and adopting a “trust but verify” tone with respect to transparency issues.¹⁷ At the same time, Keating was dismissive about the skills of the

Chinese navy personnel displayed during the recent search-and-rescue exercise, describing the exercise as “rudimentary” and Chinese performance as “average.”¹⁸ He was eager to expand “hedging” relationships on China’s periphery, though he was also critical of discussions in Taiwan about developing offensive weapons.¹⁹ Keating’s strongest comments, however, were reserved for China’s January 2007 ASAT test:

I do not know China’s purpose. However, the test was unfortunate and inconsistent with their stated peaceful policy. Chinese actions endangered international satellites, which support the world’s economy, and created considerable debris that increases the risk to human spaceflight. . . . The foremost implication is confirmation that Chinese anti-satellite capabilities can be a threat to international space assets.

I would have engaged and I would have recommended a very strong declaratory policy to China on the part of the United States government against launching that particular—or that technological demonstration . . . I would have recommended against China launching it, and expressing that in very strong terms to China.²⁰

PACOM Commander Keating Visits China

Admiral Keating visited China from 10–14 May 2007, his first trip to the country since assuming command of Pacific Command in March. In a mid-course press conference, he described his objectives for the visit as “peace and stability in the region, mutual understanding between the two armed forces, and the development of friendship.” He insisted he wanted an “open and candid” relationship with China, designed to avoid potentially dangerous miscalculations:

It is likely they will always have a somewhat different perspective on things; but, the more time we spend together the stronger partnership will develop and the less likely a misunderstanding could brew that might grow to disrupt the peace and stability that we’re looking to sustain and actually nurture.²¹

He was quick to dissuade the Chinese side of any view that the military situation in Iraq and Afghanistan reduced U.S. freedom of action or will to fight in a Taiwan scenario:

We are committed, to a degree, in Iraq and Afghanistan. That is imposing some stress on the force, to be sure. But we retain significant capability in the Pacific and all throughout the other geographic combatant commands. And, I suppose that’s a worthwhile message. Don’t for a second assume that our focus is entirely on a certain part of the world.²²

In this vein, Keating said the visit was aimed at “developing and reinforcing” relations between the U.S. Pacific Command and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy:²³

I will definitely exert effort on promoting interaction between the two armed forces. Although there are no specific items of military interaction on the table at present, I will focus on promoting mutually beneficial items of military interaction in certain key areas. The United States Pacific Command hopes to use strengthened interaction with the Chinese Navy to achieve the strategic goal of maintaining peace and stability in this region and deepening mutual understanding and friendship between the two armed forces.²⁴

At the same time, he dismissed suggestions that China and the United States would schedule another joint exercise anytime soon, asserting, “there is no joint exercise scheduled in the short term.”²⁵ Finally, Keating raised the transparency issues, describing it as “not sufficient” compared with engagement where “we look each other in the eye and talk, more than just watch.”²⁶

During the first leg of his trip in Beijing, Keating made office calls with senior military and civilian leaders, including Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Guo Boxiong, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Zhang Qinsheng, and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhang Yesui.²⁷ Keating first met with Guo Boxiong at the August 1st Building.



Guo’s opening comments were striking in their strategic confidence and desire for expansion of mil-mil relations:

The China-US relationship not only has strategic significance, but also has global influence. Both China and the United States are shouldering important responsibility for maintaining world peace and stability and for facilitating joint development. The two countries share broad and

important common strategic interests and are not only *stakeholders, but also constructive partners in cooperation*. The Chinese side attaches *great importance* to developing its relations with the United States. The relationship between the Chinese army and the US army is an important component of China-US relations. There has been a *favorable momentum* in the development of relations between the two armies in recent years and there will also be *enormous room and potential for development in the years to come*. The two sides should therefore further strengthen exchanges and broaden cooperation so that relations between the two armies *may be elevated to a new level*.²⁸

The most interesting, and frankly disturbing, part of their exchange, however, centered on China's January 2007 ASAT test. Keating told Guo that many people do not understand why China would test an anti-satellite weapon if it truly wants a peaceful rise to superpower status, as it claims. The admiral said the test, in which China used a missile to destroy one of its own satellites, sent a "confusing signal" to the United States and the world.²⁹ According to a VOA report, Guo responded to Keating's comments by chuckling and insisting that he does not understand why the world reaction to the Chinese anti-satellite missile test has been so "dramatic." He called the test a "normal scientific experiment" that had "no serious consequences or ulterior motives," and "didn't threaten any country." General Guo disputed the view that the test left a large amount of debris in orbit. When General Guo tried to change the subject to Taiwan, Admiral Keating insisted on sticking to the anti-satellite issue for a few more minutes, saying some people in the U.S. military, government, and business community believe the test was more than a scientific experiment and that the risk to other satellites posed by the debris is "not insignificant."

Later, in a VOA interview, Admiral Keating said he hopes China does not pursue its anti-satellite weapon program:

I'd hope that once demonstrated that they, 'put it on the shelf. There's little further scientific data to be derived, in my perspective. They could have done it in the laboratory, if you will. But, it's done and the debris is there. We can't unring the bell. And I would hope that they now understand, we all understand, the challenges attendant to introduction of large quantities of large debris into the commons of space.³⁰

He also disputed Guo's responses to his comments:

The explanation provided, that it was a scientific endeavor, in my view is a partially complete answer. There are, in my opinion, military overtones to this, if not direct military application. An anti-satellite test is not necessarily a clear indication of a decision for peaceful utilization of space. It is a confusing signal, shall we say, for a country that desires a peaceful rise.³¹

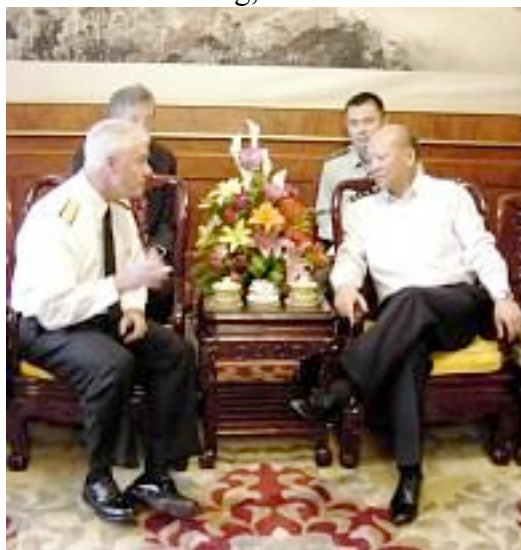
Keating then met with Deputy of the General Staff (Intel) Zhang Qinsheng. Zhang mainly spouted platitudes, but did make one pregnant remark, perhaps foreshadowing his announcement of a military hotline at the Shangri-La Dialogue: “For the Chinese and U.S. armies to stay in communication is very beneficial both to enhancing mutual understanding and mutual trust and to dispelling misunderstandings between each other.”³²

After his Beijing meetings, Keating traveled to the Nanjing Military Region, which sits opposite Taiwan and would likely form the central front in a military conflict involving Taiwan. PACOM commanders have often requested visits to Nanjing, both to tour the battlefield and also directly take the measure of their possible opposing commander. At the invitation of commanding general Zhu Wenquan, Keating visited Nanjing’s military academies and schools and Nanjing Military Region’s 179th Brigade at the eastern foot of Purple Mountain in Nanjing.

At the end of his trip, Keating attended a conference at China World Hotel with Chinese military experts, including Rear Admiral Yang Yi, director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at China’s National Defense University and a former naval attaché in the United States.³³ After the meeting, Yang commented to local media:

On this visit, Keating is establishing a relationship with the Chinese military, and the two sides have not discussed any substantive cooperation between the two armed forces. If we say that Fallon is a very skilled diplomat, then Keating displays more of the temperament of a military man. He is a military commander. His facial expression is serious and his speech is direct.³⁴

Finally, Keating met with PLA Navy Commander Wu Shengli, who had visited Hawaii and Washington between 1–8 April and met with numerous senior U.S. military officials, including Deputy Secretary of Defense England, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Pace, Chief of Naval Operations Mullen, Secretary of the Navy Winter, Commander of Pacific Command Keating, and Commander of Pacific Fleet Roughead.³⁵



VOA Photo A. Pessin

During his conversation with Wu, Keating commented on China's interest in building and deploying an aircraft carrier. He later described the conversation:

An aircraft carrier from a country pulls into port, and it is an unmistakable demonstration of will and resolve. And we had a very good conversation about that. I do not have any better idea as to China's intentions to develop, or not, a carrier program, but we had a very pleasant and candid exchange about the larger issues attendant to a carrier program.³⁶

In his discussion with Wu, Keating stressed the difficulty and complexity of developing, building and operating an aircraft carrier. But at his news conference Saturday Keating said the United States would be willing to help if that is what China decides to do:

It is not an area where we would want any tension to arise unnecessarily. And we would, if they choose to develop [an aircraft carrier program] help them to the degree that they seek and the degree that we're capable, in developing their programs.³⁷

Keating's comments immediately unleashed a firestorm among the anti-China crowd, who accused him of advocating a violation of the restrictions in the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act.³⁸ In response, PACOM spokesman Captain Jeff Alderson said Admiral Keating is aware of the congressional restrictions, adding "the offer of help was more philosophical, like how hard it is and the ramifications that a carrier would have on neighboring countries in the region." Regardless, the incident highlights the very narrow tightrope all of Keating's predecessors have been forced to walk between deterrence and engagement.

Postscript

As his final swansong before leaving his position, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Asia-Pacific Richard Lawless testified before the House Armed Services Committee on 13 June 2007, effectively summarizing the many dimensions of Sino-U.S. military-to-military relations under the Bush administration. Putting ties with Beijing in a historical context from the EP-3A hostage crisis in 2001 to the present, he assessed that the mil-mil "has grown increasingly important and complex." Lawless confirmed the strategic objective of the relationship was to reduce the chance of conflict, asserting "we believe these exchanges and mechanisms have the potential to improve mutual understanding, reduce miscalculation, and contribute over time to 'demystifying' one another."³⁹ At the same time, his testimony sought to balance the good with the bad, highlighting favorable developments such as naval ship visits, military academy exchanges and bilateral search-and-rescue efforts, as well as more troubling ones, including Beijing's "ambitious and long-term military modernization program," which is "expanding from traditional land, sea and air dimensions of the modern battlefield to include space and cyberspace."

Lawless said that China makes “a deliberate effort . . . to mask the nature of Chinese military capabilities.” “I think if we had a true dialogue of depth . . . we might be able to constrain and put some of those issues of (Chinese) intent to bed . . . Not being able to, we must plan and prepare for the worst,” he said. “It is an area of intense concern and we’re giving it due attention from the highest levels of the Department of Defense and the inter-agency discussion.” In particular, Lawless highlighted China’s successful test of an anti-satellite weapon in January, which he assessed could “disrupt, delay and frustrate our ability to operate” in space. He also emphasized China’s investments in space and counter-space activities, saying that its leaders view such programs as “bolstering national prestige and, like nuclear weapons, demonstrating the attributes of a world power.” In particular, Lawless pointed to Chinese development of counter-space capability “featuring direct ascent anti-satellite weapons, ground-based lasers and satellite communication jammers.” Complementing these space-based information operations capabilities, he asserted that “cyber-warfare” has given China the capacity “to attack and degrade our computer systems.” Despite these judgments, however, Lawless was also frank in his assessment of our gaps in knowledge about the Chinese military, and the implications of those gaps for the long-term relationship. Quoting the *2007 China Military Report*, Lawless said that the lack of transparency in China’s military activities “will naturally and understandably prompt international responses that hedge against the unknown.”

Notes

¹ Shih Chun-yu, “Excellent Momentum in Sino-US Military Exchanges,” *Ta kung pao*, 17 May 2007.

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³ “Chairman of U.S. Joint Chief of Staff Visits China, Meeting with Top Chinese Officers,”

www.chinamil.com.cn, 23 March 2007.

⁴ Jim Garamone, “Pace Calls for Closer Military Ties Between China, U.S.,” *American Forces Press Service*, 23 March 2007.

⁵ “Chairman of U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Visits China, Meeting with Top Chinese Officers,”

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⁶ Garamone, “Pace Calls for Closer Military Ties.”

⁷ Zhang Tiannan, “Guo Boxiong, Cao Gangchuan Separately Meet with American Joint Chiefs Chairman Pace,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 22 March 2007.

⁸ “Chairman of U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Visits China, Meeting with Top Chinese Officers,”

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⁹ Zhang, “Guo Boxiong, Cao Gangchuan Separately Meet.”

¹⁰ “Chairman of U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Visits China.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Garamone, “Pace Calls for Closer Military Ties.”

¹³ Chairman of U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Visits China.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, “U.S. Military Command Authorization Requests for Fiscal Year 2008,” 24 April 2007.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, “U.S. Military Command Authorization Requests for Fiscal Year 2008,” 24 April 2007.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

- ²¹ Al Pessin, "US Pacific Commander Wants 'Candid' Talks in Beijing," *VOA*, 10 May 2007.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ "Top U.S. Pacific Commander: Objectives To Be Achieved for U.S.-China Military Exchanges," Xinhua, 12 May 2007.
- ²⁴ Xiong Zhengyan and Xu Song, "US Pacific Command Commander Timothy Keating Comes to China to Find a Path," *Guoji xianqu daobao*, 14 May 2007.
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- ²⁶ Al Pessin, "US, Chinese Military Officers Sharply Disagree Over Anti-Satellite Issue," *VOA*, 11 May 2007.
- ²⁷ Xiong Zhengyan and Xu Song, "US Pacific Command Commander Timothy Keating Comes to China to Find a Path," *Guoji xianqu daobao*, 14 May 2007.
- ²⁸ Al Pessin, "US, Chinese Military Officers Sharply Disagree Over Anti-Satellite Issue," *VOA*, 11 May 2007 (emphasis added).
- ²⁹ Al Pessin, "US, Chinese Military Officers Sharply Disagree Over Anti-Satellite Issue," *VOA*, 11 May 2007.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Edward Cody, "Pacific Commander Stresses China Ties; Admiral to Sustain Policy of Predecessor," *Washington Post*, 13 May 2007, p.A16.
- ³² Tao Shelan, "Commander of US Pacific Command Visits China; Deputy Chief of General Staff Zhang Qinsheng Meets With Him," *Zhongguo xinwen she*, 11 May 2007.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Bai Jie and Luo Huaiyu, "Foreign Ministry Spokesman: Chinese Navy Commander's Visit to the United States Helps Promote Pragmatic Bilateral Military Exchanges," Xinhua, 5 April 2007.
- ³⁶ Al Pessin, "US Commander Calls Chinese Interest in Aircraft Carriers 'Understandable'," *VOA*, 12 May 2007.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Bill Gertz, "Inside the Ring," *Washington Times*, 1 June 2007.
- ³⁹ Hearing of the House Armed Services Committee, 13 June 2007.