

Chen Xiaogong: A Political Biography

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After less than a year in the position, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Zhang Qinsheng's intelligence and policy portfolios were assumed in June 2007 by new Assistant Chief of the General Staff Chen Xiaogong, a career intel officer with the General Staff's Second Department. Chen is well known in American sinological circles, having served a tour as defense attaché at the PRC Embassy in Washington, and is well respected by interlocutors as a fluent America hand and strategic thinker. Yet Major General Chen's tour in the United States as defense attaché from 2001 to 2003 was also a career disappointment, as the hangover from the EP-3A crisis precluded contact with the Department of Defense for his entire tenure. This issue of the Monitor outlines and analyzes Chen's biography, assessing the implications of his career track and experiences for Sino-US security relations.

Chen Xiaogong: The Making of An America Hand

Chen Xiaogong was born on the eve of Liberation in 1949 in Weihai City in Shandong Province.¹ Chen is a certified princeling, or *taizi*. His father, Chen Chu, was a legend in China's foreign diplomatic corps, serving as China's first ambassador to Japan after the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1972 and later as China's Permanent Representative at the United Nations. Chen reportedly lived in Russia for one year during his father's diplomatic tour there, and expressed a wistful memory of the former USSR. Little is known about Chen Xiaogong's immediate family, save that his son, born around 1981, attended private high school in the United States before Chen's defense attaché tour in 2001–2003, and attended Towson University in the mid-2000s.

Significant gaps also exist in data about Chen's early career. He reportedly commanded an enlarged regiment that fought in the mid-1980s border conflict with Vietnam, and his unit of 3,000 men is said to have taken the highest casualties of any unit in the period, losing more than 20 percent of its men. In the mid-1990s, Chen reportedly attended a reunion near the border, which today is marked by a unit monument that commemorates their exploits and honors the men who died. Interlocutors in the late 1990s describe Chen as "emotional" about the experience.

For almost the entire decade of the 1980s, he allegedly ran one of the PLA's most important foreign intelligence operations: the arms pipeline to the Afghan mujahideen fighting the Soviet Red Army. Chinese arms were a critical feature of the covert support program, along with Saudi money, American management, and Egyptian training. Based

in Pakistan, the Chinese military operation supplied hundreds of millions of dollars of weapons each year to the various mujahideen factions operating in Afghanistan, including the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, an ethnic Tajik known as the “Lion of Panjshir.” The PLA’s operation was notable in that it was able to successfully bypass the restrictions placed on direct contact with the mujahideen by the Pakistani ISI, which had reportedly frustrated CIA and Saudi participants.² Specifically, the operation allegedly infiltrated ethnic Tajik officers from the Chinese military into Afghanistan, where they were able to operate as liaison officers with Massoud’s forces. As a result of these operational experiences, Chen likely enjoys extensive contacts throughout the Middle East and South Asia, particularly with the local intelligence services. These historic linkages, which could include elements of the U.S. intelligence community involved in the mujahideen support program, would likely be of great value in the post-9/11 environment, particularly in the realms of counter-terrorism and intelligence about U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Maj. Gen. CHEN Xiaogong (陈小鹏)

Chen has significant foreign experience, spending six months as a fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C., in the late 1980s and leading the first “PLA colonels” delegation to the Harvard Kennedy School in 1997. During the latter visit, Chen was reportedly the head of the Americas and Western Europe branch within the PLA’s 2nd Department (Intel). Sometime in the 1990s Chen also served as a chief observer to the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM). From the late 1990s to the summer of 2001, he was PRC defense attaché in Egypt, one of China’s most important arms sales customers and diplomatic partners.³

Chen served as PRC defense attaché to Washington between September 2001 and September 2003. This appointment was meant to be a culmination of a long career as one of Chinese intelligence's top America hands. Instead, the D.C. tour was the occasion of Chen's greatest career disappointment, as the hangover from the EP-3A crisis precluded contact with the Department of Defense for his entire tenure. At the beginning, Chen believed that he arrived at a "good time" in the relationship, and "did not expect that the relationship would make so little improvement" while he was there. Yet the relationship was still in the midst of a long and painful recovery from the events of April 2001, and the senior leadership of the Pentagon had no interest in restoring military-to-military exchanges. Chen never formally presented his credentials and was not invited to attaché tours or Pentagon events, like the 11 September 2002 memorial service. Chinese sources assert that the only excluded countries were Burma, Zimbabwe, and the PRC, despite the latter's public claims of cooperation with the United States in the global war on terrorism. American and Chinese sources also disagree about a range of protocol slights, including the relative bureaucratic rank of American attendees to the PRC Embassy's annual Liberation Day celebration on 1 August. Chen's departure in late 2003 was allegedly ahead of schedule, perhaps reflecting the judgment that the tour was an irredeemable failure.

After his return from the United States, Chen was appointed as a deputy director of the Foreign Affairs Office (*Waiban*) under the Central Committee, joining the two deputy directors already in the organization. Prior to 2000, the *Waiban* had only two deputies, but a third slot was reportedly created to support the newly created National Security Leading Small Group. Before Chen's appointment, the third slot had remained empty. At the same time, there is no evidence that the third slot is an ex officio PLA position. Instead, Chen's assignment was a promotion based solely on his unique expertise and experience. He was likely being groomed for higher, more strategically focused positions within the security apparatus, and the *Waiban* position was designed to broaden his perspective beyond his previous postings. While serving on the *Waiban*, Chen was uniquely placed to observe how the foreign-policy sausage was made at the highest levels of the Chinese government, for both good and ill. After his departure, the third deputy position on the *Waiban* reportedly remains unfilled once again.

During his tenure on the *Waiban*, Chen was intimately involved in the planning and execution of an unprecedented event in Chinese foreign policy deliberations: the convening of a Central Committee Foreign Affairs Work Conference in Beijing in August 2006. In a discussion with foreigners, Chen described this as "an important meeting," and the first conference organized by the Central Committee on foreign affairs work since 1949. The meeting brought together a large group of senior officials, diplomats, military personnel, and foreign affairs bureaucrats. Specifically, the meeting was attended by all provincial party secretaries and governors, as well as all state ministers and 90 diplomats (including Zhou Wenzhong). The mission of the conference was two-fold: (1) unify views on the international situation and CCP guidelines for foreign affairs; and (2) adjust the foreign affairs work system, especially at the sub-national level. On the latter point, the organizers of the meeting recognized that more and more international affairs work since the opening in 1979 has been conducted at the

provincial level, but there was little coordination of this activity with national guidelines. Bureaucratically, this problem was exacerbated by the fact that each province had a foreign affairs office but these organs were not a formal part of the national foreign affairs (*waishi*) system (*xitong*), though the directors of these foreign affairs offices did attend national work conferences. The August meeting, which was attended by all officials from foreign affairs offices at the national *and* local (provincial and county) level, sought to rationalize the structure and process of international work at the local level. One important change is that the provincial foreign affairs offices are now officially part of the national foreign affairs *xitong*.

After leaving the *Waiban*, Chen was appointed to head the General Staff Department's Second Department, subordinate to Lt.Gen. Zhang Qinsheng, the then-Assistant Chief of the General Staff. Chen served as head of the Second Department for less than one year, moving up to become Assistant Chief of the General Staff when Zhang Qinsheng was appointed Commander of the Guangzhou Military Region.

Among his other professional affiliations, Chen has been variously listed in publications and conference proceedings as a researcher at the Institute for Strategic Studies of the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, Standing Member of the Council of the China Society for Strategy and Management Research (www.cssm.org.cn), and a research fellow of the GSD/2nd Department's China Institute for International Strategic Studies.

Impressions of Chen Xiaogong

Chen Xiaogong is well regarded by both Western interlocutors and Chinese colleagues. Interviews with American experts who have dealt with him directly describe him as "cautious," "careful," "serious," "patriotic," "realist," "very balanced," "interesting," "highly professional," "thoughtful," "a good listener," "businesslike," "modest," "insightful about the U.S. system," "sophisticated," "a policy intellectual," "prudent," "open," "unpretentious," "hardworking," "reserved," "not a grandstander," "quietly competent," "frank without being hasty," "relatively approachable," "focused," "controlled," and "a reasonable guy." One senior American expert opined that Chen "seems to care about U.S.-China relations and not want them to go off the rails," and did not come across as "a hothead on Taiwan." Another expert who had dealt with Chen for years described him as "a very different personality than Hou Gang or Xiong Guangkai," with a "demeanor and behavior . . . more like Xu Xin, minus the anti-American chip on his shoulder from the Korean War." In a meeting with foreigners, Chen himself admitted to having a temper, but apparently only shows it to people within the Chinese system. Others disagreed with the comparison to a bombastic character like Xu Xin, reiterating that Chen is "very modest, sincere and open-minded." On a personal note, he reportedly likes classical music, especially Beethoven's 6th and 9th symphonies. A senior Chinese military expert, comparing Chen with his predecessor Zhang Qinsheng, insisted only the former had the "strategic vision" for the top intel and policy job on the General Staff. Chen's reviews were not universally positive, however, as one senior China expert who

served in the Pentagon during Chen's tenure as defense attaché said he lost respect for Chen during that period, calling him the "quintessential whiner."

Conclusion

So, what to make of Chen's biography and experiences, and the impressions of his American and Chinese colleagues? At first glance, Chen's elevation to Assistant Chief of the General Staff with responsibility for intelligence and policy appears to be a clearly positive development for Sino-U.S. security relations. After a succession of military intelligence and policy chiefs who were either anti-American (Xu Xin), narcissistic and histrionic (Xiong Guangkai), or professional warfighters with no intel experience (Zhang Qinsheng), the position is now held by an individual with long experience dealing with the United States, the strategic vision to see the long-term benefits of strong Sino-U.S. relations, and the demeanor and personality to build a well-functioning relationship and soberly handle unexpected crises. Questions remain as to whether Chen is able to rise above his perception of ill-treatment during his posting as defense attaché to Washington, though it must be said in fairness that U.S. defense attachés operate in a much more physically and psychologically hostile environment in Beijing. Indeed, all evidence suggests that the episode has not colored his perspectives on the United States. Instead, he remains the consummate professional, committed to strategic Sino-U.S. relations, including military-to-military relations.

Notes

¹ "PLA Headquarters Promotes Two Generals," *Ming pao*, 30 June 2007.

² For an outstanding discussion of ISI's penchant for controlling access to mujahiddin groups, see Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York: Penguin, 2004.

³ At the nadir of the Cultural Revolution, Cairo was the only operating Chinese embassy abroad.