

Sino-U.S. Military Relations and the Admiral Fallon Visit

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In May 2006, the Combatant Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral William “Fox” Fallon, visited the People’s Republic of China, traveling to four cities and meeting with a wide range of civilian and military officials. During his meetings, Fallon invited the Chinese military to attend the “Valiant Shield 2006” exercise in June, which the Chinese side accepted during the Defense Consultative Talks in June. This article examines the press coverage of Fallon’s trip, analyzing the comments of his Chinese interlocutors and the symbolism of his various meetings and activities.

First, Talk, Then We Will Break Bottles with Our Foreheads

Between 10 and 17 May 2006, Admiral William J. “Fox” Fallon, Combatant Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, conducted a four-city visit to the People’s Republic of China. As befitting the warfighter and military diplomat responsible for defending U.S. interests over more than 50 percent of the earth’s surface and 60 percent of the world’s population, Fallon received a very high-level reception from the Chinese political class. While he did not meet with any members of the Politburo Standing Committee, he did have an official audience with Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing at his guesthouse in the Diaoyutai Guest House complex. The Foreign Ministry press spokesman offered a predictably slanted version of what transpired:

The Chinese side said that thanks to the joint efforts, China and the US have maintained good momentum in bilateral relations and military ties. The military ties are facing a precious opportunity of development. China and the US should take this opportunity to strengthen dialogues, enhance cooperation and further promote the development of their military ties. The Chinese side reiterated its stance on the Taiwan question. Admiral Fallon said [the] US side attaches importance to friendly bilateral military cooperation and hopes the two sides can promote exchanges and strengthen dialogues. He reiterated that the US stance on [the] Taiwan question remains unchanged. The US adheres to the One-China Policy and hopes to see [the] Taiwan question resolved with peaceful means. We think Admiral Fallon’s visit is important and conducive to promoting mutual understanding, enhancing mutual trust and developing friendship. We will further strengthen the China-US military exchanges and dialogues after consultations with the US.¹

While the text is not particularly rich for exegesis, one should note the positive description of the current state of Sino-US military ties as an “opportunity,” though the projected span of the exchanges is limited to “dialogues” and “cooperation,” which could be fulfilled by the existing slate of Defense Consultative Talks and other high-level officer exchanges. In this sense, the Chinese description of the relationship does not appear to embrace the broader exchanges sought by the U.S. side, including exchanges between lower-ranking officers. At the end of their discussion, Fallon reportedly gave Li a gift: a book entitled *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. During their meeting in 2005, Li presented Fallon with a compendium of poems that Li himself had written.² One presumes that Fallon did not feel comfortable sharing any of his own personal poetry with the Chinese foreign minister.

Fallon’s most substantial meetings occurred on 10 May at the Ministry of Defense’s Bayi Building in Beijing with Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan and Deputy Chief of the General Staff Ge Zhenfeng.³ Ge said it was important for Chinese and U.S. officials to deepen their relationship so they don’t view each other through the “lens of ignorance and suspicion.” Chinese military press reported Ge as telling Fallon:

Sino-U.S. relations now face an excellent opportunity for further development. Chinese president Hu Jintao recently made a successful visit to the United States and held pragmatic and constructive talks with your country’s President Bush, and reached extensive consensus on many major issues. The successful visit of President Hu Jintao will further promote the in-depth development of relations between the two countries.⁴

Under the care of the two countries’ top leaders, there also emerges an excellent development momentum in overall relations between the Chinese and U.S. armies. The two armies will continue to enhance exchanges and cooperation in institutional exchanges, military academy exchanges, warship visit exchanges, humanitarian relief and disaster reduction, coping with non-traditional threats, and in other areas. These activities of exchange visits have promoted the development of relations between the two armies.⁵

Ge’s enthusiasm and repeated use of the term “excellent” to describe Sino-U.S. relations and the mil-mil strikes a discordant note when compared to the more cautious optimism of his more experienced counterparts, but his detailed listing of exchanges involving deeper interactions between the two militaries suggests that he favors a more robust program.

The planned 45-minute meeting between Cao and Fallon was extended to 90 minutes in order to cover a wide range of issues, according to official media.⁶ Cao reportedly offered Fallon the following characterization of Sino-U.S. relations:

Sino-U.S. relations have maintained a good momentum of steady development on the whole. Leaders of the two countries have kept in close

touch and communication. Chinese president Hu Jintao successfully visited the United States and had practical and constructive talks with U.S. president George W. Bush not long ago. They had an extensive and profound exchange of views on Sino-U.S. relations and major issues of common concern, and reached broad and important agreement. President Hu Jintao's successful visit to the United States will further promote the development of bilateral relations, and we are very happy about this.⁷

Cao's words display a cautious optimism, resisting the urge to overstate the current state of affairs. Momentum is "good" not great, and development has been "steady" but not rapid. Hu had "practical" and "constructive" talks with Bush, but no sign of Colin Powell-like hyperbole about Sino-U.S. relations being "the best in 30 years." Cao notes that Hu and Bush reached "broad and important agreement" about "major issues of common concern," but his later comments about Taiwan (see below) suggest this was not completely true. Cao also reportedly gave Fallon the following assessment of the military-to-military relationship:

Relations between the Chinese and U.S. armed forces are an integral part of bilateral relations. We are happy to see that the relations between the two armed forces have been gradually restored and developed in recent years thanks to the concern of the Chinese and U.S. heads of state and through the joint efforts of the defense departments on both sides. Exchange of high-level visits, exchanges between institutions and universities, and mechanism-based contacts are under way as agreed upon by both sides. The Chinese side has always taken a positive attitude toward the development of relations between the two armed forces. We will make a joint effort with the U.S. side to conscientiously implement the consensus reached by the heads of state of both countries to strengthen exchanges between the two armed forces, further enhance understanding, increase consensus, reduce differences, establish trust, expand exchanges and cooperation between the two armed forces, and increase positive factors for the development of constructive cooperative Sino-U.S. ties.⁸

One doubts that Cao is truly happy that relations were only "gradually restored" after the EP-3A collision crisis in 2001, but it is interesting that he twice mentions the role of the heads of state in engineering their restoration, which is perhaps a slight criticism of the reported reluctance of the Pentagon to aggressively pursue mil-mil ties. His final comments suggest (correctly) that much of the challenges to the current relationship are perceptual and psychological, focusing on "understanding," "trust," and "differences."

Of course, the meeting would not be complete without the required harangue about Taiwan.

The Taiwan question concerns China's core interests. We insist on safeguarding peace and stability in Taiwan and promoting the

improvement and development of cross-Strait relations on the basis of the “one China” principle. We will work for the prospect of peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and utmost efforts. We hope that the U.S. side would clearly oppose “Taiwan independence,” clearly support China’s positive efforts in safeguarding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and in improving and developing cross-Strait relations, stop U.S.-Taiwan military exchanges, stop selling advanced weapons to Taiwan, and clearly oppose Chen Shui-bian’s efforts to bring about “de jure Taiwan independence” and any other “Taiwan independence” activities.⁹

Cao may insist that the Taiwan issue has to be addressed on the basis of the “one China principle,” but such a demand only serves to highlight the differences between Beijing and Washington. As Comrade Romberg has taught many times, China has a “one China principle,” which states Taiwan is part of China, whereas the United States adheres to a “one China policy,” which merely acknowledges the Chinese position that there is “one China,” of which Taiwan is a part. This chasm explains why Admiral Fallon’s command cannot “stop U.S.-Taiwan military exchanges” and the Pentagon cannot “stop selling advanced weapons to Taiwan.”

Fallon’s response to Cao, which appears to have been filtered by his hosts (especially the misstatement of U.S. policy toward Taiwan), was summed up in the Chinese military press as follows:

China has become an important force in the region and in the world at large. It is very important for China and the United States to maintain a healthy and stable relationship, as this will help them in their joint efforts to deal with challenges. He hoped that the two armed forces would further strengthen exchanges and contacts at different levels, and enhance mutual understanding and trust. On the Taiwan question, he reiterated that the U.S. government will continue to uphold the “one China” policy and hoped that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait would be able to find a good way to resolve their differences by peaceful means and avoid conflicts.¹⁰

During these meetings, Fallon likely unveiled his trip initiatives, which included three major invitations. First, Fallon reportedly invited Chief of the General Staff Liang Guanglie to join a November 2006 meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, of Asian regional commanders, which would mark the first time for a Chinese warfighter.¹¹ Second, Fallon allegedly sought to schedule reciprocal visits by commanders who handle the nuclear arsenals of each country, perhaps starting with the head of the U.S. Strategic Command visiting China.¹² The offer that attracted the most attention in media coverage was the invitation Chinese naval officers received to observe the Valiant Shield exercises scheduled for June near the U.S. territory of Guam.¹³ China did not have an immediate response to this last offer, and the Foreign Ministry spokesman for days afterward could only say that the offer was under consideration. In an early and presumably coordinated signal, Yang Yi, director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at National Defense

University of China, wrote an editorial for *People's Daily* on 18 May calling the offer “a positive signal worthy of attention in China-U.S. military relations.”¹⁴

The remainder of Fallon's trip consisted of a hodgepodge of regional facility visits and demonstrations, including the Air Force Engineering University in Xi'an, the Jianqiao Air Base in Hangzhou and a concluding stop at the army's 39th Infantry Regiment south of Shenyang in northeast China.¹⁵ At the airbase, Fallon, who was an aviator, was permitted to get very close to a new Chinese aircraft:

“I believe I'm the first American that's had an opportunity to see firsthand the new FB-7 fighter-bomber,” Fallon said of his visit to the air base. “I had a chance to actually climb in the cockpit, which put a big smile on my face, with my aviation background.”¹⁶

Fallon's success was a striking contrast to the visit of the USAF Chief of Staff Michael Ryan in 1998, who nearly canceled his trip over China's refusal to allow him to get in the cockpit of an SU-27.¹⁷

In the Shenyang Military Region, Fallon met on 14 May with the region's political commissar Lieutenant General Huang Xianzhong, and was treated to the usual military “demonstration” that all foreign visitors must suffer through.¹⁸ Soldiers from the 39th Regiment smashed bottles on their foreheads, jumped through hoops of fire and cracked cement with their bare hands. One soldier attached a rope to a vehicle and pulled it with his teeth. Fallon was not impressed by the “show of macho strength,” as he later called it, saying “I haven't seen evidence of the kind of thinking and equipment that would indicate that they're any good.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Fallon left China optimistic that he was making progress. As his plane lifted off, he told aides he was already looking toward his return, something Chinese officials might not be ready to hear. “I'm looking forward to seeing you here, sir,” Defense Minister Cao told Fallon last week. “Once a year.”²⁰ On his way home after a stop in Thailand, however, a last-minute request to fly over Chinese airspace to avoid a typhoon was quickly approved, to Fallon's surprise.²¹

The positive spirit of the Fallon meeting was also reinforced by the tone of the Defense Consultative Talks less than a month later. Confirming the analysis in my *CLM* 17 article, Zhang Qinsheng, assistant chief of the General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), headed the Chinese delegation, which had traditionally been led by General Xiong Guangkai.²² The U.S. delegation was led by Assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman, who declared, “this forum is one of the most important forums for the interactions between the two defense ministries.”²³ After the conclusion of the meeting, Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao seconded Rodman's remarks, stating that “the China-U.S. military exchanges like Thursday's

defense consultations will help boost the mutual trust and promote China-U.S. constructive and cooperative relations.”²⁴ More important, confirming earlier informal signals from designated PLA barbarian handlers, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao declared that China had accepted Fallon’s offer to observe “Valiant Shield 2006.”²⁵

Notes

¹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s Press Conference on 8 September 2005,” accessed at <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t211142.htm>.

² “Chinese Foreign Minister Concerned About U.S. Report,” *Bloomberg*, 13 May 2006.

³ Xiong Zhengyan, “Cao Gangchuan Meets With William Fallon, Commander of the US Pacific Command,” *Xinhua*, 10 May 2006.

⁴ Tian Yuan, “Ge Zhengfeng Meets With U.S. Pacific Command Commander Fallon,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 11 May 2006.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Xiong Zhengyan, “China, US vow to restore comprehensive military ties,” 11 May 2006, accessed at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-05/11/content_4531966.htm.

⁷ Tian Yuan, “Cao Gangchuan Meets With Commander of US Pacific Command,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 11 May 2006.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Tim Johnson, “U.S. military seeks to build ties with Chinese,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 16 May 2006.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ “U.S. Admiral Invites China To Observe Military Exercises,” *DefenseNews.com* (<http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?F=1800829&C=asiapac>).

¹⁴ Yang Yi, “China Focus: U.S. Invitation for China To Watch Military Exercise a Positive Sign: Expert,” *Renmin ribao*, 18 May 2006.

¹⁵ Tim Johnson, “U.S. military seeks to build ties with Chinese.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ John Pomfret, “Cohen Hails Achievements in China Visit; Halt in Missile Sales to Iran, Closer Military Ties Cited,” *Washington Post*, 20 January 1998, p. A11.

¹⁸ “Huang Xianzhong Meets with Commander of U.S. Pacific Command,” *Liaoning ribao*, 16 May 2006.

¹⁹ “Fallon, U.S. Commander, Pushes China to Modernize Its Military,” *Bloomberg*, 18 May 2006.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “4th LD: China, U.S. Hold Defense Consultations on Closer Ties,” *Xinhua*, 8 June 2006.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*