

The “Dawn of Heaven”? A New Player in Sino-U.S. Mil-Mil

James Mulvenon

Previous *China Leadership Monitor* articles have focused upon China’s significant deficiencies in crisis management and strategic signaling, and explored the role of military-to-military relations in either improving or exacerbating those problems. Often, the success or failure of those interactions is determined in part by the personalities involved. In the past year, there has been a sea change in the Chinese team responsible for these activities, in particular the replacement of longtime interlocutor/nemesis Xiong Guangkai with Ma Xiaotian and Chen Xiaogong. While CLM22 presented a fuller picture of Chen Xiaogong than previously available, this issue is devoted to Ma Xiaotian.

Let’s Meet Ma Xiaotian!



Lieutenant General Ma Xiaotian (马晓天) is currently Deputy Chief of the General Staff with responsibility for intelligence and foreign military-to-military relations, including the Sino-U.S. Defense Consultative Talks. He reportedly serves on the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, as well as the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group and the Olympic Security Leading Small Group.

Ma was born in August 1949 in Gongyi (巩义), Henan Province (34°41’N 112°84’E), which is also the birthplace of Du Fu, one of ancient China’s most revered poets.¹ Ma joined the PLA in July 1965, spending his first seven years in the air force’s professional military education system. He studied at the air force’s No. 2 Aviation

Preparatory School (空军第二航空预备学校) until December 1966 and the No. 12 Aviation School (第十二航空学校) until May 1968. He then stayed on at the latter school as a flight instructor until November 1970, joining the Chinese Communist Party in July 1969.² After his teaching stint, Ma studied at the No. 5 Aviation School (第五航空学校) until December 1972, leaving to once again serve as a flight instructor in unspecified aircraft.

Between the early 1970s and 1983, Ma served successively as a squadron commander (中队长), deputy group commander (副大队长), deputy regimental commander (副团长), and regimental commander (团长). Between 1983 and 1993, Ma was promoted to be a deputy division commander (副师长) and then division commander (师长) of unspecified units. From May 1993 to April 1994, Ma studied in the National Defense University's Basic Studies Department (国防大学基本系),³ and then served from April 1994 to March 1997 as chief of staff and then corps commander of the air force's 10th Corps, during which time he was promoted to major-general. A Hong Kong magazine asserts that Ma served as a commander during the joint drill of the three services in the Taiwan Strait in 1996.⁴

From March 1997 to August 1998, Ma was promoted to deputy chief of staff at PLAAF headquarters, moving to become chief of staff of the Guangzhou Military Region Air Force until May 1999. From June 1999 to December 2000, Ma served dual-hatted as deputy commander of the Lanzhou Military Region and commander of the Lanzhou Military Region Air Force, and was promoted to lieutenant-general. During his tenure in Lanzhou, Ma took his first recorded foreign trip, escorting General Yu Yongbo, director of the General Political Department of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, on an official visit to the United States at the invitation of Bernard Daniel Rostker, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Defense.⁵ From January 2001 to May 2003, Ma moved horizontally to be dual-hatted as deputy commander of the Nanjing Military Region and commander of the Nanjing Military Region Air Force.⁶

Ma was appointed as deputy commander of the PLAAF in 2003.⁷ While in this position, Ma was appointed to the inaugural editorial committee for *ConMilit* magazine, a PRC-affiliated periodical devoted to military affairs.⁸ Ma also accompanied Chief of the General Staff Liang Guanglie on a three-nation visit to Pakistan, Brunei, and Malaysia.⁹ PLA Air Force deputy commander Ma Xiaotian and Lanzhou Air Force deputy commander Feng Jingquan and their parties in mid- and late November 2003 separately made inspection visits to the Xi'an aircraft manufacturing company and the Shenyang aircraft manufacturing company, manufacturers of the Chinese air force's main fighter planes, to check up on the situation in developing key fighter plane models. They also asked the two plants to "deliver quality goods on time and according to schedule" and "provide the air force with even more, even better, and even more advanced aircraft."¹⁰

On 16 August 2006, Ma was transferred to be president of the National Defense University, replacing Pei Huailiang.¹¹ Ma was the first non-army officer to serve in the post. While at NDU, Ma reportedly co-led a teaching reform project group of cultivating competent commanding personnel for joint operations. This group researched 17 key issues and created a large number of top-level design documents—such as the "Plan for

implementing the teaching reform in order to cultivate competent commanding personnel for joint operations” and the “models for the quality of competent commanding personnel for joint operations”—which Chinese sources claim laid a solid foundation for deepening teaching reform.¹² While President of NDU, Ma received some early experience in foreign military-to-military relations, attending an SCO meeting chaired by Cao Gangchuan.¹³

Ma was promoted to Deputy Chief of the General Staff in September 2007, and re-elected to the 17th Central Committee in October 2007. One of his first press references was an off-the-cuff remark to Hong Kong reporters as he entered the 17th Party Congress session, reportedly calling out “I resolutely oppose Taiwan’s attempt to join the UN!”¹⁴

As DCOS, one of Ma’s most important roles is running foreign military-to-military relations, including accompanying foreign defense officials in their meetings with senior leaders. Ma attended Cao Gangchuan’s meeting with Chief of the General Staff of the Afghan National Army Bismillah Mohammadi, along with Afghan ambassador to China Eklil Ahmad Hakimi, where the two sides discussed “Sino-Afghan comprehensive partnership of cooperation” (全面合作伙伴关系).¹⁵ Ma also attended Chief of the General Staff Chen Bingde’s meeting in Beijing with Jean-Marie Guehenno, deputy secretary general of the UN, who was attending the China-ASEAN Peacekeeping Seminar held in China.¹⁶

Ma also runs strategic dialogues with foreign military and defense officials. Ma met with David Anthony Bamfield, deputy commander of the New Zealand Defense Force on 15 November 2007.¹⁷ With Lt. Gen. Johann Georg Dora, deputy director general of the Defense Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany, Ma co-chaired the third round of Sino-German defense consultations, which allegedly discussed “the bilateral relations, national defense policies and army building of the two countries, and the issues of common concern such as the Asia-Pacific security situation.”¹⁸ Ma co-chaired the 11th round of strategic consultation between the General Staff Headquarters of the Chinese and Russian armed forces, which was held in Moscow from 7 to 10 November. Ma’s interlocutor on the Russian side was Alexander Rukshin, deputy chief of the General Staff and chief of the intelligence directorate of the Russian Armed Forces. Ma and his entourage also met with Yury Baluyevsky, chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.¹⁹

In January 2008 in Singapore, Ma signed a defense agreement with Permanent Secretary for Defence Chiang Chie Foo at the end of the inaugural China-Singapore Defence Policy Dialogue. Co-chairing the session, Chiang and Ma discussed regional security as well as defense exchanges and security cooperation between Singapore and China. These reportedly included mutual visits, sending personnel to each other’s courses and seminars, and port calls. The two militaries also pledged to work together on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The proposal to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation was first raised during Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean’s meeting with General Cao Gangchuan in Beijing in November 2005. When General Cao visited

Singapore in April 2006, the two ministers agreed to work for that in the framework of an agreement.²⁰

Since assuming the Deputy Chief of the General Staff position, Ma has been the primary Chinese interlocutor in Sino-U.S. military-to-military relations. Ma participated in meetings with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates when he visited China in November 2007, attending the 6 November audience with Hu Jintao.²¹ Within weeks of Gates' visit, however, two separate circumstances rocked the bilateral relationship, pushing Ma to a prominent position. The first was the 21 November refusal by the PRC to allow the *Kitty Hawk* carrier battle group to make their scheduled port call in Hong Kong for the Thanksgiving holiday, disappointing local businesses and the hundreds of dependents who had flown in for the break from the carrier's home port in Japan. While Beijing reversed itself the next day for "humanitarian" reasons, the carrier battle group had already turned around and headed for home, reportedly sailing through the Taiwan Strait because of weather. The second event was the November announcement that the Pentagon planned to sell three sets of Patriot II anti-missile upgrade systems and affiliated equipment worth \$939 million to Taiwan.

These two issues were still lingering when Ma co-chaired the Ninth Sino-U.S. Defense Consultative Talks with Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman, held in Washington, DC, in December 2007.²² Participants allegedly included Qian Lihua, director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense; Zhang Leiyu, deputy chief of staff of the navy; Yang Zhiguo, deputy chief of staff of the Second Artillery Corps; Zheng Zeguangu, envoy at the Chinese embassy in the United States; Chinese ambassador to the United States Zhou Wenzhong; military attaché Zhao Ning; U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense James Shinn; Deputy Assistant Secretaries of Defense David Sedney, Brian Green, and Richard Douglas; officers from the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council Dennis Wilder; and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Christensen.²³ Official Chinese statements described the tone of the meetings, which allegedly covered the relations between the Chinese and U.S. armed forces, international and regional issues, the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, and the Iran nuclear issue, as "moderate" and "constructive."²⁴ On overall Sino-U.S. relations, Ma was reasonably optimistic, reportedly asserting:

China-US relations are the most important bilateral ties in today's world. China and the United States are each other's stakeholders and constructive partners, and the relations between the two armed forces are an important component of the overall bilateral relationship. During US Defense Secretary Robert Gates' visit in China in early November, the two sides reached seven consenses on further promoting exchanges between the two armed forces, and this served to bring favorable opportunities for promoting military ties between the two sides. It is our hope that the US side will remove obstacles; make joint efforts with the Chinese side on the basis of reciprocity and mutual benefit as well as mutual consideration for

the concerns of the other side; and push forward the constructive cooperation between the two armed forces.²⁵

Ma assessed that “bilateral military ties have shown a momentum for continued development in recent years, thanks to the efforts of both sides,” highlighting cooperation in “new areas” such as “military law, military archives and prevention of epidemic diseases.”²⁶ At the same time, Ma allegedly called out two “obstacles” to the improvement of Sino-U.S. military-to-military relations: the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act, which restricts the conduct of military-to-military relations with China, and the Taiwan issue, in particular continuing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.²⁷ According to Chinese press coverage of the meetings, Ma stressed the Taiwan issue, reportedly stating:

The Taiwan issue involves China’s core interests. We are willing to strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and greatest efforts, but we absolutely do not tolerate “Taiwan independence” or allow anyone to separate Taiwan from China under whatever name in whatever form. . . . The situation in the Taiwan Strait situation is complex and sensitive. The US side should take concrete action to stop its official contacts and military links with Taiwan, stop its sales of advanced weapons to Taiwan, refrain from sending wrong signals to the Taiwan authorities so as not to harm peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and China-US relations.²⁸

Ma and members of his delegation rounded out their trip by meeting officials from the U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, State Department, and National Security Council, as well as some congressmen and former political leaders, including Gordon England, deputy secretary of the U.S. Defense Department; James Cartwright, vice chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, and James F. Jeffrey, assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor.²⁹

Ma met with Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte on 5 December. According to Chinese media, Ma told Negroponte:

Against the major background of overall good development in Sino-US relations, relations between the Chinese and American armed forces have maintained a good momentum of development in recent years. The high-level exchange of visits and the active contacts in the area of mechanism and academy education have played a positive role in increasing mutual understanding, building trust, strengthening pragmatic cooperation, and promoting the development of military ties between the two armed forces. The Chinese side is ready to work together with the US side to jointly push forward the development of defense and military relations between the two countries. . . . The actions taken by the US side to elevate military links with Taiwan and sell advanced weapons to Taiwan are serious violations of the US government’s solemn commitment made to the

Chinese side and have sent a wrong signal to the Taiwan authorities. We hope that the US side would fully and clearly recognize the nature of Chen Shui-bian's "Taiwan independence" moves and the grave nature of the current situation in the Taiwan Strait, faithfully fulfill its commitment by stopping the selling of advanced weapons to Taiwan and stopping its official contacts and military links and cooperation with Taiwan, and take concrete actions to safeguard peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the common strategic interests of China and the United States.³⁰

Ma met with PACOM Commander Admiral Keating in January 2008.³¹ According to Chinese press, Ma stressed common ground:

I always believe that in spite of the differences between China and the United States in historical traditions, culture, economic and political systems and ideology, we can still find some points in common to promote the further advance of relations between the two countries and two militaries.³²

Ma allegedly also told Keating that his second visit to China in a short span of only eight months is sufficient to show he has attached importance to developing the relations between the Chinese and U.S. armed forces:

Currently China-US military relations have generally presented a good momentum of positive development. The Chinese side is willing to make joint efforts with US side to strengthen communication, enhance mutual trust, deepen exchanges and cooperation, and promote the relations between the two countries' armed forces toward further development.³³

Yet Ma again felt compelled to raise the Taiwan issue:

The Chinese side appreciates the US side's recent open expression of opposition to Taiwan's "referendum on UN entry." We hope that the US side will not upgrade its military relations with Taiwan, will stop its military cooperation with Taiwan, and will make joint efforts with the Chinese side to ensure the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.³⁴

Most recently, Ma met with Brent Scowcroft, former national security advisor to President G.H.W. Bush, and repeated many of the same themes:

At present, China-US military relations generally present a good momentum of positive development. Exchanges and cooperation between the two countries' armed forces have continually achieved progress in various fields. The Chinese side is willing to make joint efforts with the US side to strengthen communication, increase mutual trust, deepen cooperation, and promote the relations between the two countries' armed forces toward further development.³⁵

On the Taiwan issue, Ma Xiaotian reportedly said that the Chinese side appreciates the U.S. side's recent open clarification on opposing Taiwan's "referendum on UN membership." He hoped that the U.S. side will continue to strictly abide by the one-China policy and the three China-U.S. joint communiqués, stop its arms sales to Taiwan, stop sending any wrong signals to Taiwan, and jointly safeguard peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.³⁶

Ma Xiaotian and China's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations

Given Ma's portfolio for foreign military relations and the historically central role played by Chinese military intelligence in its support to UN peacekeeping operations (PKO), it is not surprising that Ma appears to be the point person for Chinese PKO diplomacy. At a China-ASEAN peacekeeping seminar sponsored by the Peacekeeping Operations Office under the Ministry of National Defense held in Beijing on 19 November 2007, attended by representatives from 10 member countries of the United Nations and ASEAN as well as some 100 representatives from China, Ma offered the following views:

First is maintaining and strengthening the UN authority in international security affairs and its leading role in action; second is bringing into play the positive role of regional organizations under the prerequisite of ensuring the UN leading role; third is persisting in peaceful means to resolve disputes; fourth is persisting in the basic peacekeeping principles proven to be effective by practice; fifth is ensuring UN possession of adequate peacekeeping resources and its efforts to continually enhance its peacekeeping ability; and sixth is adopting comprehensive measures to eliminate the root cause of conflicts.³⁷

Ma Xiaotian and China's Participation in Foreign Joint Exercises and Training

Press reporting strongly suggests that Ma Xiaotian is also the PLA's lead official on foreign joint exercises and training. Ma commented on the subject in a January media article, asserting that "joint exercises and training by Chinese and foreign armed forces help deepen understanding and mutual trust among the countries concerned, they deepen interaction and cooperation, and they protect peace and security in the region. China conducts joint military exercises and training with other countries, but it does not form alliances, it does not involve third parties, and it does not threaten any country."³⁸

Ma put these principles into practice during the 19–25 December 2007 joint anti-terrorism training between Chinese and Indian ground forces in Kunming, codenamed "Hand-in-Hand 2007." The exercise was relatively small, involving only 100 troops from each side, but represented the culmination of a series of Sino-Indian exercises that had grown in scale and complexity. On 14 November 2003, China and India conducted a joint search and rescue maritime exercise, codenamed "Dolphin 0311," in the East China Sea near Shanghai. Further progress in these types of activities, however, was stymied by

unresolved border disputes. In April 2005, Premier Wen Jiabao broke the logjam by signing the “Guiding political principle for resolving Sino-Indian border disputes,” which has led to ten subsequent meetings. On 1 December 2005, the two sides held a “Sino-Indian Friendship 2005” joint naval exercise in the Indian Ocean. The following year, the two sides formalized their growing military exchanges with the 29 May 2006 signing of a “Memorandum of Understanding for Exchanges and Cooperation in the Field of Defense” in Beijing. The MOU focused on joint search and rescue and anti-terrorism, and led directly to the December 2006 joint naval search and rescue exercise near Kerala, India.

Chinese media describe one part of the “Hand-in-Hand 2007” exercise that illustrates its objectives. The military drill on Tuesday, the third and also the last stage of the five-day training, began at 7:30 a.m. at a hilly terrain near Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, with the participation of 206 ground troops from the two armies. The scenario posited that 56 “terrorists” from “a certain international terrorism organization” had entered the border area of China and India. They “established” a training base and “intended” to attack a trading port on the border between the two countries. The finale maneuver involved establishing a joint command post, joint battle decision making, and implementation of an anti-terrorism operation before wiping out a group of “terrorists” and rescuing “hostages.” The Chinese and Indian troops broke into the “training camp of the terrorists” at 9:25 a.m. and began to rescue “hostages” at 10:25 a.m. About 10 minutes later, the drill ended with “terrorists” subdued and “hostages” rescued and brought to a safe place.³⁹

At the end of the exercise, Ma and his Indian counterpart, Deputy Chief of Army Staff Susheel Gupta held a final press conference, permitting Ma to summarize his views about Sino-Indian relations and foreign joint exercises. On terrorism:

Nontraditional security issues, such as international terrorism, keep growing in today’s world and the importance and urgency of a joint effort by the international community to cope with the global challenges are increasingly conspicuous. China advocates that the people of all countries join hands in an effort to promote the building of a harmonious world with enduring peace and common prosperity.⁴⁰

On foreign military exercises:

In holding a joint military exercise or training with a foreign army, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army adheres to an independent foreign policy and defensive national defense policy; proceeds from contributing to stability and peace in the world and the region; and has the goals of deepening understanding, mutual trust, exchanges, and cooperation with the country concerned and promoting the comprehensive development of relations with it.⁴¹

On Sino-Indian strategic and military relations:

In recent years, exchanges and cooperation between the Chinese and Indian armies constantly expanded and became even richer in substance. From reciprocal visits by the defense and army leaders to bilateral defense and security consultations and from sending military observers to view and learn from each other's exercises to holding joint maritime search and rescue exercises and joint antiterrorism training of the Armies, all this has demonstrated China and India's efforts and aspirations to jointly deepen exchanges and cooperation between the two armies. . . . China insists on solving problems through negotiation, which requires communication and understanding between the two sides. The joint exercises will play an active role in enhancing understanding and trust and deepening defense exchanges and cooperation. . . . The Chinese side will continue to further develop Sino-Indian bilateral military exchanges and cooperation in the spirits of mutual respect, equal consultation, and cooperation for a win-win result. China and India are important friendly neighbors and both are the largest developing countries in the world. Actively promoting exchanges and cooperation between the Chinese and Indian armies is of momentous significance to developing the strategic cooperative partnership between the two countries that is oriented to peace and prosperity . . . China is not engaged in a military alliance by holding with the country concerned a joint military exercise or training, which does not touch on a third party or threaten any country.⁴²

Analysis

All proper analysis should begin with statements of assumptions and, if necessary, a healthy dose of self-criticism, and both are in order here. Through most of 2007, it appeared as if Chen Xiaogong was systematically working his way up the system, and would eventually ascend from assistant chief of the general staff to replace Xiong Guangkai as deputy chief of the general staff responsible for intelligence and foreign affairs. When Zhang Qinsheng left the deputy chief of staff position in June 2007 to command the Guangzhou Military Region, it was widely expected that Chen would be promoted to deputy. Instead, Lieutenant-General Ma Xiaotian appears to have assumed the job in September 2007, and Major-General Yang Hui has been installed in Chen's former job as head of the military intelligence Second Department. So what is Chen Xiaogong still doing as assistant chief of the general staff, since his custom-tailored job is unavailable for at least a year or two? First, it is clear from Chinese press reporting that Chen is still an active player in foreign military relations after September 2007, attending meetings chaired by senior military officials with Japan,⁴³ India,⁴⁴ Nepal,⁴⁵ and the Philippines.⁴⁶ He has accompanied senior military leaders on foreign trips to Brunei, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia,⁴⁷ and Africa.⁴⁸ As discussed above, Ma Xiaotian over the same time period attended meetings with military officials from Singapore, India, Germany, New Zealand, Afghanistan, and Russia, suggesting no discernable pattern of a geographic

division of labor with Chen. Well-informed sources in Beijing do suggest that Ma is a member of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group, while Chen is a member of the Hong Kong-Macau Leading Small Group. Yet the relationship with the United States is perhaps the greatest mystery. On the one hand, Chen appears to be centrally involved in Sino-U.S. military-to-military relations. For example, Chen met with Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Sedney on 27 February 2008 to talk about the latest round of working meetings on Sino-U.S. mil-mil.⁴⁹ He and Ma Xiaotian both attended Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' meetings with CMC vice-chairmen Xu Caihou,⁵⁰ Cao Gangchuan,⁵¹ and Guo Boxiong,⁵² as well as Gates' meeting with Hu Jintao at the Great Hall of the People.⁵³ On the other hand, there is no media record of Chen attending any of Admiral Keating's China meetings, and Chen certainly did not accompany Ma to the December 2007 Defense Consultative Talks in Washington. Clearly more data are required. For the time being, we are left only with the words of Disraeli: "All is mystery; but he is a slave who will not struggle to penetrate the dark veil."

Notes

¹ Most biographical details are taken from Ma Xiaotian's *Baidu Encyclopedia* entry at <http://baike.baidu.com/view/585699.htm>.

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²² Cao Desheng, "US Admiral's Visit To Boost Ties," *China Daily*, 14 January 2008.

²³ Qiu Jiangbo, "Major General Qian Lihua Provides a Briefing on China-US Defense Consultations, Positively Comments on the Achievements of the Consultations," *Zhongguo xinwen she*, 5 December 2007.

²⁴ Yang Qingchuan, "China-US Vice-Ministerial-Level Defense Consultations Reach Many Points of Consensus," Xinhua, 5 December 2007.

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