

Regular military exchanges between China and the US will help build trust in trying times, writes Zhang Wei

Defending the peace

Although President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) has been on several "working visits" to Washington, his upcoming four-day trip will be his first official "state visit" since becoming president eight years ago. Given the great importance that China has traditionally attached to formalities, Beijing is repeatedly emphasising that fact – and thus demonstrating its high expectations for the event.

China has made an enormous effort to manage every detail of the summit. Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) was sent to Washington to apply the final touches to the preparations. China also resumed high-level bilateral military exchanges, which it suspended a year ago in protest at US arms sales to Taiwan. Dr Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, was warmly welcomed by Hu and other Chinese leaders days before the Washington summit. He even toured the People's Liberation Army's missile corps. Obviously, China wants to cultivate a pleasant atmosphere for Hu's state visit.

Most of the meeting's agenda will be the same as at previous Sino-US summits. President Barack Obama will probably raise issues such as the bilateral trade imbalance, the Chinese government's manipulation of the renminbi's exchange rate, prevention of nuclear proliferation, recent tension on the Korean Peninsula, international co-operation on climate change, and China's poor human rights record.

Hu's reactions to Obama will also be familiar. China will blame the trade imbalance on America's ban on hi-tech exports to China, deny engaging in currency manipulation, call on the US and its allies in East Asia to negotiate with North Korea without preconditions, insist on China's entitlement as a developing country to an exemption from emissions caps on carbon dioxide, and refute criticism of its human rights record.

While neither side is likely to change its current position significantly, a new subject will probably arise at the meeting: China's growing military power, and its influence on the Asian and Pacific region.

Just as China has replaced Japan as the world's second-largest economy, so its military might has grown rapidly in recent years. As a result, the US, as the world's strongest military power, wants to put bilateral military relations on the



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upcoming meeting's agenda, along with bilateral economic relations and international political affairs.

Gates raised this issue during his recent talks with his Chinese counterpart, Liang Guanglie (梁光烈), proposing a mechanism for "strategic dialogue" between US and Chinese military forces, aimed at avoiding potential conflicts that might be caused by mutual misunderstanding and mistrust. But Liang did not commit to such a formal arrangement. Obama will surely raise the issue again at the summit.

But China's attitude towards Sino-US military dialogue remains uncertain. Despite its resistance to a strategic military dialogue with the US, it seems to crave America's attention to its growing military might. A few days before Gates' visit,

official Chinese media published a photo of the J-20 Black Eagle, a fifth-generation stealth, twin-engine fighter aircraft made in China. The media also reported the development of the Dong Feng 21D ballistic missile, described as a "carrier killer".

From America's point of view, China's rapidly growing military power and lack of transparency have become grave concerns. In recent years, China has become increasingly assertive in its territorial disputes with Japan and other countries around the South China Sea. Indeed, Chinese leaders claim the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea as "core" national interests and openly express displeasure at the presence of US naval forces in these waters.

China's behaviour clearly shows its determination to become a regional power – indeed, the only military power in the region. Given the strength and depth of America's alliances within the Asia-Pacific region, tension between US and Chinese military forces has risen.

China believes that it has a legitimate right to increase its military power, given its need to protect its expanding economic interests, which include secure sea routes

for the transport of energy and other goods. The suspicions of China's neighbours, and their moves to establish closer military relations with the US, have made the Chinese government increasingly anxious and frustrated. At the same time, growing nationalist sentiment has put huge pressure on the government to be more aggressive and confrontational.

Putting strategic military dialogue on the US-Sino agenda benefits both sides. For China, it is a symbol of recognition and respect as a regional military power. And, on a practical level, frequent and regular high-level military exchanges between the US and China would greatly increase mutual confidence and trust at a time when their divergent interests might otherwise lead to conflict.

History shows that a rising military power will inevitably clash with an existing military power if they do not have regular, effective dialogue. In that case, China's claim to a peaceful rise would ring hollow. China, the Asia-Pacific region and the world would suffer greatly as a result.

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Obstacle course

The militaries of the world's primary power and its ascendant power are talking again. Or, following US Defence Secretary Dr Robert Gates' mission to Beijing last week, they are at least talking about talking. The months ahead will provide clues to just how intensive the proposed strategic dialogue, covering such sensitive issues as nuclear stockpiles, cyber conflict and North Korea, is ever likely to be. While Gates left Beijing expressing confidence in future engagement, his Chinese counterpart Liang Guanglie (梁光烈) was more blunt. The People's Liberation Army was "studying it", he said.

One early barometer of the relationship will be the long-standing proposal to create cold-war-era protocols covering rules of the road at sea – the kind of quiet understanding that allowed the navies of the then Soviet Union and the US to gingerly circle each other across the globe without mishaps degenerating into something catastrophic.

US admirals have been keen on something similar for several years now as they re-assert their traditional role across the waters of East Asia in the face of China's expanding naval fleet and capabilities.

It will be fascinating to watch on a number of fronts. Firstly, it is intensely practical. Not only are rival Sino-US naval deployments in the Pacific increasing, but so are the activities of other regional navies, in part as a response. Then there are the growing fleets of fishing boats and craft operated by a host of regional countries – coast guard, and oceanographic research and surveillance vessels.

East Asian waters have never been so busy. The South China Sea and waters east of the Philippines are considered particularly sensitive hot spots. Recent years have seen a string of stand-offs, near-misses and collisions among a number of navies – including a Chinese submarine colliding with a sonar array towed by the destroyer, USS John McCain, in the South China Sea.

"We'd encounter a Chinese vessel of some description just about daily now," one US naval officer explained recently. "That's a big increase on just a few years ago.

They might be some kind of civilian craft keeping a watch on us, a naval ship or just commercial vessel going on its way. Sometimes there is routine and friendly communication, and other times it is more of a case of two ships passing in the night."

But there are other more intriguing wrinkles. Such a protocol, of course, is a relic of the cold war. And even as he heads to the US for a state visit, President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) is warning the US against adopting a "cold war mentality" towards China's rise.

Just as Chinese generals repeatedly stress they remain decades behind the US in military primacy and advancement, maybe they fear losing a sense of strategic ambiguity by forging some kind of understanding too early.

But there is another, more striking, potential stumbling block to such an agreement – one that appears to cut to the heart of the differences emerging between Beijing and Washington. That is, simply, what defines international waters and precisely what is allowed within that space?

Washington's maintenance of its traditional strategic alliances and newer friendships means that it must, like other nations, continue to assert its right to full military freedom of passage – and that includes all kinds of surveillance – in everything other than strictly territorial waters, essentially 12 nautical miles from a country's coast. US officials insist the UN's Law of the Sea allows those full freedoms even within a nation's 200 nautical mile economic zones.

Beijing, which has repeatedly objected to US aircraft carriers in the Yellow Sea and oceanographic surveillance in the South China Sea, is forging a different view.

It will not be easily resolved. Gates acknowledged that it would "be impossible to compromise" on such a fundamental issue as freedom of navigation, even as he expressed confidence in the areas "where we could work together".

Greg Torode is the Post's chief Asia correspondent

Voices: Energy

China should make a partner of rival India

Matthew Hulbert

Last year was a bumper year for Chinese resource acquisition. Beijing increased its overseas commercial reserves by a staggering 40 per cent, which is perhaps just as well, given that China is now the world's largest consumer of energy.

The competition for resources has not just come from the West, but closer to home in the form of Indian "national champion" companies. With Asian import dependency set to explode, this is potentially dangerous. Unless compromise can be struck between Beijing and New Delhi as the epicentres of "demand growth" over the next 20 years, the "Chindia" energy race will gather pace. This is a race both countries could do without running.

Security and diversity of supply, and reducing Asian "price premiums", should be the overriding mutual strategic concerns, not unbridled Sino-Indian resource competition.

Co-operation so far has been disappointing. A memorandum of understanding brokered between the two nations in 2006 was designed to cover upstream exploration, oil production and pipeline co-operation, but it never really gained much operational clout. Discreet blocs in Sudan, Iran, Ecuador and Syria were the only assets put on the collective table, which would not really be a problem, aside from the fact China has subsequently wiped the floor with Indian upstream acquisition.

Beijing has massively expanded its presence in Central Asia, grasped any new reserves in Australasia and

Southeast Asia, cemented its position as the leading energy player in West Africa and is fast closing in on the largest producers in the Middle East by building vertical linkages across the energy value chain. Supply agreements with Russia have been struck, while China is calling many of the shots in Latin American production.

That is all worrying for India; New Delhi not only lacks a single oil or gas pipeline hardwiring supplies

Indian access to resources is not only possible, but desirable from China's perspective

into the country in times of crisis, but expects domestic demand to double over the next 20 years.

"Business as usual" is no longer an option for India. Delhi knows this, which explains why it has started talking about a US\$280 billion sovereign fund to bulk up its financial and political pull across producer states.

Should New Delhi be forced to go down the competition path, two things are likely to happen. The first is asset prices will rise.

The second is that conflicts over upstream concessions could exacerbate tensions over the safe flow of hydrocarbons through the Indian Ocean. Unless handled carefully, China's "String of Pearls" strategy could resemble a string of

political landmines relative to Indian interests. All of which points us towards the fundamental question to hand; where should China go from here as the dominant force in the Chindia energy nexus?

The aim of the game is to bring India back into the Chindia energy fold. Rekindling an official energy pact is one option, but it could lead to disappointment if the bar is raised too high, too fast.

Instead, China should signal its intent to increase ad hoc joint ventures with India, but with an important message attached – that Indian access to resources is not only possible, but desirable from Beijing's perspective to let markets play out and gravitationally shift East. That is ultimately what both nations want.

Sharing upstream risk also makes considerable sense, not only to maintain realistic prices, but to stymie contractual wrangling from producer states that are increasingly adept at leveraging competing consumer interests. China's long-term energy interests are far better served by learning to share the baton with India to go the distance, rather than forcing a two-way dash for the finish line.

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Voices: Hong Kong

Ease the load on those who help themselves

Joseph Cheng

When Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen visited Beijing in December to deliver his work report, Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝) repeated his open advice that Tsang should resolve the contradictions in Hong Kong. Tsang later explained that he understood the contradictions to be the problems caused by the inflows of "hot money". Hong Kong people certainly disagreed with the interpretation, and they understood that they could not expect much from the Tsang administration.

In response to the growing rich-poor gap and social discontent, the administration has been making adjustments to its fiscal philosophy. In recent budgets, there have been provisions to please the public: many Hongkongers have come to expect waivers of public housing rents, extra social security payments, utilities subsidies or other help.

Now, the administration faces the daunting task of removing expectations that every budget has to distribute such "candies". In his previous policy address, Tsang invited major business groups to set up a HK\$10 billion Community Care Fund for the needy. But, this will not go far in resolving the exacerbating social contradictions.

A small breakthrough in the same policy address was the new transport subsidy to help low-income families, including some of those who fall outside the more narrow eligibility criteria for CSSA. With the establishment of this precedent, the government could further raise the income ceiling to allow more to benefit from the programme, increase the total fund for the subsidy, and even introduce

other long-term subsidies for low-income families.

Clearly, the broad issue of support for them deserves serious discussion. In the context of globalisation and Hong Kong's increasing economic integration with the mainland, the gap between rich and poor can hardly be expected to narrow.

Today, the fact that many workers accept low wages rather than social security, in the spirit of self-reliance, merits respect and support. The transport subsidy enhances incomes of low-wage families and strengthens people's motivation to remain employed.

In the same vein, subsidies could be given to help low-income families buy school books and stationery for their children, or for them to take part in extra-curricular activities in schools. This will help provide a better learning environment for the children.

Traditionally, Hong Kong people believe they should help only those who cannot help themselves. If a family member has a full-time job, people think there is no real problem, even if he or she earns a low wage. The concept of working poor has only come to the fore in recent years.

The minimum wage will be implemented in May; the initial estimate is that up to 314,000 workers' wages will rise. But some employers have already tried to adopt measures to mitigate any rise. So fewer people than expected may actually benefit. Hence, more emphasis should be placed on measures to help low-income families.

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Voices: Society

No justification for law on blasphemy

Aryeh Neier

The assassination of Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province in Pakistan and an outspoken critic of religious extremism, has focused attention on his country's draconian blasphemy law. Adopted in its present form by General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq's military dictatorship more than 30 years ago, the blasphemy law imposes a mandatory death penalty on anyone convicted of insulting Islam.

The police officer who murdered Taseer apparently acted because the governor recently launched a campaign to repeal the law.

For a long time, blasphemy laws were considered an unfortunate legacy of efforts in England during the religious struggles of the 16th and 17th centuries to suppress deviant interpretations of scripture among Christians. They were spread in South Asia and elsewhere through British colonial rule.

Blasphemy became a global concern in the late 1980s when Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the assassination of the writer Salman Rushdie for his novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

More recently, arguments that it is legitimate to make blasphemy a crime have, disturbingly, gathered increasing support. Those who insist that blasphemy does not warrant the protection otherwise given to freedom of expression often claim that it is a form of hate speech.

It seems important, therefore, to clarify the differences between hate speech and blasphemy. Inasmuch as hate speech involves incitement of imminent violence, it may be made criminal. It is assumed in such circumstances that the violence will be carried out by those who

sympathise with the views of the person inciting hatred.

Ordinarily, however, the circumstances in which blasphemy may lead to violence are entirely different. In those circumstances, the violence is not imminent, and it is carried out by those offended by the speaker's views rather than by sympathisers. And, of course, it is typically carried out on the speaker.

This makes criminalisation of blasphemy a far greater threat to freedom of expression. After all, while a speaker can reasonably take care not to express views that will lead to imminent violence, if listeners have unlimited discretion in determining what causes offence, the speaker can never know what will so offend some people near or far at some time in the future that they will commit violence.

These differences between hate speech and blasphemy are fundamental. It is, therefore, inappropriate to extend the legal restrictions on hate speech to blasphemy. Criminalising blasphemy should be strongly opposed, even by those who believe that there are certain limited circumstances in which it is appropriate to make hate speech a crime.

Of course, such distinctions do not matter much to the religious fanatics who rejoice in the murder of Salman Taseer. Yet those who admire his courage in struggling for freedom of expression ought to see to it that efforts to make blasphemy a crime, or to perpetuate it as a criminal offence, are afforded no legitimacy whatsoever.

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