

US-China military talks fail to resolve tensions

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The annual China-US defence consultative talks (DCT) held in Beijing on December 7 highlighted the tensions between the two countries generated by the Obama administration's aggressive efforts to undercut Beijing's influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Under Secretary of Defence for Policy Michele Flournoy led a team of senior American military officers to meet a Chinese delegation headed by the deputy chief of general staff, Ma Xiaotian. These were the first US-China military talks since Washington announced a \$US5.9 billion arms sale to Taiwan in September to upgrade its F-16A/B fighters—the second major arms sale since January 2010.

Together with Taiwan, reconnaissance activities by US aircraft on China are longstanding sources of friction, but another issue emerged at this DCT meeting. In November, President Obama visited Australia and announced an agreement to station 2,500 Marines near the northern Australian city of Darwin, as well as for greater US access to Australian naval and air bases. The deal was part of Obama's campaign to strengthen military alliances or partnerships throughout Asia, including with Japan, South Korea, India, Vietnam and the Philippines, to strategically encircle China.

The US basing arrangements in Australia have been interpreted in Beijing as part of an aggressive American plan to dominate the Malacca Strait and other key shipping lanes between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. In times of confrontation, the US could choke off vital Chinese supplies of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

Beijing's anger was spelled out at a press briefing on November 30. Defence ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng criticised the strengthening of the US military alliance with Australia as “an expression of

Cold War mentality.” He warned: “We hope that the parties concerned will do more that is beneficial for the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region, and not the contrary.”

After the talks, Flournoy admitted that General Ma had asked whether the increased US-Australian defence cooperation was directed at China. “We assured General Ma and his delegation that the US does not seek to contain China. We do not view China as an adversary,” Flournoy said. She claimed that the US-Australia military build-up was primarily aimed at “non-traditional” security threats, such as terrorism and piracy. Flournoy reportedly told Ma: “The view that ‘conflicts between the US and China are inevitable’ is completely incorrect.”

No one in the Chinese general staff or political leadership accepts such an “explanation.” In a recent piece published in the *People's Daily*, Major General Luo Yuan warned: “The United States is making much of its ‘return to Asia’, has been positioning pieces and forces on China's periphery, and the intent is very clear—this is aimed at China, to contain China.”

The basing arrangements near Darwin are part of a broader US plan, including an \$8 billion expansion of air and naval facilities in Guam and a \$250 million upgrade of the Indian Ocean naval base at Diego Garcia. The US still has extensive forces in Japan and South Korea—eight air bases, three naval bases and 23 army posts, one marine base and a range of logistical and communications facilities.

Washington has created a forward base for its advanced Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore, which is strategically located at one end of the Malacca Strait and adjacent to the South China Sea. The Obama administration has been encouraging South East Asian

countries such as Vietnam and Philippines to forcefully assert their territorial claims in the South China Sea against those of China.

Obama's campaign has led Beijing to take counter-measures. As the US-China military talks were being held in Beijing, Chinese President Hu Jintao called on the navy to "accelerate its transformation and modernisation in a sturdy way, and make extended preparation for military combat."

The Chinese navy is stepping up its training activities in the Western Pacific, and conducted the second sea trial of its first aircraft carrier. An article in the China-based *International Herald Leader* on December 5 called for the building of a "Pacific fleet" because the Pacific Ocean "should not be a private swimming pool" for America.

Another theatre of the strategic rivalry is the Indian Ocean. Half of China's exports, to Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and two third of its imports, especially oil and raw materials, traverse the Indian Ocean. China is also seeking its own military relations there.

Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie visited the Seychelles on December 2. Seychelles has invited China to build a military base there in the name of combatting Somali pirates. In reality, China, which has deployed warships to the area since 2008, is seeking to protect its commercial and strategic interests, especially its supply lines.

China's *World News Journal* on December 9 cited unnamed military sources saying that the Seychelles was a "perfect choice" for China to take its first step in stationing military forces overseas. It wrote: "Seychelles is also close to the biggest American military base in the Indian Ocean—the Diego Garcia base, and is right in the middle of routes for the US forces moving from Diego Garcia to the Middle East and Persian Gulf. If the Chinese forces are stationed there, it will act as a constraint to the US military deployment in the Indian Ocean."

A National Defence University professor told the newspaper that China should proceed cautiously, given its long-standing opposition to stationing forces overseas and to US intervention in the internal affairs of other countries. Rather than referring to a "military base" in the Indian Ocean, it should be described as "commercial" or re-supply facilities. Days later, the Chinese government denied plans for a "military" base

in Seychelles and spoke of supply facilities for its anti-pirate operations in the Indian Ocean.

The *Wall Street Journal* dismissed the denial, pointing to an invitation by the Seychelles Foreign Minister Jean-Paul Adam for China to base military reconnaissance aircraft at its main airport—alongside US drones operating there. The newspaper said China had already constructed or upgraded ports in Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, for "civilian" use, which "could be used to provide Chinese navy ships with supplies and refuge in the event of a regional conflict."

Such references to China's military build-up ignore the fact that Beijing's forces are dwarfed by the US military, not only in hardware and technology, but in a large global network of military bases. Over the past decade, the US has launched two major wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as backing the NATO onslaught on Libya. The Obama administration is now preparing for a vastly more dangerous confrontation with China.



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