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Making Sense of Chinese General's Visit to the US

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China's White Paper 2015, which has been termed as 'China's Military Strategy and issued in May 2015, is indicative of China's ever-increasing concern vis-à-vis the US involvement in the South China Sea dispute and the US' bonhomie with the Southeast Asian countries. Vietnam and the Philippines are cases in point. China, in the White Paper, stated that, "Some external countries are busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China. It is, thus, a long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests".¹ Clearly, this statement was made in the context of the US as China is contesting the US global and regional dominance by openly advocating 'protection of its interests abroad'.²

China-US rivalry was further fuelled when, on May 20, 2015, the US flew a reconnaissance plane (P8-A Poseidon surveillance aircraft) with a television crew on board over areas of the South China Sea. The P8-A was repeatedly warned by a Chinese navy facility to quit the area while the United States, who is a proponent of freedom of navigation, insists that the region is international airspace. Subsequently, the US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter, with an aim to bolster Southeast Asian nation's maritime capabilities, has also proposed to set up 'Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative'. These developments are certainly not suited to China's long-term national interests primarily when it aspires to become a maritime power by developing a 'blue water' navy in the forthcoming years. Though there are several issues of divergence between China and the US, the just concluded visit of General Fan Changlong, China's Vice Chairman of the Central



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Military Commission, to the US makes it evident that, as of now, China is not prepared to have a direct or indirect military confrontation with the US and the latter is still considered as an important defence partner of China.

Notwithstanding the recent differences over the South China Sea and the US' allegations about China's attempts at hacking US federal offices data, high-level military delegation headed by General Fan Changlong visited the US between June 8 and 12, which has made him, the most senior military leader from the Chinese side to visit Washington since the change in Chinese leadership in 2013. While speculations about whether the visit was in line with the routine bilateral military exchanges or is actually of particular significance are rife, it is evident that despite the recent differences in the South China Sea, both sides making concerted efforts to step up the military cooperation. The main purpose of the visit was to enhance mutual trust and strengthening defence cooperation..

Beginning the tour on June 8, 2015, General Fan and his high level delegation visited the Boeing Factory in Seattle followed by three military bases (Fort Hood, Marine Corps Recruit Depot and Naval Air Station, North Island) as well as a nuclear powered super carrier, USS Ronald Reagan. To discuss military cooperation, he also held meetings with the United States National Security Advisor, Susan Rice. During his stay, he held a closed-door meeting with Ashton Carter. Both sides inked an agreement to establish military dialogues which would include establishment of joint exercises, trust mechanisms, Codes of Conduct and an agreement on air-to-air encounters. Another significant agreement to put the China-U.S. Army-to-Army Dialogue Mechanism in place was finalised by General Fan and the U.S. Army Chief of Staff Raymond Odierno.

The military agreements signed between China and the US would prove to be advantageous at the regional as well as global levels in following ways:



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First, while an agreement on the air-to-air encounters would be aimed at preventing future crises, the dialogue mechanism between the armed forces would facilitate military cooperation. Second, although such agreements are rarely respected and are mostly violated in contemporary times, the visit still holds relevance as the visit and the subsequent agreements would help in pacifying situation at the South China Sea front.

Thirdly, the military agreement between China and the US may presage the possibility of the establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea similar to China's declared ADIZ over the East China Sea. On May 31, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, PLA Admiral Sun Jianguo said, "China could declare another ADIZ on the South China Sea if its maritime interests in the Sea are threatened".³ The formation of an ADIZ over the South China Sea would not only add fuel to the fire in the South China Sea territorial spat but also undermine the US' attempts to establish its foothold in the region. Additionally, China and Vietnam have been at loggerheads with each other in recent times as China is constructing artificial islands in the disputed sea and both China and Vietnam are involved in the process of reclaiming land.

While China has tried to alleviate the apprehensions of the neighbouring countries by stating that these are not more than peaceful services of marine search and rescue, disaster prevention and reduction and navigation safety, the other parties to the conflict claim that China's moves are mere attempts to extend its area of operation and strengthen its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Moreover, the television crew aboard the American aircraft alleges that the islands host an early warning radar, military barracks, a watchtower and a runway- all of which can only have military significance.⁴ However, as far as the ADIZ over the South China Sea dispute is concerned, given that the stakes in the South China Sea are much higher than that in the East China Sea where China is locked in



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dispute with just one country, Japan, these agreements would help minimising the possibilities of China taking such a step in the near future.

Whether China will establish ADIZ over the South China Sea and there will be escalation in the conflict or cooperation would prevail remains to be seen. Nevertheless, one factor clearly stands out and that is, the South China Sea will be a major factor in China-US bilateral relations in the years to come. General Fan's U.S. visit comes as a prelude to the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to the US which is scheduled later this year. It could merely be part of routine bilateral exchanges and is just the forebearer to the visit of the Chinese President this year. Even so, it is merely aimed at minimising the number of irritants that crop up in the relationship between the two countries. However, what it does signal though, is that President Xi Jinping's visit will have definite ramifications in the defence arena for both countries.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

1 For details on China's White papers on China's Military Strategy, visit, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>, accessed on June 1, 2015.

2 Srikanth Kondapalli, "Why India Must Pay Attention to China's Defence Plans", *Rediff*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/why-india-must-pay-attention-to-chinas-defence-plans/20150602.htm>, accessed on June 10, 2015.

3 Edward Wong, "China Says It Could Set Up Air Defense Zone in South China Sea", *New York Times*, May 31 2015 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/01/world/asia/china-says-it-could-set-up-air-defense-zone-in-south-china-sea.html> Accessed on 15 June 2015

4 Jim Sciutto, "China warns U.S. surveillance plane", *CNN*, May 27, 2015 at <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/20/politics/south-china-sea-navy-flight/> Accessed on June 15, 2015.
