

Schiffer Speaks at Center, Calls Chinese Military Expansion “Natural”

On July 27, 2011, the Center for the National Interest hosted Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asian Affairs Michael Schiffer for a luncheon discussion of China’s military modernization and its impact on U.S.-China relations. U.S. Institute of Peace President Richard Solomon introduced Schiffer and called attention to the growing role of the People’s Liberation Army in the cross-Pacific relationship. Solomon said that the PLA’s mistrust of the United States has led to neglect of many opportunities for cooperation. Recent developments in the PLA suggest independence from Communist Party control, exacerbated by current generations’ weak ties to the PLA in comparison to their revolutionary forebears. Solomon remarked that provocative actions like the unveiling of the J-20 low observable fighter prototype during U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ recent visit and the demonstration of anti-satellite capabilities have set a tone inconsistent with that pursued by official leadership, raising questions about the PLA’s place in the Chinese system.

In his on the record remarks, Schiffer noted that managing the U.S.-China relationship can be “quite challenging,” especially in areas of military security, but the U.S. believes that the growth of Asia, and in particular the growth of China, will create great opportunities alongside new challenges. The U.S., he said, is an Asia-Pacific nation deeply invested in the region and its institutions, and China is at the fulcrum of both regional prosperity and regional security. Schiffer repeatedly stated that China owes its growth to American global leadership, as this has created a favorable economic and security environment for prosperity. Thus, the U.S. welcomes a “strong, responsible, and prosperous China” that plays a “constructive” role in regional and global institutions. Schiffer said that the U.S. has three goals for its relationship with China: it wants to maximize opportunities for cooperation and strengthen regional institutions and mechanisms while encouraging China to abide by the international norms that allowed its rise.

Unfortunately, said Schiffer, in spite of rosy joint statements and significant progress in many other areas of the U.S.-China relationship, military-to-military cooperation has not always been easy to attain. However, this cooperation would be mutually valuable and would aid in continuing the region’s peace and prosperity. Schiffer emphasized that the U.S. does not view China as an adversary—it realizes that even peacefully rising powers will naturally need to carry out expansion of their military capabilities. Had China not done this, it would have been the first country in history to choose such a path.

However, Schiffer continued, with expanded power comes expanded responsibility. On some fronts, China’s military has handled this responsibility admirably. Its humanitarian relief efforts, contributions to security off the coast of West Africa, and assistance to international peacekeeping missions have been “encouraging manifestations” of China taking the constructive role the U.S. has supported. Nevertheless, the lack of transparency in the growth and modernization of China’s military raises questions about China’s long-term goals for the region, and without transparency regional players can only guess at goals by the examination of China’s new capabilities. China continues to develop arms that would be highly useful in a confrontation with Taiwan, even though cross-Strait relations have been improving. Schiffer drew particular attention to the development of the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile, which he said “raises worries” about China’s intent.

Schiffer was less concerned by China's carrier program, noting that it is not especially useful for a confrontation with Taiwan, but that it does fit a trend of growing Chinese power projection capabilities that will naturally yield expanded contact with U.S. military forces in the region. Schiffer was adamant that China must take more care to follow longstanding operational safety procedures. He noted that Chinese interceptors have been engaging in behavior similar to that which caused the 2001 EP-3 incident, in which a Chinese interceptor collided with an American reconnaissance aircraft, and that this behavior endangers the lives of aircrews on both sides. He asserted that neither country's interests would be served by a military incident of this nature, and that it is risky to put the power to create such an incident in the hands of pilots.

Schiffer suggested that the PRC's participation in various regional forums has been excellent, but that the region remains concerned by China's ambiguous intentions in places like the South China Sea. In this context, he said, it is more important than ever to establish a joint code of conduct on activity in the area.

Schiffer stated that the greatest source of misunderstanding between the U.S. and China has been arms sales to Taiwan. However, this misunderstanding does not need to happen. U.S. policy towards Taiwan is predictable, Schiffer said, as it is based on federal legal requirements and longstanding practices. China's buildup of arms across the Strait also naturally enters into the American calculus, as does China's refusal to renounce the use of force in issues related to Taiwan. The U.S. thus sees arms sales as a "necessary enabler of stability" in the cross-Strait relationship, and accordingly sees no contradiction between providing military assistance to Taiwan and engaging in deep cooperation with China.

Schiffer added that direct military-to-military ties have been shaky. He suggested that direct ties are most important during times of crisis, and that they thus must not be seen as a reward or favor to be traded for compliance in other areas of the relationship. Military dialogue is not an element of only the most exceptional international relationships—it is the "most basic expectation" of good relations.

Indeed, American involvement in the region is not intended purely to balance China's growing influence. Like China, America has permanent interests in the region, manifested in treaties and other ties that date to the time of our founding (and, Schiffer noted, much prior to the establishment of the PRC). America's interest in the region is not hegemony, but engagement grounded in alliances, economic interests, and many other things that are ends in themselves. Peace, said Schiffer, has lasted due to common interests and common norms in Asia. The U.S. and China must forge a solid military-to-military relationship to maximize mutual interest, even in times of strained relations. Without this, the region's peace and prosperity becomes fragile.

Summary by John Allen Gay