

Vì Sao Trung Quốc Sẽ Không Đối Thoại Với Quân Đội Hoa Kỳ?

Why China Won't Talk With America's Military

Tác giả: YUN SUN (Tôn Văn)

Foreign Affairs

Lược thuật: Hoàng Việt Hải

YUN SUN is Director of the China Program at the Stimson Center.

Research Assisant

25/7/2023



Một máy bay chiến đấu J-16 của Trung Quốc bay gần máy bay trinh sát điện tử RC-135 của Không quân Mỹ ở Biển Đông vào ngày 31 tháng 5. Ảnh: Hải quân Hoa Kỳ

Hoa Kỳ đã yêu cầu một cuộc gặp giữa Bộ trưởng Quốc phòng Trung Quốc và Bộ trưởng Quốc phòng Hoa Kỳ để giải quyết những căng thẳng đang gia tăng ở Biển Đông và Eo biển Đài Loan. Đáp lại, Trung Quốc đã từ chối yêu cầu này, với lý do Hoa Kỳ đã áp đặt lệnh trừng phạt Bộ trưởng Quốc phòng Trung Quốc. Nhưng Tôn Văn, Giám đốc Chương trình Trung Quốc tại Trung tâm Stimson, cho rằng việc Trung Quốc từ chối tham gia liên lạc quân sự với Hoa Kỳ là một tính toán chiến lược. Trung Quốc muốn quân đội Hoa Kỳ cảm thấy bất an và không chắc chắn về các hành động của Trung Quốc, với hy vọng rằng điều này sẽ khiến Hoa Kỳ phải thận trọng và giảm hiện diện quân sự trong khu vực. Trung Quốc không muốn gây chiến nhưng sẵn sàng tham gia vào chính sách bên miệng hổ chiến tranh và chấp nhận rủi ro để đạt được mục tiêu của mình. Các nhà hoạch định chính sách Trung Quốc tin rằng một cuộc khủng hoảng quân sự

có thể giúp họ thiết lập các quy tắc cơ bản mà Hoa Kỳ sẽ tuân theo khi hoạt động gần Trung Quốc.

Tác giả nhấn mạnh Trung Quốc không phải là không biết lợi ích của quan hệ quân đội với quân đội trong việc giảm căng thẳng và ngăn ngừa xung đột. Trên thực tế, trong những tháng cuối cùng của chính quyền Trump, Trung Quốc thường xuyên tìm đến Hoa Kỳ để thảo luận về quản lý khủng hoảng vì sợ rằng Trump sẽ gây chiến vì vấn đề Đài Loan. Tuy nhiên, Trung Quốc cũng coi một số cuộc khủng hoảng là cơ hội để thúc đẩy lợi ích của mình và khai thác những nhượng bộ từ Hoa Kỳ trong mục tiêu hạn chế Hoa Kỳ hoạt động quân sự ở Tây Thái Bình Dương

Việc Trung Quốc sẵn sàng chấp nhận rủi ro hơn khiến Hoa Kỳ gặp nhiều khó khăn trong việc hồi phục kênh đối thoại giữa quân đội với quân đội. Hoa Kỳ có thể buộc Trung Quốc tham gia đàm phán bằng cách tỏ ra quyết liệt hơn, nhưng điều này sẽ khiến khu vực trở nên bất ổn hơn và có thể không thuyết phục được Trung Quốc tham gia một cách có ý nghĩa. Một lựa chọn khác, Hoa Kỳ có thể nhượng bộ một số yêu cầu của Trung Quốc, nhưng điều này sẽ có thể khiến Trung Quốc cảm thấy được tưởng thưởng cho nước cờ nguy hiểm của mình.

Do đó, hiện tại, điều tốt nhất Hoa Kỳ có thể làm là làm rõ với Trung Quốc về khái niệm hành vi quân sự không an toàn và làm cho các mối quan hệ dễ dự đoán hơn, trong khi chờ tính toán của Bắc Kinh có thể thay đổi trước hội nghị thượng đỉnh giữa nhà lãnh đạo Trung Quốc Tập Cận Bình và Tổng thống Joe Biden vào cuối năm nay, hoặc do các yếu tố đối nội như cuộc bầu cử Đài Loan có thể giúp mở đường cho các cuộc đàm phán quân sự trong tương lai. Tuy nhiên, tác giả cho rằng Trung Quốc sẽ tiếp tục đẩy xa những giới hạn cho tới khi Hoa Kỳ rút khỏi khu vực.

Why China Won't Talk With America's Military

Beijing Sees Silence as Leverage

By [Yun Sun](#)

July 21, 2023



Military delegates outside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, March 2023

Noel Celis / Reuters

This past spring, the United States requested a meeting between Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. The two were both going to attend the Shangri-La Dialogue—an annual security conference hosted in Singapore in June—where the United States’ and China’s defense chiefs traditionally speak with each other. This year’s gathering was an especially important opportunity for these officials to talk directly, given the growing frequency and intensity of China’s unsafe and provocative behavior in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. At the end of May, for example, China flew a fighter jet right in front of a U.S. reconnaissance plane. The two sides needed (and need) a way to lower tensions and create mechanisms that could diffuse any crisis.

But [China](#) turned down the United States’ request. Washington, the Chinese government pointed out, had sanctioned Li over China’s procurement of Russian weapons systems in 2018. Li would not meet with U.S. officials until those restrictions were lifted.

The decision was disappointing, but it was not a surprise. Since August 2022, China has suspended a series of talks with the United States among major military commanders and defense policy coordinators. The freeze was announced after then U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [visited](#) Taiwan, a trip that outraged China’s leadership. But the reason this rift has

endured goes deeper. China has refused to have its military communicate with the United States' because it believes that silence is a form of leverage. It knows that Washington is concerned about the lack of contact, and it likes that the U.S. military feels uneasy. Beijing wants Washington to worry about China's provocative military acts, to ask for reassurance, and then not receive it. By depriving U.S. officials of security and certainty, Beijing hopes that it can pressure them to decrease the United States' military footprint in the waters and airspace near China.

Stay informed.

In-depth analysis delivered weekly.

Despite its propensity for aggression in its neighborhood, China does not want to start a war. But Beijing does not seem to be worried that its brinkmanship will provoke one at this time. In China's view, the risk of a military conflict is low, primarily because the [United States](#) is preoccupied with Ukraine and therefore unwilling to open another front in the western Pacific. And although it does not want actual conflict, Beijing appears willing to court the possibility of war. In fact, some Chinese policymakers believe that a military crisis could help them establish ground rules the United States will follow when operating in China's periphery. The fact that Beijing is more willing to take such risks makes it hard for Washington to restart military-to-military conversations. The United States could try to force the Chinese military to talk by becoming more belligerent itself—for example, carrying out more patrols or conducting more drills in the western Pacific. But such moves would make the region more unstable, and they still might fail to persuade the Chinese military to have meaningful conversations with its U.S. counterpart. Washington could instead give in to some of Beijing's demands in exchange for better lines of communication, but that would reward China's dangerous posturing. For now, then, the best the United States can do is to clarify what military behavior both countries believe is unsafe, work to make ties more predictable, and wait for Beijing's calculus to change ahead of a major summit between the Chinese leader [Xi Jinping](#) and U.S. President Joe Biden later this year.

SILENT TREATMENT

China's military policies are not borne of ignorance. Like Washington, Beijing knows that military-to-military relations can lower tensions and prevent the outbreak of conflicts. That is why, during the last six months of U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, China frequently reached out to the United States in the hope of discussing crisis management. The Chinese feared that Trump would launch a war over Taiwan to secure reelection, and so top People's Liberation Army officials repeatedly spoke with their U.S. counterparts. In fact, China was so worried that the PLA chief Li Zuocheng had two phone calls with U.S. General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Both times, Milley assured Li that the United States would not suddenly launch an attack.

Although Beijing wants to prevent unwanted crises, it does not always see such risky scenarios as intrinsically bad. Chinese officials believe they can use certain crises to advance China's interests. At a time when China does not believe the United States will start a hot conflict, it sees brinkmanship as a good way to extract concessions, including meaningful changes to U.S. military activities in the Chinese periphery.

Some Chinese officials want to leave their U.S. counterparts in the dark.

Beijing has reason to think it might get them. When China insisted that the United States lift sanctions on Li, the defense minister, as a condition for him meeting with Austin, [Biden](#) said his administration was mulling it over. The State Department walked back his comments, and Beijing then quickly rejected the meeting.

Beijing's goal, however, is not always to accumulate more negotiating power. Sometimes, Chinese officials simply want to avoid military-to-military relations altogether and leave their U.S. counterparts in the dark. Beijing thinks that such dialogue serves as a guardrail or a safety net that allows the United States to keep conducting military activity in the western Pacific without fear of repercussions. In China's view, then, an open line of communication on military matters actively abets Washington's behavior, allowing the United States a greater freedom of action. Preventing dialogue, by contrast, might keep the United States on its toes, depriving U.S. officials of knowledge about what China's redlines are—and therefore making them more cautious.

Ultimately, to manage crises and prevent conflicts, China believes the United States must stop talking and start eliminating what Beijing sees as the source of tension: Washington's presence in the western Pacific. As Li said at Shangri-La, when asked about China's provocative behavior, "Why are the foreign warships and warplanes always circling around China's territorial waters and airspace to begin with?"

LIVING ON THE EDGE

For U.S. policymakers—and anyone else concerned with global security—China's diminishing aversion to risk is alarming. Beijing may see its strategy as low risk and high reward, but if the United States does not back down, the result could be skirmishes and unintended escalation. China and the United States, for instance, might experience a more dangerous version of the 2001 EP-3 incident, when two Chinese military planes collided with a U.S. spy plane over the South China Sea. At the time, Beijing and Washington had better relations, and they resolved the crash peacefully. But if a similar incident happened today, and the two militaries were not on speaking terms, they might stumble into conflict.

Beijing and Washington do have a dedicated hotline for crisis communications, and if another EP-3 incident occurred, the United States would likely try to use it. But when U.S. officials attempted to reach Chinese officials via the hotline this past February after finding a Chinese spy balloon in U.S. airspace, Beijing did not pick up. China, it seems, views answering the hotline the same way it views military-to-military conversations: as a sign of weaknesses and an indication that it is willing to deescalate, which defeats the entire purpose of brinkmanship.

And Chinese policymakers are getting quite comfortable with sitting on the precipice. Indeed, within China, there is an increasingly popular (if fatalistic) view that a military crisis may be inevitable, and perhaps even desirable. With all the competition in the western Pacific, more and more Chinese strategists are convinced that Beijing and Washington need to reach an impasse akin to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962—an event that could bring the two powers to the brink of a war—before they can sit down and negotiate the terms of their coexistence.

Chinese policymakers are comfortable sitting on the precipice.

The United States simply has no good options for prompting a conversation with China's military. But there are still a few ways that U.S. policymakers can work with their Chinese counterparts to make military relations more predictable, if not more cordial. Instead of criticizing each other, the two sides could focus on specific concerns where they might be able to come to a more constructive understanding. If China and the United States cannot agree on what "safe" maneuvers are in air and sea military encounters, perhaps they can at least discuss and agree on what kind of military behavior should be defined as "unsafe."

And U.S. policymakers should remember that China's risk tolerance may not remain so elevated forever. In fact, Chinese officials could grow warier as soon as next year, especially depending on what happens in the planned Taiwanese elections. Polling suggests that the current Vice President William Lai has a strong chance to win in the election, a victory that would start the third consecutive term in office of the Democratic Progressive Party, a party that Beijing sees as wanting to formalize Taiwan's de facto independence. A triumph for Lai could prompt punitive military actions from China, which would inevitably incur a response from the United States. As China seeks to manage the escalation of this conflict and appeal to the United States to rein in Taiwan, it might then see the utility of military-to-military talks and to a new round of dialogue with U.S. counterparts about crisis management.

In the interim, however, the United States will have to understand that China has a higher tolerance for risk. Some lines of communication remain open. Xie Feng, the Chinese ambassador to the United States, had an unusual meeting with U.S. defense officials at the Pentagon in July. In advance of Biden's meeting with Xi in November, China might see the resumption of military-to-military talks as one way to pave the way for a smooth summit. None of this engagement, however, fundamentally changes China's goal, which is to limit U.S. military activities in the Chinese periphery. Until the United States backs away from the region, Beijing will keep pushing the envelope.

YUN SUN is Director of the China Program at the Stimson Center.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com>