



# Calming the Seas for Sino-U.S. Relations

By Lan Xinzhen



China joined this year's U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) maritime exercise, held from June 26 to August 1. Over 40 ships and submarines, more than 200 aircraft and 25,000 personnel from 22 countries are taking part in the naval exercise off the coast of Hawaii. Ships sent by China include the missile destroyer *Haikou* and the missile frigate *Yueyang*, two of the main warships of the Chinese Navy, along with the supply ship *Qiandaohu* and the hospital ship *Peace Ark*. Other Chinese forces include two helicopters, a commando unit and a diving unit.

This marks the first time China has been invited to participate in the biennial naval drill. At this critical juncture, while distrust is building between China and the United States, it is of crucial importance that the two meet each other halfway over military cooperation. The joint exercise shows that collaboration remains the best way to enhance mutual understanding, improve transparency, and avoid misconceptions in bilateral relations.

Both sides have shown positive signs of rekindling friendly bilateral ties through this drill. The Chinese Navy has put a lot of emphasis on the exercise, as exemplified by the number of vessels dispatched. It regards the drill as an important step in building a new type of great-power relationship, and is seeking to increase the transparency of its national military forces so as to improve relations with Washington and its south Pacific allies. Maintaining world peace and regional stability is among China's key goals.

The U.S. military also wants to build closer ties with its Chinese counterpart. As China's economic and military might grows, the United States will require China's aid in resolving international disputes, such as supervising the nuclear capabilities of Iran and North Korea. Frequent contact between the two militaries is in America's national interests.

Building military ties also helps move toward a new era in the great-power relationship, one aimed at avoiding and addressing massive conflicts between a rising China and an already powerful America. While economic interests of the two are increasingly intertwined and trade between them has long yielded fruitful results, military ties have remained the most vulnerable among various areas of collaboration. Weak military relations could hamper future economic interactions; it is in the best interests of both countries and their militaries to use this exercise to strengthen their unique partnership.

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Sino-U.S. military relations have received wide attention from the international community as well. High-level naval officers from the 22 participating countries attended the June 30 RIMPAC opening press conference hosted by U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Harry Harris in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The first six questions reporters posed to Harris were about China's participation, as those present at the conference were seemingly more interested in Sino-U.S. military relations than the exercise. Harris had to remind the journalists that many nations besides China and the United States were also involved in the drill.

Thus, international society, too, is concerned with Sino-American military relations. A sound relationship between the armed forces of the world's largest developing country and largest developed country is actually a boon to world peace and development.

Obstacles, however, still remain. Since the two established a formal diplomatic relationship more than 30 years ago, both sides have experienced turbulence over a lack of strategic trust. Issues such as U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, cybersecurity, and maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea have all hindered progress in military relations.

At the sixth round of the China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing on July 9, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that when China and the United States can correctly interpret each other's strategic intentions, they can then adopt proper policies needed for successful bilateral relations. Any mistaken interpretations will only continue to affect bilateral ties.

Thus, China's involvement in this year's maritime exercise indicates that the two countries have taken another important step toward military cooperation. After the RIMPAC drill, the ships *Haikou*, *Yueyang* and *Qiandaohu* will make a goodwill visit to San Diego, California, in an effort to further improve Sino-U.S. naval relations.

Actions like this can bolster positive ties between the two countries. It is hoped that China and the United States can use this opportunity as a springboard toward greater cooperation, between militaries and otherwise, while both playing constructive roles on the world stage. ■

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