TRANSPARENCY AND OPACITY: THE U.S.-CHINESE STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

As the United States has pursued a strategy of engagement in response to China's rise, bilateral relations have steadily increased with one notable exception—the U.S.-Chinese security relationship. In many respects, this is puzzling. Not only have military-to-military ties failed to develop along Washington's expectations, but deeper bilateral military engagement should offer China valuable exposure to the powerful U.S. military. Rather than attribute disappointments in operational exchanges to cultural variables, I argue that over the course of emerging security competition between a rising power and an established power, the established power rationally seeks transparency while the rising power is incentivized to resist it.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to Sherrina.

Many thanks,
ADAM W. GREER
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INTRODUCTION

As the United States has pursued a strategy of engagement in response to China's rise, bilateral relations have steadily increased with one notable exception—the U.S.-Chinese security relationship. In many respects, this is puzzling. Not only have military-to-military ties failed to develop along Washington's expectations, but deeper bilateral military engagement should offer China valuable exposure to the powerful U.S. military, and steady defense ties should serve both sides by calming regional tensions. Instead, several decades of policy makers and military practitioners have expressed frustrations over military-to-military ties.¹ Although both sides have offered explanations as to why the relationship has struggled, available explanations are generally over determined or incomplete. Inevitably, explanations attribute ups and downs to cultural dissimilarity, disagreement over Taiwan, or bureaucratic limitation.

Although many of these views provide explanatory insight, they overlook important underlying strategic incentives. I argue that the U.S.-Chinese bilateral security relationship is best explained in the context of power competition. By selectively resisting, accepting, and shaping bilateral military ties, China derives maximum utility from a position of strategic ambiguity—an asymmetric power balancing strategy preferred by rising powers within a framework of transparency cooperation and competition. As long as bilateral competitive tensions resulting from shifting power dynamics persist, comprehensive military exchange will likely be shaped by competing preferences for information transparency and opacity.

THE PUZZLE

Why has China resisted U.S. efforts to build transparent, collaborative military ties? Strong U.S.-Chinese bilateral security ties, after all, are not unprecedented. Security cooperation emerged as early as the 1970s when Nixon seized the Sino-Soviet split as an opportunity to balance the Soviet influence.\textsuperscript{2} Although military ties were not formalized until 1980, bilateral relations developed steadily out of shared security concerns rather than economic necessity or ideological affinity. Defense cooperation quickly expanded to include arm sales, exchanges, naval port calls, and even a 1987 U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team visit.\textsuperscript{3}

As Cold War tensions subsided, however, so did the impetus to maintain steady military-to-military contacts.\textsuperscript{4} By the time ties were resumed in 1993 following fallout over the 1989 Tiananmen Crackdown, the security relationship had taken on an entirely different character. Although the U.S. remained interested in military relations, contacts have been suspended six times in the last thirty-five years despite steady economic and political ties.

This apparent contradiction has led senior officials in multiple administrations to comment on the weakness of U.S.-Chinese military-to-military relations. Dennis Wilder, a former Bush Administration National Security Council (NSC) Asia advisor, observed that the "Chinese military, of all the elements in China, has been the least willing to engage in direct relationships with the United States and the neighbors in East Asia."\textsuperscript{5} Similarly, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates voiced his frustrations over what he characterized as an "on-again, off-again relationship" at the 2010 Shangri-La Asia Security Conference, arguing that "there is a real

cost to the absence of military-to-military relations.\textsuperscript{6} More recently, Tom Donilon, National Security Advisor for the President, observed that the military-to-military relationship remained a "critical deficiency in our current relationship."\textsuperscript{7} Frustrations are not only felt at senior levels of government; military practitioners have reported that military contacts are often superficial and consist of very little substantive exchange.\textsuperscript{8}

The most common explanation for ups and downs in the bilateral security relationship has been disagreement over Taiwan.\textsuperscript{9} Of the six times military relations have been suspended in the last three and a half decades, three are attributable to disagreements over Taiwan.\textsuperscript{10} However, attributing poor relations solely to issues surrounding Taiwan fails to explain why other aspects of the larger bilateral relationship have been left unimpeded, or why military exchange flourished in the 1980s despite on-going disagreements over Taiwan. Additionally, suspensions in military ties have not altered U.S. policies towards arms sales to Taiwan, suggesting that China’s continued use of the military relationship as a lever to encourage U.S. policy change is ineffective at best and irrational at worst.\textsuperscript{11}

Others have suggested difficulties in the relationship can be attributed to cultural dissimilarity.\textsuperscript{12} Cultural explanations, although interesting, fall short of addressing underlying causes and fails to account for periods of relatively smooth U.S.-Chinese military-to-military

\textsuperscript{6}Robert M. Gates, “Remarks Delivered at Shangri-La Asia Security Conference” (Singapore: Department of Defense, 2010).
\textsuperscript{7}Tom Donilon, “The United States and the Asia Pacific in 2013,” in Remarks Delivered to the Asia Society (New York, NY, 2013).
\textsuperscript{11}Gates, “Remarks Delivered at Shangri-La Asia Security Conference.”
interaction. Importantly, cultural explanations fail to address why both sides have successfully sustained military ties with culturally dissimilar nations.13

Others contend that PLA organizational limitations curb its ability to engage in military-to-military relations. Not only does the PLA have a relatively small foreign relations element, it lacks well-developed classification controls. Although organizational variables surely detract from the PLA's capability to comfortably engage with foreign powers, organizational explanations do not explain why the PLA has not developed the applicable capabilities despite decades of growth in other areas, nor do they explain why the PLA is sometimes willing and able to engage with some nations.14

THEORY OF TRANSPARENCY COMPETITION AND COLLABORATION

China's behavior is a rational bargaining response by a rising power in the context of great power competition. Over the course of emerging security competition between a rising power and an established power, the established power seeks transparency while the rising power is incentivized to resist it. Competition—a key component to this argument—is a clear element in the modern U.S.-Chinese relationship.15 Origins of modern U.S.-Chinese competition can be traced to the Korean War—or the "War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea," as it is commonly referred to in China—when Mao ordered the PLA to blunt Allied advances on the Korean Peninsula. Although U.S.-Chinese relations progressed relatively smoothly during periods of unquestioned U.S. preeminence—particularly during the Sino-Soviet splits—worries

14Ibid.
began to surface as differential rates of military and economic growth between the U.S. and
China became apparent in the mid-1980s.

Power transition theories contend that prerequisites for conflict are met when nations
dissatisfied in the international status quo possess sufficient national power to challenge and
overtake existing power centers.\textsuperscript{16} If this is the case, differential rates of growth in national
power may signal that the U.S. and China may be on a collision course. China's dissatisfaction
with the international status quo seems evident—especially in regards to Taiwan and the South
China Sea—leaving analysts wondering if China could cultivate enough national power to upset
the status quo and bring about desired revisions. Many seem to think so, and by the early-1990's,
scholars began to predict that Asia would be the site for the world's next major conflict.\textsuperscript{17}

Although power transition theory offers an interesting narrative of historic conflict,
efforts to empirically predict future power transitions face two layers of compounding
complexity. First, static indicators of national power are often overdetermined, unreliable, and
hopelessly interrelated.\textsuperscript{18} Second, forecasters face the added challenge of drawing trends from
imperfect data to predict dynamic, long-run power development—a critical task in the case of a
rising power. If rising powers eschew transparency, as I argue is the case, these two layers of
complexity further combine to produce broad, systemic uncertainties in the international system,
resulting in polarized debates about the ultimate trajectory and outcomes of China's rise.\textsuperscript{19} Even
if China does not prove to be a "full-time revisionist," but rather just a "part-time spoiler," as

some international relations scholars have predicted, deeply embedded U.S. regional interests and alliances necessitate some degree of competition as China seeks greater regional influence. As Even Montgomery argues, "because of its expansive interests and extensive reach, the United States represents the chief impediment to any rising power, whether that power wants to reorder the international system or elevate its position within its own region." As the Chinese seek greater influence over its neighbors—such as Korea, Japan, or ASEAN nations—it must do so through indirect competition with the United States.

From a hegemon's point of view, uncertainty stemming from information opacity is problematic. Although a hegemon may currently enjoy static material advantage, strategists rely on accurate information to effectively allocate and leverage material advantages into dynamic (forward-looking) deterrence mechanisms to counter emerging areas of competition. When a hegemon cannot chart the trajectory of a rising state's power, it risks the possibility of being caught off guard by the unexpected. By contrast, whereas a hegemon benefits from information transparency so it can produce dynamically efficient security systems, rising powers rely on information opacity to develop effective asymmetric capabilities to hedge against established powers in lieu of raw material advantage.

To a hegemon, transparency has another, related benefit. By making its own capability and cost data more transparent, hegemons may deter smaller powers from embarking on competitive projects. By comparison, information opacity conceals a rising power's weakness, which in turn acts as a "deterrence-by-doubt" mechanism to deter potential coercive hegemon

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behavior.\textsuperscript{23} These differing aspiration levels for information transparency combine to create an interesting side-effect: because hegemons aspire for information transparency while rising powers eschew it, a rising power may leverage a hegemon's desire for transparency—and its fear of uncertainty—to extract concessions from the hegemon.

Figure 1: Contrasted Preferences for Information Transparency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why hegemons prefer transparency</th>
<th>Why rising powers prefer opacity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Market Research</strong>&lt;br&gt;Transparency allows a hegemon to efficiently allocate raw material advantage to counter developing threats.</td>
<td><strong>Periods of Strategic Opportunity</strong>&lt;br&gt;Opacity allows rising powers time to develop asymmetric capabilities by sacrificing static allocative efficiency for dynamic allocative efficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Militaries-of-Scale</strong>&lt;br&gt;By revealing strength, hegemons deter would-be challengers from entering into security competition.</td>
<td><strong>Strategic Bluffing</strong>&lt;br&gt;Lack of transparency conceals weakness, thereby deterring coercive hegemon behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low-Cost Intel</strong>&lt;br&gt;Transparency is less costly than attempting to gather information from secretive competitors.</td>
<td><strong>A Peek for a Price</strong>&lt;br&gt;Opacity allows rising power to extract concessions from the hegemon in exchange for limited information.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Achieving Dynamic Efficiency through Information Transparency

U.S. defense spending has historically matched threat perceptions, making accurate data on emerging adversarial capabilities and intentions essential to maintaining competitive defense acquisition and innovation cycles.\textsuperscript{24} Although the United States has strived to maintain


dominance in all areas of emerging competition, rapid military advancements inevitably produce, as the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work puts it, "an interactive clash, a two-sided duel—action followed by reaction."\textsuperscript{25} To put it simply, enduring military dominance requires near-constant reinvention.

In lieu of total transparency, Washington has pursued deeper military ties as part of efforts to understand China's developing capabilities and intentions. Upon resuming ties in 1993, Secretary of Defense William Perry argued that "by engaging the PLA directly, we can help promote more openness in the Chinese national security apparatus, including its military institutions."\textsuperscript{26} Successive administrations have added support to this objective. Secretary Gates widely pushed for a strategic dialogue to "help us understand each other's military intentions and programs batter."\textsuperscript{27} Similarly, DOD objectives for military contacts include "increasing U.S. understanding of China's military capabilities and intentions," and encouraging greater Chinese "openness and transparency."\textsuperscript{28} PACOM advocates a "more transparent, enduring, stable, and reliable military-to-military relationship" to compensate for "China's growing military capabilities coupled with its lack of transparency."\textsuperscript{29} This approach has been endorsed by some practitioners. Two former attachés argued that “the most effective way to ascertain developments in China’s military and defense policies is to have face-to-face contact at multiple levels over an extended period of time”; even if the usefulness of military contacts is limited—as is often

\textsuperscript{27}Gates, Duty: \textit{Memoirs of a Secretary at War}, 195.
\textsuperscript{29}“USPACOM Strategy,” 2014.
argued—"the United States has learned, and can continue to learn, much about the PLA through its long-term relationship."\textsuperscript{30}

Opaque information systems, by comparison, have contributed in securing China's "period of strategic opportunity," by which it can sacrifice static allocative efficiency for dynamic allocative efficiency.\textsuperscript{31} This fact has been pointed out by high-level DOD members. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced in 2014 that while the U.S. was preoccupied with other conflicts, "potential adversaries have been modernizing their militaries, developing and proliferating disruptive capabilities across the spectrum of conflict."\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Engagement-as-Deterrence verses Strategic Bluffing}

In addition to using exchange to understand PLA capabilities and intentions, the United States has promoted military exchange as a means to deter competition and shape PLA development. Large advantages in military capabilities act as theoretical "barriers to entry."\textsuperscript{33} This military economies-of-scale concept resembles William Wohlforth's argument that U.S. supremacy is both peaceful and durable because the power gap between the next closest competitor is so wide that no would-be rival will attempt to confront the U.S. in war or extended rivalry.\textsuperscript{34} Wohlforth argues that in order for conflict to occur, "the leader must think of itself capable of defending the status quo at the same time that the number two state believes it has the power to challenge it."\textsuperscript{35} If conflict is to be avoided, the "number two state" has to recognize its

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid.
relative weakness. In this light, information transparency takes on another purpose: flaunting U.S. supremacy serves as a deterrence and shaping mechanism.

Accordingly, engagement-as-deterrence practices developed steadily out of the "peacetime forward deterrence" strategies of the 1990s. The U.S. granted PLA officers access to bases, weapons systems, and leaders—often with the explicit intent of demonstrating U.S. "military prowess and professionalism." Engagement-as-deterrence strategies were not lost on the PLA. In one example, a Chinese official complained, "For the U.S. side, transparency means deterrence. Some of your people are too arrogant. The United States says the PLA needs to see more U.S. capabilities in order to scare them." Additionally, asymmetric bilateral engagement—the powerplay theory—allows powers to attempt to shape smaller counterparts. Secretary Perry, for example, touted military ties as a way to "influence China's polices to... curb the spread of weapons of mass destruction," and "influence China to play a positive role in regional instability." Perry further envisioned leveraging the PLA's "significant influence" to shape broader issues in China's domestic politics. Although some of Perry's ambition has been eroded by time, similar policies are still in effect. Present U.S. objectives for ties with the PLA include, "prevent conflict by clearly communicating U.S. resolve," (deterrence) and "encourage China to play a constructive and peaceful role... address common security challenges... and emerge as a responsible stakeholder in the world" (shaping).

37 Ibid., 69.
38 Ibid., 84.
40 Perry, "U.S. Strategy: Engage China, Not Contain It."
Conversely, strategic ambiguity benefits weaker powers by providing what some researchers have referred to as an "deterrence by doubt" effect. Accordingly, the PLA has largely eschewed transparency to conceal weakness and deter potential U.S. coercion. As one PLA researcher observed, "To rich countries military transparency is an effective way to brandish military power and deter others; whereas to poor nations low military transparency is a way to protect themselves, by being ambiguous rather than specific." Similarly, Kurt Campbell observed:

"America often employs overwhelming displays of military capability – shock and awe – to create apprehension in the minds of potential adversaries or competitors. For China, deterrence—or, perhaps better, doubt—is achieved not through overt displays of power, but through creating uncertainty in the perception of others. So, by this avenue of logic, the less operational intimacy and understanding with PLA forces, the greater the deterrent value."

Offset strategies—highly effective asymmetric capabilities that ensure "unfair U.S. competitive advantage"—remain the cornerstone of U.S. deterrence. Successful offset strategies must be demonstrated or transparently advertised to provide any deterrence value. As the U.S. attempts to find its "third offset strategy" to counter A2/AD technologies, we can expect two things: first, the next offset strategy will be publicized for maximum deterrence effect, and second, would-be competitors will continue to facilitate uncertainty in lieu of material advantage.

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42 Baliga and Sjöström, “Strategic Ambiguity and Arms Proliferation,” 1024.
45 Ibid.
46 Work, “National Defense University Convocation.”
A Peek for a Price—Leveraging Uncertainty to Extract Concessions

In addition to seeking transparency to craft winning future capabilities and deter and shape would-be competitors, a dominant power wants information transparency because it is better than the alternative—securing accurate information from rising competitors is costly and imprecise. Not only are curious hegemons forced to invest in expensive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies, but estimating agencies have a historical precedent of overinflating threats, which in turn induces extravagant and unnecessary defense spending. By comparison, rising powers may have multiple incentives to avoid transparency. Not only does uncertainty afford rising powers periods of "strategic opportunity" to grow sources of material power and develop asymmetric capabilities to hedge against potential coercion, uncertainty allows developing powers to mask weakness and deter would-be aggressors. By result of these contradicting incentives, the United States has pursued military relations with China, whereas China has traditionally resisted thorough engagement on American terms.

These contradicting aspiration levels allow for interesting side effects. As China seeks to resist deep security engagement, it is able to use high American aspirations for transparent engagement as leverage to extract concessions. Whereas this strategy would make little sense in other domains of the bilateral relationship—attaching economic costs to unfavorable U.S. behaviors would hurt China just as much as, if not more, than the U.S.—because the PLA has comparatively little incentive to promote transparent military information exchange, it is an ideal bargaining chip.

48 “In the Chinese calculus, denying the United States any material or informational advantage that could be gained through the relationship outweighs the PLA desire to gain an advantage through its contacts and visits with the U.S. military” Hooper, Going Nowhere Slowly: U.S.-China Military Relations 1994-2001, 31.
When viewed from this perspective, U.S.-Chinese areas of strategic disagreement—Taiwan arms sales, for example—may be less a threatening issue than an excuse to revert to strategies favoring uncertainty.\textsuperscript{49} Military contacts have been suspended due to Taiwan arms sales twice (in 2008 and 2010.) In both instances, the PLA suspended high-level dialogues and exchanges. In both instances, however, consequences did not flow into other areas of the bilateral relationship. Interestingly, military suspensions cut deepest into areas where the most exposure had begun to take place—engagements with the U.S. Navy—suggesting that the U.S. and China derived asymmetric benefits from exchanges.\textsuperscript{50} U.S. officials were able to negotiate the resumption of military exchanges in the months following suspensions, but only after high level visitors provided concessions, usually in the form of reconciliatory speeches.\textsuperscript{51} Although U.S. reconciliation efforts have been generally low-cost to the U.S., Beijing can use U.S. concessions for domestic advantage. Ultimately, although the U.S. has not officially backed off from arms sales, Beijing’s suspensions of military ties have, been effective in making the U.S. question its policies.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{What About Cooperation?}

Much of this theory hinges on underlying assumptions of competition. Although the presence of U.S.-Chinese competition is clear, the relationship is by no means entirely competitive. Cooperative elements, however, complicate incentives for information transparency. Business theories on information transparency have developed to capture this

\textsuperscript{49} Some U.S. officials have suspected this to be the case. See Kan, \textit{U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress}, 39.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.


phenomenon.\textsuperscript{53} Whereas initial theories supposed that transparency was overwhelmingly beneficial to all parties, later models expanded to account for asymmetric bargaining positions and distinctions between competitive or collaborative integration.\textsuperscript{54} Consistent with my arguments, information transparency has been shown to be preferred by high-power parties in competitive systems, but not low-power parties. Perhaps counter intuitively, under conditions requiring collaboration the incentives were reversed. Rather, high-power parties are incentivized to mask capabilities in collaborative settings so as to induce low-power parties to share the burden of providing for public goods.

Table 2: Model of Transparency Competition and Collaboration

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Areas of Security Competition</th>
<th>Areas of Security Collaboration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>China</strong></td>
<td>Quadrant I Opacity</td>
<td>Quadrant II Conflicted Transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
<td>Quadrant III Transparency</td>
<td>Quadrant IV Conflicted Opacity</td>
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When placed in the context of international relations, this relationship becomes less clear. Because international relations are both competitive and cooperative, cooperation will be marred with competition and vice versa—especially in the context of security, where competition is especially strong. Although theoretical incentives for transparency of opacity are clear under conditions of competition (Quadrants I & III), competitive aspects of the relationship bleed into


\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 678.
cooperative aspects, resulting in a region of contradicting incentives I term to be *conflicted transparency* (Quadrant II) and *conflicted opacity* (Quadrant IV).

This is observable in U.S.-Chinese military relations. For example, the U.S. has been puzzled at China's apparent avoidance in participating in joint humanitarian, search and rescue, or counter-terrorism efforts. Collaborative operations, however, employ dual-use capabilities that overlap with competitive capabilities. Humanitarian transport operations, for example, may be used for wartime troop insertion, and search and rescue procedures may allow insight into command and control procedures—topics that may interest the United States. Bleed-over from competition may cause opaque states to shy away from collaboration with those that prefer transparency. Washington's continued calls for "miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation" blur the lines between competition and cooperation.\(^55\) Accordingly, scholars may be puzzled when calls for greater security collaboration are not met with enthusiasm.\(^56\) Even in areas where there are signs of exchange, China's aversion to transparency often leads the PLA to shape exchanges to preserve ambiguity—to take, but not give, in exchanges.\(^57\)

Furthermore, because this behavior is a result of competing incentives (*conflicted opacity* or *transparency*) contradictory behaviors may appear as one party wishes to appear strong in one context, then weak in another. Washington's normal stance of unquestioned preeminence is occasionally tempered in favor of efforts that encourage China to share a larger portion of the

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\(^{56}\) Saunders, “China’s Rising Power, the U.S. Rebalance to Asia, and Implications for U.S.-China Relations,” 50.

global security burden as a "responsible stakeholder."™ Predictably, Chinese leaders frequently respond to these solicitations by pleading incapability.™

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to demarcate the strategic incentives pertaining to information transparency in the context of the U.S.-Chinese military-to-military relationship. In sum, the U.S. generally seeks information transparency for at least three reasons: to accurately estimate China's growth, deter and shape China's development, and to avoid costs imposed on dominant states in opaque systems. By comparison, China benefits from uncertainty for at least three similar reasons: uncertainty affords China periods of strategic development, allows China to mask weakness and deter coercive behaviors, and diverging aspiration levels for transparency allows China to extract concessions from the United States. Because China is able to selectively shape exchanges to preserve opacity, future developments in bilateral security relations should be evaluated in terms of transparent exchange—quality trumps quantity. If relations improve, it may indicate more about strategic undercurrents than the persuasiveness of U.S. diplomacy. Further research should evaluate the effectiveness of transparency or ambiguity strategies. Although each strategy may be independently advantageous, each strategy's effectiveness is less clear when employed within a dynamic system.™ Militaries-of-scale, deterrence-by-engagement, and deterrence-by-doubt strategies may all be subject to diminishing returns or may carry heavy negative externalities. Each of these strategies deserves greater individualized attention within the context of U.S.-Chinese relations. Additionally, policy makers and military practitioners

59 Gates describes this as a normal response. See Gates, Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War, 527.
60 For an overview of the debate, see Kan, U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress, 21.
would gain from insight into how mutually beneficial relationships might develop within theories of information transparency competition and collaboration.

The United States has argued that better military relations are necessary to reduce the potential for unintentional conflict. Although Beijing likely welcomes this objective, Washington's preferred conflict-prevention mechanism is to leverage military-to-military exchanges to reduce miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation—a strategy Beijing may very well continue to resist. Although in some ways this assessment paints a pessimistic picture, opportunities for positive interaction do exist, and should be embraced. The potential for unintentional conflict to break out is a real concern, and merits serious attention. Although recent memorandums of understanding are a step in the right direction, more work remains to be done to establish procedural frameworks that operational forces can use to deescalate confrontations. Additionally, although collaborative projects may be marred by competition, collaboration represents a negotiating space where militaries may discuss the terms of their evolving relationship. In the end, however, each state will likely continue to operate according to its preference for—or aversion against—information transparency; the benefits of which are not equally distributed. Some states are happiest in the shadows.
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