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The Prospect of China-US Military Security Relations under the Trump Administration

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With Trump becoming the new U.S. president, China-U.S. military security relations have arrived at a new cross; whether it leads to fiercer competition, friction or even conflicts, or to maturity and stability is of great significance to China-US relations.

I. Status-quo of China-US Military Security Relations

In recent years, with the constant growth of China's comprehensive national strength and military power as well as America's pursuit of Asia-pacific re-balancing strategy, China-US military security competition and friction have been constantly on the rise. The two countries are greatly or strongly divergent in several hot spot issues concerning the current East Asia security. Both countries deem each other as a major security challenger; and the military forces of both countries see each other as a potential target of warfare. The internal factors of confrontation in China-U.S. military security relations are becoming increasingly prominent, and the severe divergences and frictions between China

and the U.S. make the warm bed for risks of military crisis and conflicts between them.

On the other hand, however, there is also a new momentum for China-U.S. military relations. In recent years, both sides have maintained dialogues, exchanges and cooperation. Chinese navy also, upon invitation, participated twice in a row in joint military drills of multiple “Pacific Rim” countries led by the U.S. The two sides have constantly enhanced their cooperation in peace-maintenance, anti-terrorism, anti-pirate, maritime rescue, disaster relief, etc. Military departments of both countries have signed MOU to build the trust mechanism of communication on major military actions as well as to formulate principles of safety actions for meets in ocean and air, which have enhanced the capabilities of the two countries in crisis control. This is a situation in sharp contrast to the often stagnated bilateral dialogues long after the cold war.

The status-quo of China-U.S. military security relations reflects at least three points: China-U.S. military relations have entered into a stage when dialogues and exchanges shall never be stopped, or else huge risks would occur. Secondly, there are fundamental differences between China-U.S. relations and the relations between former Soviet Union and the U.S., as there has yet been a pattern of global strategic competition between China and the U.S. Both sides not only keep close economic and trade relations, but also share major interests in global governance and in coping with non-traditional security challenges. Thirdly, “non-conflict and non-confrontation” remain the wishes of both sides.

II. Orientation of the China Policy of Trump Administration

In the early days when Trump won the presidential election, there were some optimistic voices in China, saying he would focus more on developing domestic economic development instead of leading the world; his perceptions of the relations with its military alliance as well as his attitude of anti-TPP would reduce America’s pressure on China; his businessman characteristic of being skillful in making deals would contribute to certain compromises by America to China. However, it was not for long that voices concerned about Trump took the dominant place. China was caught by surprise and alarmed by dialogues between Trump

and Tsai Ing-wen. He is a person strongly headed for trade protectionism and has uttered many hard remarks towards China, some members in his team also hold strong anti-China attitude. The new president's style of walking the talk leads to the comprehension that his China policy would be full of "hardness" and "uncertainties", which would harm China-US relations even more.

However, with Trump's governance unrolls, new developments have been seen. For instance, in the dialogue between presidents of both countries, Trump expressed that his administration would still respect the "One China Policy"; some of members in his team with strong anti-China attitudes have been gradually marginalized with constantly weakening influences on him; an informal meeting between heads of the two countries have been realized in an early date, Trump also expressed his hope to pay a formal visit to China within the year, etc. With all these facts, we shall have a more balanced perspective towards Trump's policy, especially his China policy.

In fact, it is still too early to make a conclusion as to Trump's China policy. It takes at least three to four months to identify the policy framework to build up the team of governance. However, it is certain that his policy must be headed towards two directions only: firstly, utterly breaking up with the pro-establishment camp, and breaking the basic long-term framework of America's China policy; secondly, gradually returning to the basic framework of America's China policy. Seen from the progress of over two months of his governance, the latter has more possibility than the former.

III. Influences of Policies of Trump Administration on China-US Military Security Relations

The following specific analysis is made on 8 main issues regarding China-US military security relations.

(1) North Korean Nuclear Issue and Korean Peninsular Security

In front of the North Korean nuclear issue and the extremely dangerous situation in the Peninsular, the Obama government's North Korean policy of "strategic tolerance" has already gone to the end. The

Trump Administration will make hard choices: either coordinating and cooperating with China, trying to re-initiate the North Korean nuclear dialogue, seeking for a package solution; or intensifying military deterrence, preparing to use force against North Korea, thus forcing China to “shoulder greater responsibilities”, and pressing North Korea to yield. The former might result in new round cooperation between China and the US in denuclearization on the Peninsular, while the latter might make the peninsular situation even more intense, or even incurring military conflicts or wars. Once wars should break out, whether China and the US could avoid from a head-on collision would be a tremendous challenge between the two countries. What is worrying is that the voice for the latter is louder than for the former in the United States at present.

(2) Disputes on the East China Sea

Since the emergence of Diaoyu Islands crisis in 2012, China and Japan have gone into military confrontation for the first time after WW II . Since 2014, the disputes on East China Sea between China and Japan have eased to some extent, and the bilateral relationship has also gradually improved, yet is still not normalized. At present, there are frequent meets of the two countries’ military planes and warships in East China Sea with constant frictions and high risks of emergencies. In 2015, according to the new US-Japan Defensing Cooperation Guideline, US-Japan military cooperation will be expanded to global scope and “seamless” military cooperation between the two countries will also be realized. Recently, the Trump Government’s showcasing of its attitudes towards US-Japan alliance made the Abe Government feel relieved somewhat, yet caused heavier apprehension to China. Whether America and China would trap into crisis and conflicts due to Japanese factors would also be a severe challenge for China and America.

(3) Disputes on the South China Sea

Since the arbitration verdict on the South China Sea issue was released in June 2016, the South China Sea situation has been gradually eased under the joint efforts of China and relevant sides. Currently, the Trump Government is facing two choices on the South China Sea issue: firstly, continuing to intervene in the disputes on the sovereignty over the

South China Sea, intensifying its military presence and enhancing “free navigation action”, which might cause tension to the situation of the South China Sea. Secondly, supporting to solve the South China Sea disputes with the dual-track ideology reached between China and ASEAN, and conducting serious strategic dialogues with China regarding how to avoid from military actions in the South China Sea. If China and America could make joint efforts in this direction, tensions and frictions between the two could be eased.

(4) The Taiwan Issue

After impacting the political foundation between China-US relations with impertinent remarks and actions, Trump reiterated that America would still respect the “One China Policy” not long ago, which is conducive to the stability of China-US relations and the Taiwan Strait situation. However, the Taiwan Strait situation is not in peace. In 2016, the situation became intense again as the Tsai Ing-wen Authority refused to admit the “1992 Consensus”, and the National FY2017 Defense Authorization Act passed by the United States Congress explicitly requires to improve the military relations between the US and Taiwan. The Chinese government will strictly focus on the orientation of the Trump’s Government in arm sales to Taiwan and its relations with Taiwan. The practices of the United States in improving its relations with Taiwan in 1990s had resulted in military crisis. If the Trump Government repeats the practice, it would undoubtedly bring about huge negative impact on China and US military security relations.

(5) Nuclear Relations

China-US nuclear relations largely remain stable during the Obama Government. Some adjustments of America’s nuclear policy made in its nuclear situation report in 2010 have been approved by China to a certain extent. However, with increasing potential military security risks between the two countries, modernized nuclear powers of the two countries and the development of America’s missile defense system (the new development of U.S. THAAD deployment in South Korea), in the past couple of years, the security concern and suspicion between the two countries in the nuclear filed is again on the rise. The Trump administration will release the new nuclear situation report. It is unknown

whether the nuclear strategy of the United States will undergo important adjustments. However, Trump has put forward to enhance and expand the nuclear power of the United States. In the American strategies research circle, the voice against establishing stable nuclear strategic relations with China is becoming louder and louder. In the future, if these trends turn into policies, it would cause significant harm to China-US military security relations.

(6) Cyber Security and Space Security

Recently, with increasing frictions on the two new strategic areas between China and America, relevant bilateral and multilateral dialogues between the two countries have also been on the rise, which has played an important role in enhancing mutual understanding and managing divergences and risks. However, in the fields of cyber and space, there is obvious shortage and stagnation of dialogues, and deep mutual suspicion between Chinese and U.S. military. Apart from its significance for economic and social development, cyber, space security and nuclear weapons are of close relations with military commanding and control probing system (C4ISR). In the future, if China-US strategic stability is challenged, China-US relations in these two areas would also be faced with severe challenges. The Trump administration cyber and space policies, together with its nuclear policy, will influence greatly on the future of bilateral military security relations between China and America.

(7) China-US Military Dialogues and Exchanges

In recent few years, persistence in dialogue exchanges and intensified crisis control has become a shining point of China-US military security relation. This indicates that the bilateral military relations are starting to mature. In early 2017, mainly due to America's regime change, plus China's national defense and military reform, military exchanges and dialogues between the two countries were halted to some extent. In the informal meetings between the presidents of the two countries not long ago, both sides confirmed the new framework for dialogues, and the first of the four pillars of the framework is to conduct diplomatic security dialogues. Besides, both countries have also decided to conduct dialogues between China's PLA Joint Staff and U.S Joint Chiefs of Staff.

This new progress is so inspiring that the sound momentum of military dialogue exchanges is expected to be sustained.

(8) Roles of Military Alliance and Building Regional Multilateral Security Mechanism

An important reason why China-US military security frictions have been on the constant rise in recent years is that the United States promotes the Asia-pacific re-balancing strategy, intensifies its military alliance and enhances its check on China. The isolationism tendency shown by Trump in his presidential election has once caused great concerns of America's alliances. However, Trump changed from such a tendency soon after he came into power. Trump may not propose "Asia-pacific re-balancing" any more, yet he advocates to greatly increase military expenditure and expand military force, and adopts negative attitudes towards multilateralism. If these are transformed into policies, that would only intensify China-US military frictions and competitions, and strain even more China-US security relations.

IV. Conclusion and Counter-measures

1. Compared with the Obama Government, the Trump Government's China military security policy (the Pro-establishment camp's tough stance against China plus Trump's decision style) will bring about more risks and challenges to China-US military security relations, at least at the preliminary stage. China shall have full preparation for this.
2. The Trump security policy changes will firstly be reflected in the U.S. Korean Peninsular policy and Taiwan Strait policy, and then in its nuclear policy and the South China Sea policy. China shall be highly alert of America's possible actions of increasing military expenditures and arm forces by a large margin.
3. If there are serious frictions in security and trade between the two countries, China-US relations will be severely harmed. China shall try every means to avoid such a trend.
4. As to the policies against China's security interests that might be made by the Trump Administration, China shall be fully prepared for counter-measures and opposition and make various pre-arranged plans.

Meanwhile, it shall also seize opportunities brought about by policy adjustments.

5. In the short to middle term, it is particularly important to enhance security risk and crisis control between China and the US (including crisis circumvention and control). China shall try to reach consensus with America on the basic principles of crisis management, jointly enhance and improve bilateral security crisis management and control mechanism, and give full play to the hot-line's role of crisis control.

6. In the military security area, it is suggested to make full use of the new platforms for security and diplomacy dialogue (2+2) as well as the original defense negotiation and maritime military security negotiation mechanisms, control divergences, dissolve misunderstandings and enhance cooperation. Efforts shall also be made to put China-US strategic stability dialogue (including bilateral strategic nuclear relations, relevant network and space security issues) on the 2+2 dialogue schedule in a early date.

7. Both sides shall have far-sighted perspectives to make arms race and security plight reduction as a major task. To this end, state and military leader of the two countries shall try to reach basic consensuses on Asia-pacific security order, comparisons of military forces and solutions for regional hot-spot issues.

8. Efforts shall be made to change the zero-sum relations between China and the bilateral military alliances of the United States. Therefore, China shall explore the possibilities of conducting practical dialogues and cooperation with America's alliances, and via promoting the transformation of America's military alliances, reducing its exclusiveness and confrontation.

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