

Leading the Interagency to Shape U.S.-China Relations

by Timothy E. Steigelman

Empires do not decline gracefully. While commentators may debate whether the U.S. is declining in absolute or only relative terms, China is undoubtedly on the rise; that rise is perhaps the single most important security issue for the U.S. this century. The U.S. national security apparatus should devote sufficient attention and resources to effectively shape and manage America's relationship with China.

As an entering assumption, on balance, the U.S. would probably rather avoid open warfare with China. Classic international relations balance-of-power theory highlights the threat of force to moderate the actions and reaction from all nations.¹ In that same vein, the foreign policy reorganization suggested here assumes that America would rather attempt to marshal its governmental organs to avoid a war rather than plunge into an avoidable conflict. This discussion is not a substantive weighing of competing policy goals for the U.S.-China relationship, such as the debate between containment and engagement. What follows instead is a discussion about process, a proposal to alter the interagency process to better implement whatever China policy and desired end state America's duly elected political leaders pursue.

The U.S. should employ a whole-of-government approach to better shape its current and future relationship with China. To effectively shape U.S.-China relations, a single senior official should be assigned the sole task of coordinating the whole-of-government with respect to China. This senior official would synchronize diplomatic, informational, and economic civilian government agencies with the military to unite them in a common purpose across the government and internationally.

The Risk of the Status Quo Abroad

China is a rising power that alternates between quiet build-up and pointed, muscular standoff. Paired with the opacity of the Communist Party system and the sheer size of the Chinese populace,

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its rise is a marked challenge to American power and, perhaps, to regional or global security. Worse still, American bureaucracy is famous for stove-piping, allowing bureaucratic hurdles to prevent the synergies that the multiple levels of the American government should provide. Taken together, China's rise and America's bureaucratic inertia offer ample opportunities for inadvertent major power war.

Whether looking at economics, military construction, or maritime delimitation, China is rising on many fronts. Disputed islands in the East and South China Seas are at once the most visible and most fraught examples of China's muscular rise. As it has with increasing regularity since the 1990s, China is now challenging the claims of the Philippines and Vietnam, among others, to a large handful of islands in waters that could plausibly be claimed by any of several nations. Because Chinese defense policy changed from primarily defensive to regional power projection in the mid-1980s, the current rising tensions seem of a piece with the longstanding Chinese goals of military expansion, economic expansion, or both.² The term "hundred-year marathon" has come into use in Chinese policy circles in the last few years, referring to the 100 years since the Communist Party's ascendance in 1949; under this concept, China is supposed to rise to become the world's preeminent nation by the Party's centennial.³

While China's expansionist aims seem clear enough, the motivations of Chinese leaders and the people are perhaps less clear. Predicting this rise years ago, Huntington pointed to Chinese history and culture inevitably leading to an expansionist policy.⁴ A recent *Economist* piece opines that the Chinese people want continued prosperity, while the leadership wants domestic stability and international respect.⁵ A more circumspect view of decision making by nation states might parse the differences between the goals of elite Chinese with the working and middle classes, contrasting as well the process

strictures of the Communist Party, the military, and civil bureaucracy.⁶

In short, Chinese expansion is a several-decades-long project that shows no signs of slowing anytime soon. It is likely to be kept in perpetual motion through a combination of economics, demography, culture, and key stakeholder interests.

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The Risk of the Status Quo within the U.S. Government

With so many possible drivers of Chinese aims, the U.S. government must put to work its broad spectrum of governmental tools—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—to shape a future with China. However, given organizational stove-piping and a dearth of cabinet-level coordination across agencies relating to military and foreign affairs, no person or entity short of the President is able to direct a response across the whole of government, and the result is often confused organizational responses.

Interagency tools, or applying the "whole of government," is nothing new. Military doctrine discusses the desirability of a whole-of-government approach to "facilitate [U.S. government] engagement with [non-U.S. government] stakeholders, fostering a broader comprehensive approach to security."⁷ Such close coordination across governmental entities, however, is more often than not aspirational.

In theory, the Joint Interagency Coordination Group (JIACG) is supposed to insert itself between military commands and civilian other governmental agencies (OGAs) that might perform specialized, related tasks. The

geographic combatant commands—U.S. Central Command, U.S. Northern Command, United States Africa Command, and U.S. Southern Command—have all coordinated with OGAs particularly well under this arrangement.⁸ Conspicuously absent from that list is U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), the geographic combatant command directly concerned with Chinese regional ambitions.

This lack of interagency coordination is all the more worrisome considering the disparity of funding between the Department of Defense (DoD) and the State Department. If a well-funded DoD becomes the *de facto* lead agency for foreign relations, the *de jure* lead role of the State Department will fade. Military personnel are acculturated to mission accomplishment and less experienced with managing a longstanding international relationship.⁹ Should robust military-diplomats set about to shape foreign policy without an effective interagency process, the result would be an inability to shape the whole of government to accomplish U.S. policy goals.

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We may be there already. Recent military and OGA interactions with China are, at best, confused. Consider the 2013 incident between the USS Cowpens and warships escorting China's new carrier.¹⁰ Soon thereafter the U.S. Navy (hopefully with input from PACOM) rewarded China's dangerous maneuver at sea by inviting the Chinese Navy, for the first time, to participate in the Rim of the Pacific exercise, the largest international naval exercise in the world.¹¹ Meanwhile the Philippines begins arbitration against China under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,

and the U.S. sits on the sidelines, providing seemingly tardy and only indirect support to the Philippines despite clearly mutual interests.¹² As for OGA engagement with China, the Justice Department recently indicted senior Chinese officials, Treasury and Office of the Comptroller of Currency continue to take no action on China devaluing the yuan, and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is conspicuously silent on China's recently announced air defense interdiction zone.¹³ It is a veritable potpourri of agency actions and inactions, with no seeming synchronization whatever.

This situation may result in inadvertent signals and unintended consequences. For example, while the National Security Council (NSC) plays a key role for synchronizing defense-related issues across the interagency, Treasury and the FAA are not necessarily on the NSC's agenda when thinking about long-term strategic goals.¹⁴ As Allison and Zelikow explain in a different context, each agency cataloged above has its own separate reason for action or inaction, each of which likely makes sense in isolation. Taken as a whole, however, they create a confused jumble with no theme of engagement. A Chinese party official cannot predict whether the next initiative will result in a trade embargo or a shrug. The situation is untenable, and America cannot rely on serendipity to avoid mixed signals that might ignite a crisis.¹⁵

Those mixed signals present a risk of near-peer conflict. Rather than clearly choosing to oppose or acquiesce to a rising China, America will likely try to do some of both, as it has so far.¹⁶ Combining China's rise with the mixed signals emanating from a stove-piped U.S. government risks stumbling into a war with China, as Huntington warned years ago.¹⁷ Left to its own inertia, there is no reason to think the U.S.-China relationship will tend toward understanding and peace. To further that end, diplomatic, informational, military, and economic levers of power should be coordinated.

How to Fix the Interagency Process Regarding China

Given the trajectories of China and the U.S., the relationship between the two should be given special priority within U.S. foreign policy, to include diplomatic, military, and OGA actions. The best way to leverage the interagency to shape relations with China is to appoint a single, senior civilian official to manage that relationship by setting a course of action and coordinating across the U.S. government and internationally.

Used correctly, the interagency process can be very effective. Military doctrine spells out how the interagency process should work to coordinate between DoD and OGAs.¹⁸ After five years of war in Iraq when the previous military commanders and civilian diplomats could not work together to apply the tools of national power, it took a concerted effort by Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus to force the issue. Beginning in 2007, they required their staffs to work together and achieved an unprecedented unity of effort.¹⁹ Similarly, coordination between DoD and OGAs set the conditions for the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in the late 1990s.²⁰ In short, interagency coordination is not novel, and it can be critically successful.

Interagency coordination with respect to China should be both inward and outward looking. Inwardly, this coordination should bring to bear the whole of government, as happened in Iraq and Bosnia. Outwardly, regional powers such as South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and other maritime nations should be able to talk with a single point of contact to balance a rising China.²¹

The official described above, having a single-issue, broad scope of authority is reminiscent of the “tsars” that have been in vogue over the last several presidential administrations; it is a model that has already worked. Lieutenant General Lute was the “war tsar,” the individual who

kept the domestic national security establishment engaged and supporting the war effort in Iraq.²²

Inward Looking

This interagency coordinator for China will be the President’s representative within the U.S. government. Perhaps, like the former “war tsar,” this individual should be a deputy national security advisor (though perhaps “Mandarin” would be more a fitting shorthand in this context) and placed on the NSC, allowing U.S.-China policy to inform U.S. foreign policy writ large. Regardless of title, the individual should be a “tsar-plus” with authority to steer policy within the government and to represent the U.S. abroad.²³

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“Mandarin’s” Placement and Authority

The “Mandarin” would not head any new agency, but instead have coordination responsibility and “tie-breaking” authority within the government. Like a traditional JIACG or any other interagency process, the Mandarin will get players from disparate organizations moving in the same direction. Unlike a typical JIACG, the Mandarin should be empowered to resolve internecine disputes. If, for example, Treasury wants to investigate Chinese currency manipulation, while State is adamantly opposed, the Mandarin should decide which agency preference best follows the President’s foreign policy guidance and so instruct the affected secretaries. A disappointed Secretary can go over the Mandarin’s head, but the position should be structured so no one other than the President can overrule the Mandarin’s decision.²⁴ This process would set incentives for the Mandarin

and agencies to work together to implement the President's goals, holding in reserve the ability to go to the President only for the most important disputes.

Outward Looking

Unlike most other tsars, the Mandarin should have an international role as the face of U.S.-China policy. The U.S. ambassador to China and the PACOM commander should both be designated as special advisors to the Mandarin and strongly encouraged to coordinate China policy and plans with the Mandarin. While the Mandarin cannot direct the Ambassador or the PACOM commander to take any particular action, the Mandarin's unique role within the government will require cooperation from PACOM and the ambassador to China in particular, so special advisor status would be appropriate.²⁵ That key advice will better enable the Mandarin to keep the President informed and facilitate implementing the President's strategic and foreign policy goals.

The Mandarin will be something of an ambassador-at-large, able to represent views of the U.S. government to Seoul on one day and Manila the next. The Mandarin will be able to address different nations' concerns, and with the advice of PACOM and the ambassador to China, the Mandarin will have the credibility to work directly with U.S. ambassadors to other nations in East Asia. Unlike those ambassadors in the region, the Mandarin will have leverage within the U.S. government to address problems within the bureaucracy.²⁶ Unlike the PACOM commander, the Mandarin will have actual (rather than *de facto*) authority to be the public face for U.S. national security relating to China.

For a model of the Mandarin, imagine combining the domestic governmental focus that Lieutenant General Lute brought to the Iraq war effort with the international work performed by Senator George Mitchell on the Northern Ireland conflict. The former "war tsar" shepherded

resources and agencies to support America's war in Iraq, tamping down the inevitable turf wars that result when different agencies touch the same problem. Sent by President Clinton, Senator Mitchell facilitated negotiations of the intractable conflict in Northern Ireland, working effectively with embittered and embattled factions to deliver the Good Friday Agreement.²⁷ The Mandarin will need to combine the best of both those inward- and outward-looking models for governmental collaboration.

Picking a Mandarin

With this dual-hatted role, both inward- and outward-looking, the selection of the Mandarin would be a very important choice. History shows that interagency cooperation is very personality dependent.²⁸ The background and nature of the Mandarin would therefore be a key consideration, and the importance of interpersonal relationships within the administration and throughout the Pacific region probably cannot be overstated. Considering the need to interface with civilian officials in the U.S. government and senior officials and diplomats abroad, a uniformed officer may not be the best individual for the job. On the one hand, General Petraeus successfully implemented a whole-of-government counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq. On the other hand, Petraeus did so as the senior military leader in theater. Husbanding the Chinese relationship will require diplomacy and bureaucratic wrangling, and, in any event, is not a shooting war demanding the focus of a seasoned military commander. (Should a shooting war break out, of course, America would properly focus on a military response.) While many general and flag officers may have the credibility and interpersonal relationships for the job, it would be problematic if America's ambassador-at-large for its Chinese relationship were perceived instead as a super combatant commander, akin to a neo-proconsul. Instead, a senior diplomat, perhaps a post-cabinet

secretary or former ambassador, would provide the Mandarin position with the experience and credibility within the Beltway and on the world stage and avoid the appearance of further militarizing American foreign policy.

Counterarguments

The following counterarguments cut against the Mandarin proposal and bear examination:

- **The status quo is fine. The communist party has ruled China for over half a century, and America has managed to avoid a shooting war so far. Why does America need to drastically overhaul its foreign policy over the fears about just one country?** Arguing for the status quo ignores the reality of what China is trying to accomplish in its economic and territorial expansionism. By attempting to carve up the South and East China Seas, China is attempting to exert heretofore unknown drilling rights in international waters, asserting sovereignty over vast swathes of ocean. As discussed above, China is now continuing its arc of actions that started decades ago, and will probably end with China carving up the ocean at least. Meanwhile, as a whole, the U.S. government dithers. Some agencies react to deter China, others are more inviting, and still other agencies do nothing. This variegated approach is bound to confuse China and is likely to lead to the kind of misreading of intentions that can spark an unnecessary conflict. The status quo is unacceptable because it is not static. The status quo is Chinese expansion with no coordinated response from the U.S. The status quo sets China on a collision course with the U.S., and an official like the Mandarin can perhaps prevent the collision.
- **Bureaucratic problems are only exacerbated when bureaucracy is added.**

There is already a cabinet, an NSC, and multiple interagency groups. How can we cure bureaucratic bloat with yet more bureaucracy? The Mandarin is not another bureaucrat. There will be no Department of Mandarins created by this proposal. The Mandarin is an individual official who would likely have a very small staff. The Mandarin's ability to accomplish policy goals will come not from his or her own office staff, but from the Mandarin's ability to harness other departments and agencies to work together and bring foreign players to the table. It establishes a chief deputy under the President to shepherd the whole-of-government response to China. This is not more bureaucracy, it is purposeful delegation.

- **This won't work because the interagency process is broken beyond repair.** This is a fallacy. The interagency process can be fixed and has been fixed in both the Bosnian and Iraq war efforts. The difficult piece, and what sets the Mandarin concept apart from previous tsars, is combining the tsar's internal focus with an international purview, simultaneously serving as an honest broker among U.S. agencies as well as between the U.S. and foreign governments, all to better shape the Chinese relationship.

Conclusion

The interagency process is unwieldy. Taking the framers' separation of powers to its absurd end, the spread of power among DoD, Department of State, and other OGAs almost perfectly precludes a coherent American foreign policy on any particular issue. Apart from acute crises, such as Serbia or the Iraq war, no governmental official other than the President can marshal the whole of government in a cohesive manner.

The rise of China presents ample

opportunities for the U.S. to send mixed signals. As these mixed signals could lead to avoidable war, they should be avoided through an orchestrated, whole-of-government approach to U.S.-China relations. A senior official, a “Mandarin” with the President’s mandate, appropriate seniority, and regional credibility is required to marshal the U.S. governmental response at home and abroad. It could be difficult to fill the role given such high expectations. Nevertheless, getting the relationship with China right may be essential to prevent great power war this century.

The Mandarin, this key official for managing U.S.-China relations, should be a senior civilian, former diplomat, or cabinet-level official. As Clemenceau understood, war was too important to leave to the generals.²⁹ In our day, maintaining peace in the Pacific is too important to leave to the admirals. **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, 1979, pp. 113–114.
- 2 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, 1997, pp. 230–231 and 311; Dean Cheng, “Winning Without Fighting: Chinese Legal Warfare,” The Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2012, <<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/05/winning-without-fighting-chinese-legal-warfare>>, accessed on November 9, 2014; Howard W. French, “China’s Dangerous Game,” *The Atlantic*, November 2014, pp. 96–109; James R. Holmes, “How the U.S. Lost the South China Sea Standoff,” *The Diplomat*, December 19, 2013, <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/how-the-us-lost-the-south-china-sea-standoff>>, accessed on November 9, 2014.
- 3 Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, 2015, pp. 17–30.
- 4 Huntington, pp. 228–229.
- 5 “What China Wants,” *The Economist*, Aug. 23, 2014.
- 6 Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*. Addison Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc., New York, 1999. That nuanced cross-section of Chinese government and society is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 7 Joint Publication 3-08, *Interorganizational Coordination during Joint Operations*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, 2011, p. I-6.
- 8 Nina Serafino, Catherine Dale, and Pat Towell, “Building Civilian Interagency Capacity for Missions Abroad: Key Proposals and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress, CRS, Washington, 2012, p. 41.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
- 10 Holmes.
- 11 John Sorensen, “RIMPAC Concludes with Enhanced Cooperation among 22 Nations,” July 31, 2014, <<http://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/030454>>, accessed on February 15, 2015.
- 12 U.S. Department of State, “Maritime Claims in the South China Sea, Limits in the Seas No. 143,” U.S. Department of State, Washington, 2014; Sean Mirski, “American Paralysis and Troubles in the South China Sea: A Primer on the Philippines-China Arbitration,” *Lawfare*, October 13, 2013, <<http://>

www.lawfareblog.com/2013/10/american-paralysis-and-troubles-in-the-south-china-sea-a-primer-on-the-philippines-china-arbitration>, accessed on November 9, 2014; see also Cheng on China's use of "lawfare" as an offensive military tactic.

13 Jack Goldsmith, "Why Did DOJ Indict the Chinese Military Officers?" *Lawfare*, May 20, 2014, <<http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/05/why-did-doj-indict-the-chinese-military-officers>>, accessed on November 9, 2014.

14 Joint Publication 3-08, p. I-15.

15 For risks of such miscalculations, see Allison and Zelikow.

16 Waltz.

17 Huntington, pp. 232–233.

18 Joint Publication 3-08; U.S. Joint Forces Command, *Commander's Handbook for the Joint Interagency Coordination Group*, Military Doctrine Publication, Norfolk, 2007.

19 Elizabeth Young, "Decade of War: Enduring Lessons from a Decade of Operations," *Prism*, April 2013, pp. 123–141; Joint Publication 3-08, p. I-12.

20 Gregory L. Schulte, "Regime Change Without Military Force: Lessons from Overthrowing Milosevic," *Prism*, April 2013, pp. 45–55.

21 Waltz.

22 Ben Zimmer, "Czar Wars," *Slate*, December 10, 2008, <http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_good_word/2008/12/czar_wars.html>, accessed on October 17, 2014.

23 The best method to implement the Mandarin—whether by statute, executive order, or other method—is beyond the scope of this paper.

24 While perhaps simple enough in theory for domestic OGAs, this would have to be carefully coordinated with DoD, Central Intelligence Agency, and other security and defense agencies to avoid delegation not allowed by Article II of the Constitution.

25 See U.S. Constitution, Article II (special authority between president and ambassadors and president and military commanders).

26 For friction between ambassadors and OGAs, see U.S. Senate, "Embassies as Command Posts in the Anti-Terror Campaign," Report to Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 2006.

27 BBC News, "George Mitchell," 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/northern_ireland/understanding/profiles/george_mitchell.stm>, accessed on February 7, 2015.

28 "Interview with Senator Jim Webb," *Prism*, December 2010, pp. 145–150; Young.

29 Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003, p. 54.