

Pacific Commander Stresses China Ties

Admiral to Sustain Policy of Predecessor

By Edward Cody
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BEIJING, May 12 -- The new commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, Adm. Timothy J. Keating, said Saturday that he wants to intensify joint exercises and other exchanges with the Chinese military as quickly and broadly as the Chinese government will allow.

The goals laid out by Keating, on his first visit to China since taking over the Honolulu-based Pacific Command on March 26, suggested that he intends to continue the effort to increase U.S.-Chinese contacts at all ranks that was a hallmark of his predecessor, Adm. William J. Fallon. The objective, Keating said, is to learn more about the Chinese military and dispel mutual suspicions to reduce chances of conflict as China expands its power and influence across Asia.

"I am very supportive of that," Keating said at a news conference. Chinese military leaders with whom he has spoken since arriving Thursday also endorsed the idea, he added.

Keating, who once commanded a carrier group, aligned himself with U.S. officials who say China's increased ability to project military power into the Pacific does not have to be a source of tension with the United States, if well managed. Other officials and analysts in Washington have argued that China's rapidly improving military ineluctably threatens the long-standing U.S. role in Asia, particularly given the U.S. pledge to help Taiwan defend itself from any Chinese attack.

Officials from both sides of the discussion have demanded greater "transparency" from the Chinese military on its acquisition of new weapons, missile buildup across from Taiwan and long-term intentions on the use of military force. Although Keating shied away from using the word, his call for more contacts between the two militaries fit into the transparency campaign.

The latest sign of China's rising military ability, the successful test-firing of an antisatellite missile on Jan. 11, has been cited as an example of a growing threat to U.S. forces, suggesting U.S. navigation and weapons guidance satellites might be vulnerable in a conflict over the Taiwan Strait. Some analysts said the test, in which an outdated Chinese weather satellite was destroyed, also created a cloud of debris that could pose a danger to other satellites in space.

The Chinese military carried out the test without notifying other countries in advance, intensifying the reaction when officials in Washington revealed that U.S. satellite reconnaissance had spotted it. The impression of stealth was further heightened when the Chinese government took 12 days to acknowledge the test.

Keating said he asked Guo Boxing, vice chairman of the Communist Party's Central Military Commission, about the test and was told it was a scientific experiment that should not be viewed in military terms. The Chinese also played down any danger from the debris, Keating said, saying the test yielded "a relatively small increase in the amount of debris in space."

Keating said he and Guo agreed to disagree on the issue.

"An anti-satellite test is not necessarily a clear indication of a decision for peaceful utilization of space," Keating said. "It is a confusing signal, shall we say, for a country that desires a peaceful rise."