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## **U.S. Aims to Improve Military Ties With China**

By Edward Cody

SHENYANG, China, May 15 -- Adm. William J. Fallon, commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, flashed what aides described as a broad grin as he sat in the cockpit of a twin-engine FB-7 fighter-bomber, China's most advanced domestically produced warplane.

"They had to drag me out of there," recalled Fallon, a veteran carrier pilot, as he described the first such close look by a U.S. official of the modern two-seater, which is scheduled to become a key part of China's air defenses.

Fallon's visit to China's 28th Air Division, based near the eastern city of Hangzhou, and his pilot's inspection of the newly deployed FB-7 were high points in a week-long tour of Chinese military installations and meetings with senior officers, including Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan. At a windup briefing here Monday, Fallon said the visits marked a significant step forward in his drive to increase contacts between the U.S. and Chinese militaries as a way to dissolve suspicions and reduce chances that the two Pacific powers will go to war.

"They really went out of their way to accommodate nearly everything I wanted to do," he said. The goal, he added, is to push for more contacts, "to see more things and different things, and to be more open and transparent in military matters."

Seeking to accelerate the movement, Fallon said, he invited senior Chinese officers to observe U.S.-led joint military exercises next summer near the Pacific island of Guam, promising them the opportunity to review U.S. bases and board U.S. warships during air-sea drills. Implicit in the invitation, he added, was the idea that, if the Chinese attend, they would reciprocate by inviting U.S. officers to observe future Chinese exercises "in a manner we would like to make a standard for both countries."

"That's what this is all about," he said, adding: "There are extensive contacts in every area. The one lag, the one exception, is in military-to-military contacts. We set out last year to right that."

U.S. officers and diplomats, for instance, were not invited to observe large-scale exercises by Chinese and Russian forces last August in the East China Sea and the Russian Far East. Partly as a result, the exercises were interpreted as a gesture by Moscow and Beijing to show they have the means to protect their regional interests without reference to the United States, even though it is the overwhelming power in the Pacific.

More broadly, transparency has been a key U.S. demand in recent years as China modernizes its 2.3 million-strong military and increasingly takes its place as a major power in the Asia-Pacific region. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has asked publicly several times why, in the

absence of direct threats, China would need the military establishment it seems to be building if, as its leaders proclaim, its intentions are peaceful.

China has vowed to use force, as a last resort, to prevent Taiwan from gaining formal independence, raising the danger of conflict -- a threat that influences every military calculation here. Taiwan, 100 miles from China's southern coast, has ruled itself since Chiang Kai-shek's defeated Nationalist forces fled there in 1949, but Beijing has continued to regard it as a province that must eventually return to the Chinese fold.

Partly to back up that threat, the Chinese defense budget has increased by more than 10 percent annually in recent years, reaching \$35.4 billion in 2006. Pentagon specialists estimate that if unreported equipment purchases are taken into account, the real expenditures could be several times that.

Fallon said this subject came up in his 90-minute discussions with Cao, a general who is vice chairman of the Communist Party's policymaking Central Military Commission. The response was that, with such a large military, even a little expenditure on each soldier adds up fast, Fallon reported.

In the exchange, Cao also asked Fallon why the Pentagon, in its recent Quadrennial Defense Report, suggested China is the country with the greatest potential to pose a challenge to the U.S. military in the future.

"As we discussed these items, it struck me that we have a long way to go," Fallon said.

The United States and China cut off military contacts in 2001 after a U.S. Navy EP-3 surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter collided over the South China Sea, killing a Chinese pilot and forcing the U.S. aircraft to make an emergency landing on China's Hainan Island. The 24-member crew was allowed to leave only after prolonged negotiations and a U.S. statement that China interpreted as an apology.

Since taking over as head of the Honolulu-based U.S. Pacific Command in February 2005, Fallon has campaigned to restore and strengthen the ties, seeking to multiply contacts at all levels of the two countries' military hierarchies.

In his initial visit late last year, Fallon saw little and was disappointed with the lack of openness. But Rumsfeld visited China in October, touring the strategic command headquarters. Fallon said Chinese and U.S. officers will meet in June to discuss exchanges of lower-level officers in the two strategic commands.

Cao also endorsed restoring and expanding military-to-military relations, telling the official New China News Agency that they are "an important part of bilateral relations." But he did not immediately respond to Fallon's invitation for Chinese officers to observe next summer's Valiant Shield exercises around Guam.

Fallon said that, in addition to the air base near Hangzhou where he sat in the FB-7, he visited an air force training academy near Xi'An, home of the celebrated terra cotta warriors -- which he also viewed -- and the 39th Infantry Regiment south of Shenyang, in Liaoning province 400 miles northeast of Beijing and a short distance from the North Korean border. ■