

China PLA delegation in European study tour

By David Fouquet

In the midst of its own historic transition, senior officials of China's Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in March undertook a major study in Europe to be informed of the current developments and transformation of European foreign and security policy.

A delegation of 18 senior and rising cadres of the PLA during the month were involved in a schedule of briefings and tours in France and Brussels, in a programme sponsored and organised by the French Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs and the Sciences-Po Asia Europe Centre in Paris. In Brussels a round table on European Security was organised by the European Institute for Asian Studies.

During this month-long study tour, the PLA delegation composed of officers ranging from Senior Colonel and Navy Captain to Lieutenants were briefed extensively on National and European defence policy and developments. As an example the group visited French military and related industrial facilities near Bourges in Central France, to study the French experience and practice in the reduction and conversion of such operations.

In recent years the Chinese Government leadership has imposed a set of severe reductions in personnel of 500,000 men, numerous facilities and withdrawal from industrial and commercial activities which had been traditional PLA practice in the past but was judged no longer compatible with a market economy or membership in the World Trade Organisation.

In addition, to these measures, the PLA has also been subjected to major adjustments to partial leadership changes toward the "Fourth Generation" of command, a new doctrine, a drive for modernisation, emerging new international geostrategic relationships and in 2003 a slowdown in previous large budgetary increases.

The programme of briefings and studies in the stay in Europe of the PLA delegation was primarily oriented on both national and European developments and policies. For example, in Paris the group was addressed by Nicole Gnessotto, the director of the Institute for Studies of the Western European Union and in Brussels by speakers from the Council of the European Union and European Commission secretariats on Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a Member Country representative on the EU Committee on Security Policy and the NATO Alliance.

They were briefed on the current plans for both the EU assuming a limited but greater security role and the adjustment and enlargement of NATO, as well as the difficulties encountered in both those processes. These included the debate in both those institutions and the United Nations over the inspections and possible military operations in Iraq. EU speakers underlined the limited nature of proposed EU operations and expressed their optimism that the current process would not suffer the same fate as the Treaty on a European Defence Community in the 1950s which was ultimately rejected and abandoned in 1954.

But they were briefed on the new NATO role in counter-terrorism activities and on the EU plans to meet the Headline Goals of fielding a force of 60,000 for peacekeeping and other limited missions that NATO would not assume. Examples were also cited of the EU assuming the command from NATO of the peacekeeping force in

Macedonia and possibly in Bosnia later, as well as the German-Dutch leadership of the international force in Afghanistan.

In their questions, the PLA members were especially interested in the prospects for either the EU and especially NATO being involved in military or security operations in other regions. There was also questioning and discussion of the concepts of "pre-emptive" and "preventive" war. A NATO official addressing the group candidly noted the probable difficulty in members agreeing unanimously on broader military operations unless directly attacked.

Some time was also devoted to questions and discussion of the EU-China dialogue relating to specific strategic and defence issues.

EU-China dialogue includes strategic, conventional arms

Proliferation issues, both global strategic concerns and bilateral conventional ones, have become an important element in the expanding strategic dialogue between the European Union and China.

The EU-China dialogue on nuclear and missile arms control emerged as part of the agenda at the bilateral summit in Brussels in September 2001 and has been said to have been conducted on a quiet but regular basis since. While details have been sketchy, they appear to have revolved around global concerns and constraints in the realm of weapons of mass destruction, including possibly the difficult issue of missile defence systems.

The discussions regarding conventional weapons and technology are the more recent manifestation of an issue which emerged in 1989 when the European Union imposed an embargo on shipments of such military equipment to China in the aftermath of the Tian An Men Square liberalisation demonstration and the turmoil that rocked China that year.

Both point to the increased complexity and range of the agenda items between Europe and China. they also underline their discreet search for similarities or compromise on these significant global concerns. And these issues illustrate some of the growth of the EU common foreign and security policy in recent years, as well as its relations with China. While the EU as such is not directly involved or a party to arms control treaties, it has active programmes on the control of small arms and has been actively and financially engaged in programmes of destruction of strategic and other weapons in Russia.

The development of this specific EU-China dialogue took place prior to the announcement of the budget plans for defence activities presented to the Peoples Congress in March 2003, which foresaw a 10% increase for the year. Although noteworthy, the increase was significantly below the 20% increases registered in 2002 and 2001, which had aroused interest and some concern in the region at the time. The choice in 2003 was said to reflect policy choices which not only include a more pronounced emphasis on spending for social and other civil activities and budgetary constraints in view of a continuing budget deficit for the year said to amount to \$38 billion.

But it also was in keeping with previous pronouncements suggesting a desire to reduce the country's large military structure, including the military role in largely economic and industrial activities and enterprises, and perhaps as a signal to the international community of moderation. For example, it could be regarded as a

particularly restrained reaction to President Bush's decision in May 2001 to offer Taiwan the biggest arms package in a decade, including weaponry seen as particularly threatening to Beijing such as eight diesel submarines four Knox-class frigates.

In any case, internationally it was characterised as further evidence of the perception that the Chinese Government priority would continue to be domestic economic and social development.

Strategic Issues

While such arms control issues have been eclipsed in the recent months by first the global concern and struggle against terrorism and later the growing prospect and debate over a possible conflict in Iraq, many strategists in Europe and China had expressed comparable concerns in the past about nuclear-biological-chemical (NBC) weapons and the possible impact of a proposed US ballistic missile defence (BMD).

Both seemed to converge toward a compliance with existing international or even bilateral strategic arms control treaties and convention in order to counter the possible spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass-destruction.

The issue focused at one point on the new US Government's decision to accelerate plans to develop national or theatre ballistic missile defences, which many in Europe and China regarded as potentially destabilising. Initially, these views tended to regard such US plans as having the ability to degrade other nuclear powers' strategic arsenals as well as be aimed at those of "rogue states" or terrorist groups, which could in turn spur an offsetting increase in Chinese or Russian second-strike capability, in a typical escalatory arms race.

Initially, a main US rationale for such defensive systems were Washington's perceptions of emerging threats from states such as North Korea, Iraq or Iran to acquire capability to launch limited, but lethal, missile strikes against the US.

Internationally, this entire process which included the US intention to withdraw from its Antiballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with Russia, was regarded as potentially jeopardising the entire structure of multilateral arms control and disarmament agreements which had been seen as a global stabilising force or at least a stepping-stone to further progress in arms control.

This was regarded as especially destabilising in the Asia-Pacific region where it caused a number of countries to re-examine strategic plans and capabilities in the light of the new US defences. While it was ostensibly directed exclusively at the US-North Korea balance and relationship, it was also regarded as having complicating consequences for China and its own strategic and political relations with the US, Taiwan and Japan. If China deemed its own defensive nuclear capability eroded by a US system said to be aimed against a potential North Korean missile threat, would it respond by developing additional nuclear capability, and what would be the reaction in Taiwan or Japan? Both the latter had also expressed interest in acquiring some form of BMD, including in collaboration with the US. Japan has also launched the acquisition of refuelling capability for some of its aircraft, thereby providing them with a range that could be regarded as a potential threat to other countries in the region.

In 2002 some reports suggested that China was in the process of increasing its arsenal of some 20 strategic long-range nuclear missiles to as many as 60 by the end of the decade, including some solid-fuel and mobile missiles.

When the EU and China incorporated such issues into their bilateral summit and political dialogue at their meeting in Brussels in September 2001, these concerns were priority issues they sought to address in the future.

At the time, some attention was being focused on European and other diplomatic initiatives aimed at strengthening existing multilateral strategic arms control and disarmament regimes and perhaps developing new instruments. One such initiative had been launched by German and French leaders a few months earlier. A related discussion eventually led to an outline accord in 2002 on a Draft Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation seen as strengthening the looser informal and voluntary Missile Technology Control Regime which 33 countries adhere to.

In August 2002, China also announced the adoption of ballistic missile technology export restrictions aimed to mirror in the international MTCR, which China is not a party to. At that time, the Government said it would soon issue lists of missile-related and dual-use technologies that would require export licenses. This was seen as helping to implement a pledge by China in 2000 that it would not assist countries third countries seeking to develop nuclear missile capability.

In 2002 the international reaction to the withdrawal of the US from the ABM treaty and its continued testing of BMD technology was muted and perhaps overshadowed by the more immediate preoccupations with terrorism and impending war in the Middle East.

Conventional Arms Issues

Some American and European sources and studies have noted a growing activity on the part of China in the past in strategic development and supplies to other countries, including some, such as Pakistan, North Korea and possibly others which have aroused interest or suspicion. A similar pattern has also been reported by sources, such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) suggesting that China has become a major customer and supplier of conventional military equipment.

But perhaps the most controversial element of this dialogue, according to some sources, is said to be the recent Chinese requests for the lifting of the 14-year old European embargo on exports of military equipment. The pressure for termination has been reported as emerging not only from China and its leaders, but also from some European government and industry sources.

The issue was raised publicly in October of 2002 by Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji during a visit to France after the Asia-Europe Summit Meeting (ASEM) in Copenhagen and has been said to also have been raised diplomatically in closed EU-China talks. But some European sources, such as former French Defence Minister Charles Millon in the 1990s, have also suggested at least a review of the boycott and some countries have begun over the years to apply a looser definition of the restrictions in order to deliver spare parts or non-offensive defence equipment to Beijing, naturally regarded as a potentially major purchaser.

While there have been few cases of reported breaches of the embargo in Europe, major American companies such as Boeing and Hughes were under judicial examination and were eventually fined in 2003 on charges of illegally having delivered satellite technology to China in previous years. The US has also denied US firms the permission to export satellites to China for launching.

In recent years, prominent European firms such as Rolls-Royce have acknowledged that they have continued to deliver military-related equipment to China. The British firm said that it agreed to supply some 90 of its Spey Mk202 engines to China to power the new domestic JH7A fighter aircraft which is expected to be deployed in 2004. The firm has explained that the engine is based largely on 1960s and 70s technology and that it had been covered by supply contracts dating back to that period. The firm has been delivering engines to China since the 1960s and developed a number of joint ventures in the civilian sector. In the 1970s other Rolls-Royce engines were reported to have been tested on a variant of the country' s H-6 nuclear bomber.

British, French, German and other firms have also been reported to have exported radar, electronics, satellite and even defensive missile technology and equipment to China in recent years since the embargo implementation. Such firms see the Chinese market as a promising one for marketing and industrial collaboration and have regarded the embargo as complicating and restricting this potential.