

“A Briefing on the Sanya Initiative”

Friday, June 6, 2008
11:45 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Event Summary

On June 6, 2008, three retired senior military leaders and participants in the Sanya Initiative spoke to an audience at CSIS about the goals and outcomes of the February 2008 meeting. Held on Hainan Island, China, the Initiative brought together nine retired senior military figures from China and the United States for a discussion of the U.S.-China relationship. At the CSIS briefing, **Admiral William A. Owens**, the delegation leader and former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provided a brief overview of the nature of the initiative and the February meeting. **General Ronald R. Fogleman**, former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, and **General John M. Keane**, former Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, discussed their thoughts about the February dialogue and the U.S.-China relationship more generally. The meeting was moderated by **Derek Mitchell**, Senior Fellow and Director for Asia in the International Security Program at CSIS. **Stephen Flanagan**, Senior Vice President and Director of the International Security Program at CSIS, introduced the panel.

Admiral William A. Owens

Admiral Owens began by presenting a brief introduction of the goals and nature of the Sanya Initiative. He shared his analysis of the February meeting, media coverage in both the United States and China, and future prospects for the initiative:

The goals of the initiative were to establish trust and confidence between both sides, to promote better exchange between the U.S. and Chinese militaries, to convey accurate and relevant information to key decision-makers, and to continue to encourage joint cooperation. With these goals in mind, four U.S. generals (the three participants plus General Charles E. Wilhelm) met five Chinese generals in February in Hainan, China. The agenda of the meeting included discussions about defense policy in the two countries, military-to-military relations, and issues ranging from Taiwan to China's military budget.

Media responses to the February dialogue were much more extensive and favorable in China than in the United States. Some of the limited coverage that the initiative received in the United States was negative, particularly from the *Washington Times*. The participants pledged after the February dialogue to maintain continuous communication through various channels such as personal letters, bi-monthly telecommunications, and a second meeting to be convened later this year.

General Ronald R. Fogleman

General Fogleman focused his initial remarks on the importance of how the U.S. views China in the bilateral relationship. He noted historical trends within the bilateral relationship, and briefly commented on how ties can be improved:

The relationship between the United States and China is the single most important international relationship the United States will have in the 21st century. In reality, within a spectrum of potential relationships that includes (from cordiality to animosity) – “friend, ally, competitor, adversary, enemy” – China is not an enemy. But if the United States is left to its own devices, it could make China its enemy through its own actions.

The U.S.-China relationship is characterized by an ebb and flow of high to low buildups of trust and cooperation. Traditionally, an initial low level of trust turns into a rapid buildup after a crisis point. Subsequently, however, the relationship returns to a low level of trust after the crisis has been forgotten. While the frequency of these ebbs and flows is increasing over time, the downside of this cyclical process of highs and lows is that it will require a long period of time to achieve sustained cooperation between the two countries. Improving this shifting relationship will require people-to-people interactions.

General John M. Keane

General Keane continued the discussion on the importance and nature of the U.S.-China relationship. He outlined his takeaways from the dialogue, including the Chinese generals’ perceptions of bilateral relations and the nature of the meeting itself:

The U.S.-China relationship is the single most important international relationship the United States will have in the 21st century. There is plenty of room for miscalculation and mischief by both sides in the relationship. However, greater understanding between the two sides can help avoid these potential miscalculations.

U.S. and Chinese participants found that they had many common ties between them such as travelling abroad and their careers of service to their respective countries. The Chinese generals became less stiff and more willing to talk freely as the meeting progressed. Much time was spent talking about the issue of Taiwan. The Chinese generals seemed to have a genuine respect for the United States and possessed more than a surface understanding of U.S. politics, particularly on the issue of 9/11 and its psychological effects on a nation that has rarely been attacked domestically in its history. But the Chinese were also sensitive to criticisms from the United States and “China bashing” from various parts of the U.S. political spectrum. Despite assurances by the U.S. generals that the criticism was in part election season rhetoric, the Chinese responded by asking how the generals would feel if these things were said about their families.

Questions/Comments and Responses

In response to a question on whether crisis management mechanisms were discussed at the February meeting, Admiral Owens noted that there were restrictions on U.S.-China cooperation on issues such as crisis management mechanisms. If Americans wish to understand or have friendly relations with China, they must be aware of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2000, which imposes restrictions on U.S.-China military cooperation. The Chinese participants knew much more about the NDAA than the U.S. participants. General Fogleman favored the establishment of a hotline as one way to reduce the potential for miscalculations, but he also noted the lack of a senior level structure in China which made it difficult to ascertain who should be at the other end of such a hotline. Regarding miscalculation, he said that despite China's use of words like "hegemony," "superpower," and bipolarity" in its discourse, the Chinese generals recognized that their country was neither a superpower nor ready to become one. He emphasized the fact that there were limits to China's 'sensitivity', as evidenced by the lack of a major Chinese response when the U.S. shot down a satellite while the dialogue was being held.

In response to a question on the controversy over the dialogue within the U.S. media, including the inclusion of former military intelligence chief General Xiong Guangkai as the leader of the Chinese delegation, Admiral Owens argued that the question of the general's reputation reflected Western misconceptions about the dialogue itself. Observers in the United States and elsewhere misconstrued the dialogue as an opportunity for China to tell the United States what to do differently. In fact, the dialogue was not about General Xiong or Chinese lessons for the United States, but a way to encourage a "spirit of togetherness." Admiral Owens added that he wondered why people were opposed to dialogue.

General Fogleman added that if the Chinese participants emphasized the importance of the Taiwan issue above all other topics. They stressed the seriousness of the issue and that U.S. actions, even when inadvertent, could complicate matters. In addition, when asked what messages they would like communicated to government officials back in the United States, the Chinese generals said they felt it would be helpful if the Department of Defense annual report on the China's military power were released after the Taiwan election this year. General Fogleman called government officials to propose this, but a press conference had already been scheduled for the report's release and the timeline was not changed.

In response to a question on whether the U.S. delegation raised the issue of China's lack of transparency in its military buildup, Admiral Owens said that while in some regards, criticism of China's lack of transparency is valid, it is sometimes exaggerated or misplaced, as in the allegations about the Sanya military base. Owens has the sense that the Chinese government might not know how to conduct its affairs transparently. He argued that the Chinese generals knew their country was neither a superpower nor interested in becoming one, and that China is a domestically-oriented country with border issues to resolve, rather than one moving toward imperialism. He stressed the need to focus on understanding China's intent, which is cautious, peaceful, and domestically-oriented, rather than threatening or revisionist. He also suggested that

one interpretation of transparency might include greater contact and communication with the Chinese government.

General Fogleman said he had trouble understanding what exactly constituted transparency himself, so it was no surprise that the Chinese government had a different perspective regarding the issue. He noted that during the dialogue, the Chinese generals themselves asked the U.S. participants why they found the Sanya base surprising at all, since China was merely safeguarding its interests in the Malacca Straits and Taiwan. He also noted encouraging evidence of increased transparency and cooperation, including Beijing's willingness to allow for international assistance after the earthquake.

When asked whether the Chinese generals suggested any proposals for NDAA 2000 reform, Admiral Owens clarified that the NDAA comments by the Chinese side were made in response to the U.S. participants' question about what messages should be taken back to the United States, and that this did not seem to be a prepared agenda item. He recommended that the United States seek to engage China in international efforts on challenges such as piracy and peacekeeping and stated that this type of cooperation would benefit the United States.

In response to a question on how the two countries could proceed in broadening military-to-military relations at various levels, Admiral Owens argued that meetings with senior level defense officials of another country cannot be substituted with communiqués and other forms of communication. He proposed engaging China at all levels in a thoughtful and constructive manner, because one can engage without giving too much away and there is much to be gained. On specific initiatives for cooperation, Admiral Owens highlighted that the program which brings Chinese 1-star generals to Harvard has been reinstituted. He proposed trying to further increase the links between young officers in both countries and urging U.S. officers to learn Mandarin Chinese. In addition, he emphasized the need for a senior official exchange without any preconceived agenda for the sole purpose of sharing views in a relaxed way.

In response to a question on whether the Chinese participants relayed information and suggestions from the Sanya Initiative to officials in Beijing, as the U.S. participants did, Admiral Owens replied that while he did not have direct evidence, he has heard from sources that the Chinese generals did go back to brief Beijing about the dialogue.

[End.]