

In Chinese admiral-s outburst, a lingering distrust of U.S.

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On May 24 in a vast meeting room inside the grounds of the state guesthouse at Diaoyutai in Beijing, Rear Adm. Guan Youfei of the People's Liberation Army rose to speak.

Known among U.S. officials as a senior "barbarian handler," which means that his job is to deal with foreigners, not lead troops, Guan faced about 65 American officials, part of the biggest delegation the U.S. government has ever sent to China.

Everything, Guan said, that is going right in U.S. relations with China is because of China. Everything, he continued, that is going wrong is the fault of the United States. Guan accused the United States of being a "hegemon" and of plotting to encircle China with strategic alliances. The official saved the bulk of his bile for U.S. arms sales to China's nemesis, Taiwan -- Guan said these prove that the United States views China as an enemy.

U.S. officials have since depicted Guan's three-minute jeremiad as an anomaly. A senior U.S. official traveling on Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's plane back to the United States dismissed it, saying it was "out of step" with the rest of the two-day Strategic and Economic Dialogue. And last week in Singapore, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates sought to portray not just Guan, but the whole of the People's Liberation Army, as an outlier intent on blocking better ties with Washington while the rest of China's government moves ahead.

But interviews in China with a wide range of experts, Chinese officials and military officers indicate that Guan's rant -- for all its discomfiting bluster -- actually represents the mainstream views of the Chinese Communist Party, and that perhaps the real outliers might be those in China's government who want to side with the United States.

Guan's speech underscored that 31 years after the United States and China normalized relations, there remains a deep distrust in Beijing. That the United States is trying to keep China down is a central part of the party's catechism and a foundation of its claims to legitimacy.

More broadly, many Chinese security experts and officials view the Obama administration's policy of encouraging Chinese participation in solving the world's problems -- including climate change, the global financial crisis and the security challenges in Iran and North Korea -- not as attempts to elevate China into the ranks of global leadership but rather as a scheme to enmesh it in a paralyzing web of commitments.

"Admiral Guan was representing what all of us think about the United States in our hearts," a senior Chinese official, who deals with the United States regularly, said on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak with a reporter. "It may not have been politically correct, but it wasn't an accident."

"It's silly to talk about factions when it comes to relations with the United States," said a general in the PLA who also spoke on the condition of anonymity. "The army follows the party. Do you really think that Guan did this unilaterally?"

China's fear of the United States was very much on display this past weekend during the Shangri-La Dialogue, where Gates and his Chinese counterparts clashed repeatedly throughout the program.

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Gates said it was unnecessary for the PLA to hold the military relationship hostage because U.S. arms sales to Taiwan are, "quite frankly, old news." The United States has provided military assistance to Taiwan since 1949, when the Nationalist government of China fled to the island after the Communist victory on the mainland; this assistance did not stop when Washington normalized relations with Beijing in 1979.

"You, the Americans, are taking China as the enemy," countered Maj. Gen. Zhu Chenghu. Zhu rose to prominence in China in 2005 after he warned that if the United States came to Taiwan's defense in a war with China, Beijing would abandon its "no first use" doctrine on nuclear weapons and attack the United States.

In January, Washington announced a \$6.4 billion arms package for Taiwan, prompting China to downgrade its military ties with the United States. China's stance on the issue is part of a concerted campaign to change a foundation of U.S. policy in the region -- its security relationship with Taiwan. At the very least, Chinese officials said, they want the Obama administration to reiterate a commitment it made in a joint communique with China in 1982 to decrease arms sales to Taiwan.

The U.S. framing of Guan's speech and the entire PLA as being out of step with the times is significant, analysts said, because the Obama administration could fall into a trap of expecting more from China than it can deliver. On the plane back to the United States, for example, U.S. officials predicted that despite Guan's outburst, China would welcome Gates and that it would also begin to side with South Korea against North Korea following the release of a report in Seoul implicating the regime of Kim Jong Il in the deadly sinking of a South Korean warship on March 26. China did neither, and interviews with PLA officers indicate that the military is highly suspicious of the South Korean report.

U.S. officials have also expressed the hope that China would work harder to press Iran, for example, to engage in talks on its nuclear weapons program. The United States also wants China's cooperation on slapping new sanctions on Tehran. China has shown more flexibility on this issue, but it is still unclear whether it will ultimately support sanctions.

Chinese analysts say the Obama administration ignores what China calls its "core national interests" -- especially U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan -- at its peril.

"For years, China has opposed arms sales to Taiwan among other things, but we were never strong enough to do anything about it," said Cui Liru, the president of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, a think tank run by the Ministry of State Security. "But our national strength has grown. And it is time that the United States pay attention."

"This is not just a talking point that can be dismissed by your government," he continued. "It is something that must be dealt with or it will seriously damage ties."