

## US-China Military Officials Meet under MMCA: An Analysis

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### Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region is undoubtedly has become the epicentre of the rivalry between the United States and China. This is not something new. Since the United States implemented its Open Door Policy in 1889<sup>1</sup>, the Western Pacific and its coastal states have been engaged in a continuous effort to avoid confrontation, particularly in the maritime domain.<sup>2</sup> Considering the volatility of the region, and potential confrontation, another significant agreement was signed between the US and China on January 19, 1998, in Beijing, known as the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA).<sup>3</sup> The agreement has been in effect since its inception, except for a break between December 2021 and April 2024. The military maritime representatives from US and China have meticulously tried and maintained a specific level of engagement to avert confrontation and avoiding accidents, mitigating the chances of inadvertent escalation of war. The US and China also signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Rules of Behaviour for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters (RBSAME) in November 2014.<sup>4</sup> Recently, the April 2025 MMCA meeting is a significant development deserving

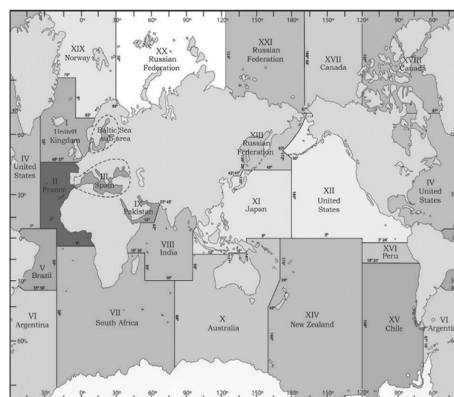
discussion given the nature of conflicting relationship between the two countries. Before elaborating on the recent meeting, the article briefly outlines the importance of the MMCA framework.

### Significance of MMCA Framework

With an estimated area covering almost 60 million square miles (160 million square km), the Pacific Ocean is a huge water body and it is the largest as well as the deepest ocean in the world.<sup>5</sup> Due to its huge size, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) has already divided the Pacific Ocean into 7 Navigational Areas (NAVAREAS) for the ease of navigating and managing the maritime affairs.<sup>6</sup> The West Pacific comes under the NAVAREA XI (Figure 1).

Figure 1

#### The illustration of NAVAREAS<sup>7</sup>



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The IMO is a specialised agency of the United Nations having the responsibility of managing the safety and security of maritime affairs.<sup>8</sup>

### **The April 2025 MMCA Meeting: Analysis**

From April 2-3, 2025, the US military officials from all the uniformed branches serving under the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) met the representatives from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Shanghai. Last time, the military officials from both the countries met in April 2024, at Hawaii. In the years 2022 and 2023, no talks could take place, since China suspended the meetings for the then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.<sup>9</sup> China lodged protest for the controversial visit; however, in April 2024, both resumed talks. The Chinese news agency Xinhua reported that during the recent meeting, the efficacy of RBSAME was evaluated and discussed in detail to further improve the maritime military security in the most challenging region of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The resumption of talks on military maritime safety and security issues between the US and China is a good omen generally, and for the region particularly. Due to geo-strategic, geo-economic, and geo-political reasons, the importance of West Pacific has increased manifold and is likely to take a considerable hike in the foreseeable future. It is to be remembered here that the US Navy's Seventh Fleet is garrisoned at Yokosuka, Japan, and took a

pivotal part in the military operations during the Second World War, Korean War, Vietnam War, and the three Taiwan Strait Crises.<sup>11</sup>

The West Pacific is also home to number of reefs and shoals, which naturally make navigation a little harder and the chances of accidents could rise significantly. Such accidents are not limited to maritime forces and coast guards, but also fishing boats and other recreational vessels could also cause accidents.

The instruments such as RBSAME and establishing hot lines for rapid communication among the frontline commanders could considerably improve the tactical and operational level cooperation. Thus, such ventures are welcoming which could reduce the chances of unfortunate incidents and improving geopolitical tensions.

In the ongoing strategic rivalry between the US and China, any official engagement between the two countries is viewed with high expectations or perhaps unrealistic prospects. As mentioned earlier, the MMCA is strictly related to air and naval activities especially in the highly contested area of West Pacific and it has nothing to do with the overall US-China relations.<sup>12</sup> However, this theatre-strategic and operational level confidence-building instrument could help bring some ease between the two armed forces.

Undoubtedly, the MMCA is a very important agreement that reflects the rationality of the two armed forces. Both sides didn't issue much details regarding

the meeting; nonetheless, we may witness more cooperation between the two in the foreseeable future. It is understandable that both sides view each other's actions with suspicion and time and again they level certain accusations. For now, one can well estimate that there will be more information sharing and the forward commanders will be meeting more often to avoid unfortunate incidents. One can well expect that other littoral states of the West Pacific could follow suit for sustainable safety and security in the region.

The Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (COLREGS),<sup>13</sup> and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982,<sup>14</sup> serve as the inspiration behind MMCA. It is fortunate that the US and China are already signatories of the non-binding Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) of 2014.<sup>15</sup> These international agreements help in maintaining safety and security in the maritime domain and the MMCA operates in accordance with such conventions.

## Conclusion

The MMCA is a central apparatus that has been instrumental in mitigating

conflicts as well as accidents in the West Pacific. The main objective of MMCA is to avoid confrontation, while at the same time encourage cooperation. The geography as well as topography of the West Pacific encourages the forward deployment of troops. However, with the forward deployment of armed forces and the continuous patrolling in one of the most challenging maritime environments, the chances of inadvertent escalation of war increases momentarily. Hence, it is incumbent on both the US and China to improve their military-to-military cooperation.

History reveals that many military adventures could have been avoided provided the communication between opposing forces on the frontlines. For instance, the Gulf of Tonkin is a very important body of water in the West Pacific, and in August 1964, the North Vietnamese Forces and the US Navy clashed with each other, primarily because of lacking a hotline between the frontline commanders.<sup>16</sup> Later, the Gulf of Tonkin incident led to a wider and greater role of the US in the Vietnam War till the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes and References

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- <sup>13</sup> "Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (COLREGs)," *International Maritime Organization*, 2025, <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/COLREG.aspx>.
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- <sup>15</sup> Sam LaGrone, "Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea," *USNI News*, 17 June 2014, <https://news.usni.org/2014/06/17/document-conduct-unplanned-encounters-sea>.
- <sup>16</sup> Lee Edwards and Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, *A Brief History of the Cold War* (Washington DC, USA: Regnery History, 2016), 102–3.
- <sup>17</sup> Spencer C. Tucker and Priscilla Mary Roberts, eds., *Cold War: A Student Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2008).