

China's Xiangshan Forum: A balancing act for the PLA by Kim Fassler

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Later this week, on Oct. 16-18, China will host the Xiangshan Forum, a recently upgraded track 1.5 dialogue organized by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and military-associated think tanks. Scheduled to coincide with a special meeting between Beijing and ASEAN defense ministers is almost certainly intended to improve attendance from last year and underscores a larger effort by Beijing to better shape Asia's security agenda.

The Xiangshan Forum's evolution is part of Beijing's increasingly active regional diplomacy, in which military diplomats and academics play a larger role. Last year, Beijing upgraded the biannual forum – which started nearly a decade ago with only about 40 attendees – to an annual event and invited high-level defense officials for the first time. More than 300 individuals from 47 countries attended the 2014 forum, including former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and defense ministers from Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, and Singapore. Defense ministers of Japan, South Korea, and North Korea were also invited. Participants discussed deeper cooperation on counterterrorism and maritime security issues, and Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan – the most senior Chinese officer to attend the Forum since its inception – gave the keynote speech.

The PLA is looking to grow the Xiangshan Forum's attendance this year and expand senior participation, including from the United States. This month's forum is likely to draw greater interest and participation than last year, especially because of close timing with the China-ASEAN defense ministers meeting in Beijing. The list of high-level attendees will include Gen. Chang, who met numerous defense leaders on the sidelines of last year's Forum. Foreign government officials and members of nonprofits and the private sector also see benefits to rubbing elbows with the forum's many attendees from the PLA, China's foreign ministry, and military-associated think tanks who influence Chinese policymaking and can offer insight into Beijing's thinking on current issues.

Despite the Xiangshan Forum's potential, the PLA will find that controlling the venue does not mean it controls the tone of the discussion. At last year's event, a Chinese attendee observed with satisfaction that most Xiangshan Forum participants were "friendly to China," unlike those at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore. A retired PLA officer

applauded China for creating a platform to set its own agenda, "instead of responding to questions posed by other countries" on their own soil.

Frustration with Beijing isn't likely to be reduced by simply adding to the discussion more countries that view China in a positive light, however. The PLA will continue to face tensions between the dual demands of building good relations with other militaries and meeting Chinese leaders' expectations for a more prominent PLA presence on China's periphery, a goal outlined in [China's new white paper on military strategy](#). This balancing act was on display in May when the PLA's release of the strategy – a gesture of transparency – received a cool reception in many foreign defense circles.

Another potential roadblock to the Xiangshan Forum's success is China's general approach to dialogue, which often requires acceptance of Beijing's version of history as a prerequisite for trust-building. Last year, Gen. Chang began his keynote speech by discussing how China's "wretched modern history" and exploitation by foreign powers justified its military modernization and position on territorial disputes.

At the 2012 Xiangshan Forum, PLA participants focused more on "correcting" other countries' perceptions of China as an aggressor than on how to prevent miscalculation in the future, according to [a U.S. attendee](#). These anecdotes suggest that Beijing sees controlling the story as a way to tamp down criticism of its actions and shift the narrative on territorial disputes in its favor. Unfortunately, it also raises questions about whether the Xiangshan Forum can be a useful venue for building trust and overcoming differences.

As other countries, including the United States, consider participation in this year's Xiangshan Forum, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, they should applaud calls by President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders to prioritize peace and stability in Asia, especially China's efforts to promote dialogue. Second, they should consider what kind of delegation would best contribute to the discussions, which will include maritime security and antiterrorism cooperation. Sending legal, maritime security, or counterterrorism specialists, for example, could make discussions on these topics more robust and inclusive of different views, and encourage practical solutions. Finally, invitees should use the incentive of their participation to press the PLA to make the Xiangshan Forum a genuine two-way conversation. This includes impressing on China that regional tensions are not due to others' misunderstanding and urging Beijing to explore how its actions contribute to narratives of China as an aggressor instead of a regional leader.

An event that is welcoming of many different perspectives would help the Xiangshan Forum become an internationally

respected security dialogue and improve strategic understanding between Beijing and its regional partners.

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