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Associate Press

China urges closer military ties with Australia

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A leading Chinese general urged closer ties with Australia's military on Monday, amid a continuing freeze on Beijing's contacts with the Pentagon.

Gen. Liao Xilong pledged Monday to "beef up military exchanges" with Australia, during a meeting in Beijing with Australian Air Vice-Marshal Margaret Staib, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

The People's Liberation Army "hopes to expand its cooperation with the Australian armed forces to push bilateral military ties to a new level," said Liao, who is head of logistics for the 2.3 million-member PLA and sits on Communist Party commission that oversees the military's operations.

The outreach to a top U.S. ally in the region contrasts starkly with Beijing's approach toward Washington — continuing its demands that the U.S. cancel a \$6.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan, and take other unspecified steps to repair relations and allow military exchanges to resume.

China suspended the contacts in January in retaliation for the sale and in recent months has grown increasingly vocal in complaining about U.S. military movements in Asia.

U.S. officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, have expressed frustration at the suspension, saying the sides need regular contacts to build trust and avoid conflicts.

The PLA has sought to build relations with other navies through port calls, exchange of visits by top generals, and a limited number of joint sea drills.

Leaders hope that will help lessen concerns about the PLA's burgeoning capabilities, particularly that of its navy, although Beijing's aggressive territorial claims to the South China Sea have spurred some countries such as Vietnam to build ties with the U.S. as a hedge against Chinese influence.