

South China Sea, Taiwan and trade: US-China relations deteriorating fast over flashpoint issues

Wednesday 6 June 2018, by [AFP](#), [Associated Press](#), [TISDALL Simon](#) (Date first published: 6 June 2018).

Clashes over South China Sea, Taiwan and trade have plunged Trump and Xi into the diplomatic deep freeze.

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China's expanding efforts to impose its will on neighbours through diplomatic, commercial and military pressure – the so-called Xi doctrine – have drawn the sharpest riposte to date from the Trump administration, with Taiwan once again the main flashpoint in a sea of accelerating Sino-American rivalry.

Following recent verbal clashes over US “freedom of navigation” patrols in disputed South China Sea waters, officials in Washington say they plan to send a US aircraft carrier battlegroup into the Taiwan Strait separating the island from mainland China. The move was in response to China's military “turning up the heat” on Taiwan, an official said.

Such a US deployment, if it goes ahead, would be seen as highly provocative by China's president, Xi Jinping, who has vowed to reunify China with its “renegade province” in his lifetime. It would potentially bring the US navy into contact with Chinese surface and submarine forces and hundreds of People's Liberation Army missile batteries lining the shores of the strait. Xi warned Taiwan's pro-independence government in March that it would face the “punishment of history” if it pursued a separatist course.

On Tuesday, a foreign ministry spokeswoman cautioned Washington not to jeopardise peace. “We have repeatedly emphasised that the Taiwan issue is the most important and sensitive core issue in the China-US relationship,” she said.

Although the US does not recognise Taiwan as an independent country, it is, to all intents and purposes, its principal defender and guarantor against attack. Donald Trump outraged Beijing after he was elected by talking directly to Taiwan's president by phone. Washington has sold Taiwan more than \$15bn (£11.2bn) in arms since 2010, and Trump has increased bilateral contacts, including with the Pentagon.

Meanwhile, China has accelerated efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, using its economic clout to pressure countries and international institutions into breaking off ties. It has curbed bilateral trade and cultural exchanges while increasing naval exercises and fighter-bomber sorties, including the deployment of its own aircraft carrier in the strait. That has led to warnings China could “do a

Crimea" in Taiwan, aping Russia's action in Ukraine.

The US response is being closely watched for signs of weakness by America's other allies in the region, who are also feeling the squeeze. Australia's government strongly protested this week at Chinese pressure on Qantas to list Taiwan as Chinese territory on its website. Australia is already involved in disputes with Beijing over alleged covert meddling by China in its internal political affairs. Similar allegations of Chinese interference have surfaced in New Zealand.

Rodrigo Duterte, the volatile Philippines president, recently became so upset about Chinese encroachment on South China Sea islands claimed by Manila (which refers to the area as the West Philippines Sea) that he threatened to declare war. That led Vietnam, which has its own disputes with Beijing, to call for calm.

Dangerous US-China flashpoint issues appear to be multiplying fast. The two superpowers are locked in a worsening trade dispute. China took furious exception to American and Taiwanese comments about this week's anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators. It flatly rejects criticism of its repression of similar sentiments in Hong Kong.

Now the US and China may also be heading for a collision over Trump's attempts to cut a denuclearisation-for-normalisation deal with North Korea at a summit next week. China may greatly benefit from an end to sanctions. But if Pyongyang comes in from the cold, Beijing could catch a strategic chill.

Speaking in Singapore at the weekend, James Mattis, the US defence secretary, had a tough message for China, indicating how far relations have deteriorated since Trump visited Beijing last year. "We have seen those who wanted to dominate the region come and go, and we have been with you," Mattis told America's allies. China would ultimately pay a heavy price for bullying its neighbours.

Simon Tisdall

* The Guardian. Wed 6 Jun 2018 01.00 BST Last modified on Wed 6 Jun 2018 01.01 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/06/us-china-relations-deteriorating-fast-taiwan-trade>

Mattis accuses China of 'intimidation and coercion' in South China Sea

US defence secretary warns of consequences if China continues militarisation of manmade islands.

China's placement of weapons systems on manmade islands in the South China Sea is designed to intimidate and coerce others in the region, the US defence secretary James Mattis has said, laying out a sharp criticism of Beijing at an international security forum.

Speaking at the Singapore summit, he warned that America's recent move to disinvite China from a multinational naval exercise this summer was an "initial response" to the militarisation of the islands.

And, in response to a question, he said that “much larger consequences” were possible in the future if China did not find a way to work more collaboratively with others in the region.

The US, he said, remained committed to ensuring free and open transit in the region.

“Despite China’s claims to the contrary, the placement of these weapons systems is tied directly to military use for the purposes of intimidation and coercion,” Mattis said, referring to the recent deployment of anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles, electronic jammers and other equipment on the Spratly Islands, and the landing of bomber aircraft at Woody Island.

Mattis also struck at one of the key, longstanding disputes between the US and China, telling the conference that America will continue to provide defence equipment and services to Taiwan and oppose any effort to alter the status quo. China claims the self-governing island as its own territory to be brought under its control by force if necessary.

But in a quick pivot, he said the US welcomed cooperation with China “wherever possible” and announced that he had accepted Beijing’s invitation to visit there soon. It remains to be seen if that invitation will stand after this conference.

The Pentagon leader’s comments at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue came in the wake of a tumultuous few weeks between the US and China.

Last week the US withdrew an invitation for Beijing to participate in an exercise known as Rim of the Pacific. China had participated in the exercise in 2014 and 2016.

The Pentagon said the decision to disinvite the Chinese navy was triggered by what it called strong evidence that China has deployed weapons systems on the islands, and called on China to remove them. China says it is within its rights to build up defences on islands in the South China Sea that it believes are its sovereign territory.

China’s activities, Mattis said in his speech Saturday, stand “in stark contrast to the openness of what our strategy promotes. It calls into question China’s broader goals.”

In recent years the US had sought to stabilise military relations with China, but the militarisation of the islands has been a persistent point of conflict. Many nations fear that Beijing will use the construction on the islands to extend its military reach and potentially try to restrict navigation in the South China Sea.

China has not sent high-level officials to the three-day meeting, in an apparent attempt to deflect attention from its campaign to expand its sovereignty across virtually the entire South China Sea.

Mattis made clear that the US does not expect nations to choose between the US and China, adding that Beijing should have a voice in shaping the region, while allies have a voice in shaping China’s role.

The US, he said, “will continue to pursue a constructive, results-oriented relationship with China, cooperation when possible, and competing vigorously where we must”.

Associated Press in Singapore

* The Guardian. Sat 2 Jun 2018 06.50 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/02/mattis-accuses-china-of-intimidation-and-coercion-in-south-china-sea>

South China Sea: US will keep confronting Beijing - Mattis

Rhetoric ramps up as defence secretary says China's militarisation of the disputed islands is out of step with international law.

US defence secretary Jim Mattis has vowed that the US would keep confronting China over its territorial claims in the South China Sea, where Beijing has established a significant military presence on contested islands.

Mattis's remarks came after Beijing voiced "strong dissatisfaction" on Sunday after two US warships sailed by an island in the disputed Paracel Island chain.

"You'll notice there's only one country that seems to take active steps to rebuff (such operations) or state their resentment of them, but it's international waters and a lot of nations want to see freedom of navigation, so we will continue that," Mattis told reporters as he flew to Hawaii.

His intervention comes amid tension between Washington and Beijing over trade policy. The US imposed \$50bn worth of tariffs on Chinese goods on Tuesday despite comments last week by treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin that a threatened trade war with China was "on hold" after talks between the two countries.

The US navy periodically conducts "freedom of navigation" operations in the contested waterway, where it sails close to island features China has built into military facilities as a way of showing it rejects any territorial claims.

"We are going out of our way to cooperate with Pacific nations, that's the way we do business in the world, but we are also going to confront what we believe is out of step with international law," Mattis said.

Sunday's operation was conducted just over a week after Beijing flew nuclear-capable bombers to a disputed island, drawing immediate criticism from the US.

Last week, the Pentagon pulled its invitation to China to join maritime exercises in the Pacific over Beijing's "continued militarisation" of the South China Sea.

Beijing has been building artificial islands to reinforce its claim over most of the resource-rich South China Sea, despite protests from south-east Asian countries.

Its neighbours, particularly some of those involved in maritime disputes over the waters, have expressed fears China could eventually restrict freedom of navigation and overflight.

"Our diplomats are robustly engaged on this," Mattis said.

"The concerns have come to me not just from American government circles, but also from foreign nations that are concerned, very concerned about this continued militarization of features in the South China Sea."

Agence France-Presse

* The Guardian, Wed 30 May 2018 03.14 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/30/south-china-sea-us-will-keep-confronting-beijing-mattis>
