

In Singapore, US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis Criticizes Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea islands and Supports Taiwan

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Mattis Accuses Beijing of 'Intimidation and Coercion' in South China Sea

SINGAPORE — Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis harshly criticized the Chinese government on Saturday for its continuing militarization of a string of islands in the South China Sea, calling the new presence of advanced military equipment and missiles there a flagrant show of military power.

"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," Mr. Mattis said during a speech on Saturday at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, a regional security conference.

Mr. Mattis recently disinvited the Chinese military from a large, multinational naval exercise this summer due in part to China's positioning of those weapons, including antiship and surface-to-air missiles, on the Spratly Islands.

China's activities, Mr. Mattis said, are "in stark contrast to the openness our strategy promotes," calling into question "China's broader goals."

Mr. Mattis's remarks come as the United States tries to navigate increased tensions with Beijing, even as the Trump administration seeks Chinese help in curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

The Chinese military participated in the multinational exercise, called the Rim of the Pacific, in 2014 and 2016. Mr. Mattis called the move to withdraw their invitation an "initial response," without specifying what additional moves the United States might be considering. He added that he was open to cooperation with China "wherever possible."

"The U.S. will continue to pursue a constructive, results-oriented relationship with China," Mr. Mattis said, "competing vigorously where we must."

On Sunday, two American warships sailed within 12 miles of islands in the South China Sea, in an attempt to assert the United States' stance on freedom of navigation in international waters. China has laid claim to most of the South China Sea, in defiance of international norms.

Mr. Mattis tried to reassure allies in the region that the United States was committed to handling both China's rapid expansion and the threat from North Korea.

"We are focused on modernizing our alliance with both the Republic of Korea and Japan, transforming these critical alliances to meet the challenges of the 21st century," Mr. Mattis said, using South Korea's formal name.

He also said the United States would continue to support Taiwan, the self-governing island that China claims as its territory, with military and other assistance.

Aaron L. Friedberg, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University and a former deputy assistant for national security affairs, said that Mr. Mattis's speech was probably meant to ease American allies' concerns not just about regional threats, but about President Trump's oft-changing foreign policy.

"They don't know what's coming next," Mr. Friedberg said. "There's not much people even at Mattis's levels can do about it."

Mr. Mattis said little about North Korea in his speech, which came just hours after Mr. Trump said that the June 12 talks in Singapore with the North's leader, Kim Jong-un, were back on. He said the American goal remained the "irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." In response to a question, he added that American troop levels in South Korea would not be on the agenda for the summit talks.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff

* New York Times, June 1, 2018:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/world/asia/mattis-south-china-sea.html>

A version of this article appears in print on June 2, 2018, on Page A5 of the New York edition with the headline: *Mattis Blasts China's Choice To Emphasize Military Might*.

U.S. Disinvites China From Military Exercise Amid Rising Tensions

WASHINGTON — The United States has disinvited China from participating in a multinational naval exercise scheduled for this summer, further escalating tensions with Beijing that have spanned from trade to North Korea to the military.

The Pentagon cited China's rapid military buildup on disputed islands in the South China Sea for withdrawing the invitation for Beijing to participate in the large-scale naval exercise known as Rim of the Pacific, or RimPac. Defense Department officials said on Wednesday that China's decision to place surface-to-air missile systems and other offensive weaponry on the islands spurred the move.

The military snub comes after President Trump suggested the Chinese might be influencing North Korea's recent talk of withdrawing from a summit meeting set for June 12 to discuss the dismantling of Pyongyang's nuclear program. Washington and Beijing also are in the middle of a major trade fight that is part of a perennial battle over market access and technology policy.

The conflict over China's military buildup in the disputed islands adds another layer to the overall tensions between the two global economic powers.

"We have strong evidence that China has deployed anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile systems, and electronic jammers to contested features in the Spratly Islands region of the South China Sea," Lt. Cmdr. Christopher Logan, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement.

He added that "China's landing of bomber aircraft at Woody Island has also raised tensions."

It marks the first time that China has been disinvited from RimPac, Commander Logan said.

Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea islands — which have been claimed variously by China, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines — has been for years a source of tension.

During his campaign, Mr. Trump labeled President Barack Obama as weak in defending international waters in the South China Sea, where Beijing has started a sharp military buildup to reclaim land, install runways and haul equipment onto reefs and shoals it claims as its own. Several of Mr. Trump's aides called for China to be denied access to the artificial islands.

During the first few months of the Trump administration, foreign policy experts and Asia watchers braced for a return to routine Navy patrols within China's self-proclaimed territorial waters, something Mr. Obama allowed sparingly.

But freedom of navigation naval patrols, which are used by the United States to challenge Chinese claims to the islands, continued sparingly. Top Pentagon officials rejected three requests by the Navy to conduct the freedom of navigation patrols in the initial months of Mr. Trump's presidency, before resuming them again last year.

China has brought additional equipment to the disputed islands and bomb-proofed airplane hangars it built there. Its government says that such action does not constitute a militarization of the islands, which Beijing considers to be Chinese territory and therefore it cannot militarize land it already owns.

The United States and other countries disagree.

"China's continued militarization of disputed features in the South China Sea only serve to raise tensions and destabilize the region," Commander Logan said in the Pentagon statement. He called China's behavior "inconsistent with the principles and purposes" of the exercise.

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* New York Times, May 23, 2018:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/23/world/asia/us-china-rimpac-military-exercise-tensions.html>

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