

U.S.-China Military Tensions Start to Rise as Trade War Deepens

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Bloomberg, 27 de septiembre de 2018

As a trade war heats up between the U.S. and China, military tensions are also rising.

China on Tuesday [refused](#) a U.S. warship entry to Hong Kong next month, according to the U.S. Consulate General in Hong Kong, and Beijing's top naval officer canceled a high-level meeting with his U.S. counterpart after being recalled to China, according to Lieutenant Colonel Dave Eastburn, a Pentagon spokesman.

The moves come as a worsening trade war prompts concern in Beijing over whether President Donald Trump's latest tariffs are part of a master plan to stop China from threatening American dominance of the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration last week levied unprecedented [penalties](#) on a Chinese military procurement agency and its director for allegedly purchasing Russian combat aircraft, claiming a violation of U.S. sanctions.

"It all adds up," said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, who teaches U.S.-China relations at Hong Kong Baptist University. "It plays into the hands of the conservatives like Xi Jinping in China's leadership that Trump's real intent is to contain China's rise."

Midterm Elections

Trump's [latest assault](#) came Wednesday when he accused China of trying to interfere in coming U.S. midterm elections in November. Trump said he had evidence, but didn't provide any. He also said he and Xi might no longer be friends.

"We do not and will not interfere in any country's domestic affairs," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at a session of the United Nations Security Council, through a translator. "We refuse to accept any unwarranted accusations against China."

The U.S. State Department said its sanctions on the Chinese military's Equipment Development Department -- which oversees China's defense technology -- weren't intended to undermine the military capabilities or combat readiness of any country, but rather to impose costs on Russia in response to alleged interference in the U.S. election process. Among Russia's arms customers, only China has been targeted by American sanctions.

The list of Chinese grievances against the Trump administration has mounted since the president unleashed his trade war, placing tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars of Chinese goods.

'Strike Back'

"In China, they are debating how they can respond and there are hawks who say, 'We have to strike back,'" said Collin Koh Swee Lean, research fellow at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. The country's military actions this week are a way of "showing displeasure without crossing the line into something more serious."

China has employed similar messaging in the past. In 2016, Beijing denied a U.S. carrier strike group's request for a Hong Kong port visit during a period of heightened tension with the U.S. over the South China Sea.

Washington has also adeptly deployed the tactic. To protest China's militarization of artificial structures it has created in the waters, the U.S. earlier this year disinvented the Chinese from participating in the 2018 Rim of the Pacific exercises -- drills held in the Pacific every two years that bring together the militaries of two dozen nations.

China will likely continue finding ways to express its dissatisfaction, without derailing its attempts to resolve the trade war via conciliation.

Took Umbrage

"I expect this kind of thing will continue," said Ian Storey, a senior fellow at the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore specializing in U.S.-China relations. "It's what the Chinese do when they want to express anger over a particular issue."

Beijing took umbrage in August, when U.S. senators [pushed](#) for sanctions against seven Chinese officials and two surveillance equipment manufacturers after reports that China is [forcing](#) as many as 1 million Muslims into "re-education" camps in its far western region of Xinjiang. On Monday, China's Defense Ministry issued a sharply worded statement expressing [dissatisfaction](#) after the U.S. approved the sale of a \$330 million military equipment package to Taiwan.

Taiwan has been an escalating [point of tension](#) between the U.S. and China since Trump's election. Before he took office, he tweeted about his protocol-breaking phone conversation with Tsai Ing-wen, the island's Beijing-skeptic president. He subsequently questioned the One-China policy, which has guided U.S.-China ties since the 1970s.

Paracel Islands

The [British warship](#) HMS Albion sailed by the Chinese-occupied Paracel Islands in the disputed South China Sea earlier this month, adding to China's sense that countries were joining forces with the U.S. to stymie its expansion in the waters -- of which Beijing claims more than 80 percent -- said Koh. An international arbitration panel in the Hague ruled in 2016 that China's claims have no legal standing.

France's Defense Minister Florence Parly said at June's Shangri-La Dialogue security conference in Singapore that French and British naval forces would sail together through "certain areas" in the South China Sea. The U.S. Navy routinely conducts freedom of so-called freedom of navigation operations to demonstrate its right to sail there.

Japan this month held a [submarine exercise](#) in the South China Sea. It led Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang to caution that the "relevant non-regional country" should refrain from undermining peace and security.

(Adds Pentagon confirmation of canceled meeting in second paragraph.)

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