

Tensions continue as US defence secretary visits China

Peter Symonds
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US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis concluded a two-day visit to China yesterday after holding meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe. While both sides attempted to put a positive spin on the exchanges, Washington's confrontational stance toward Beijing has generated worsening tensions over the South China Sea and Taiwan, in particular, as well as trade and investment.

During the first leg of his trip, in Alaska, Mattis suggested he would adopt a low-key approach to discussions with China officials. "I want to go in right now without basically poisoning the well at this point... I want to go in and do a lot of listening," he said.

An unnamed US defence official was closer to the mark when he told the *Financial Times* that Mattis was going to deliver a "medium tough" message to Beijing.

In reality, the Trump administration, including Mattis, has already "poisoned the well." The Pentagon's National Defence Strategy, unveiled in January, branded China and Russia as "revisionist powers" and "strategic competitors" to the United States. Trump has escalated Obama's "pivot to Asia," aimed at confronting and undermining China across the board—diplomatically, economically and militarily.

Speaking in Singapore in early June, Mattis accused China of "intimidation and coercion" in the Indo-Pacific, singling out its alleged militarisation of South China Sea islets. He declared that the Indo-Pacific was the Pentagon's "priority theatre" and warned of "larger consequences" if China continued its military build-up.

Accusations that Beijing is militarising the South China Sea are utterly hypocritical. Stepped-up US "freedom of navigation" military operations deliberately and provocatively challenge Chinese territorial claims in the area, and Washington

encourages its allies to follow suit. There is nothing innocent about these US operations, as the South China Sea is adjacent to major naval bases in southern China.

Pentagon spokeswoman Dana White acknowledged that Mattis touched on the South China Sea dispute in his discussion with Xi. A senior US defence official, who attended the meeting, told the media Mattis was "effective" in defending the US freedom of navigation operations, saying "it's not for one country to diminish what are international rights for navigation as defined in international waters."

According to the Chinese media, Xi told Mattis: "We cannot lose even one inch of the territory left behind by our ancestors." He reportedly added: "What is other people's, we do not want at all." Xi's comment undoubtedly applies not only to Chinese claims in the South China Sea, but to the highly sensitive issue of Taiwan.

In recent months, the Trump administration has created deep concerns in Beijing by foreshadowing closer ties with Taiwan, which China claims as its territory and regards as a renegade province. On several occasions last year Trump called into question the US adherence to the "One China" policy that treats Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Earlier this year, Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act, which authorises top-level exchange visits by Taiwanese and US officials, including on defence. In April, the US authorised American corporations to provide Taiwan with technology to enable it to build its own submarines, provoking an angry reaction from Beijing. Earlier this month, the US unveiled its large new \$250 million representative office that functions as a de-facto American embassy in Taiwan.

Xi and Mattis clearly discussed the Taiwan issue, but

the discussion was kept under wraps. China is particularly concerned that the US is determined to integrate Taiwan, several of whose islets lie just kilometres off the Chinese coast, into its preparations for war against China. Reuters reported earlier this month that the US military was considering sending a warship through the Taiwan Strait—a highly provocative move that would immediately raise tensions.

While Chinese officials reiterated their support for US negotiations with North Korea and the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, Xi is undoubtedly concerned about Trump’s strategy. The US is exploiting the nuclear issue to pressure North Korea to align more closely with Washington, as part of the US preparations for war with China. Far from ending the danger of conflict in Asia, a US-North Korean deal, if it eventuates, is likely to be the precursor to a further intensification of conflicts with Beijing.

Mattis is the first US defence secretary to visit China since 2014. He declared that his visit aimed to improve relations between the two countries, including their militaries. “I am here to keep our relationship on the right trajectory... to share ideas with your military leadership as we look at the way ahead,” he reportedly told Xi. Mattis also invited his Chinese counterpart, General Wei, to visit the US.

Such gestures, however, are meaningless. Just last month, the Pentagon “disinvited” the Chinese navy from participating in its major annual naval exercises in the Asia Pacific, known as RIMPAC. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Chinese officials expressed their “disappointment” to Mattis over the move.

Michael Kovrig, an International Crisis Group analyst, told the *Washington Post* that, in their meetings, the US and China fail to get beyond repeating their respective positions. “The danger now is that if each side sees the other as a strategic competitor and acts accordingly, they will pursue harmful measures and countermeasures, and tensions could intensify in a negative spiral,” he warned.

While the mounting trade war between the US and China was reportedly only discussed in passing, economic and military conflicts are intimately interconnected. Fearful that China is threatening its global dominance, the US is determined to use its residual military power to arrest its historic decline and is

engaged in a massive military build-up in the Asia Pacific to prepare for war with China.



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