

US signals its new approach to China

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The US' military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait are symptomatic of its new approach to engagement with China in the region and beyond.

On Saturday last week, two US guided-missile destroyers transited the Taiwan Strait. Institute for National Policy Research executive director Kuo Yu-jen (郭育仁) on Monday said that the operation, far from being an isolated event, was part of the expansion of the US' military presence in the region, meant to place checks on China's bullying tactics and militarization of the South China Sea.

Taiwan is a relatively small regional player, but it has geopolitical value, and the US is committed to supporting it. From Taiwan's point of view, a stronger stance by Washington to Beijing's machinations is certainly welcome.

However, the maneuvers are part of a wider narrative.

As regional and global alliances and understandings are changing, China's rise is now being approached not just in the Asian context, but in a wider geostrategic context that also includes the Indian Ocean and the Western and Central Pacific.

The US is pursuing what it calls a "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy." This new strategy is a reformulation of former US president Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia. Obama was generally seen as taking a conciliatory approach to Beijing to ensure a good trading relationship with a rising China and to maintain peace in Asia.

With the escalating trade war with China, US President Donald Trump has clearly been taking a more confrontational, aggressive approach on trade, while US Secretary of Defense James Mattis has been following a policy of reining in Beijing's ambitions of becoming a regional hegemon and a problematic global superpower.

Beijing's activities in the South China Sea are a litmus test for how it is going to behave

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elsewhere when it secures a stronger foothold in other regions around the globe. So far, the test results have provided much cause for concern.

During a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue regional defense forum in Singapore from Sunday to Tuesday last week, Mattis took a tough stance on China and noted Beijing's militarization of artificial features in the South China Sea.

While Beijing is suspicious of the intentions of the US amid its shift to an Indo-Pacific strategy, China has done much to necessitate this widening of the focus beyond Asia.

In the past few years, Beijing has made major inroads into developing a global network of communication links and investments, including in Africa, India and the Middle East, with its "string of pearls" strategy — the development of maritime infrastructure connecting ports in the Indian Ocean to ensure the supply of oil from the Middle East — and its Belt and Road Initiative of regional connectivity.

The US is rightly concerned about China's intentions with these infrastructure initiatives. The name change, announced on May 30, of the US Department of Defense's Pacific Command — responsible for the US west coast to the Indian Ocean, from the Arctic to the Antarctic — to the US Indo-Pacific Command can be regarded as a reflection of Washington's shift in focus toward checking China's increasing naval strength in the South China Sea and beyond.

Given the shifting realities and balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region between the US and Japan and rising superpowers such as India and China, and to a lesser extent South Korea, Indonesia and Australia, a lowering of tensions and increased communication would be desirable.

Of those countries, there is only one that has provided cause for real concern and which the others believe needs to be reined in.

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