

A sign of the increasing cooperation between Taiwanese military and defense officials and their US counterparts was the presence of two senior Taiwanese officers at the change of command ceremony for the US Pacific Command in Hawaii on Wednesday.

A sign of the continued sensitivity of such ties was that the government has not publicly identified the pair, although Administrative Deputy Minister of Defense Lieutenant General Shen Yi-ming (申宜明) was seen in a live stream of the event on the command's Facebook page, and Chinese-language media reports have said that Chief of General Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-ming (李希明) was the other.

The ceremony at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam was to mark the handover of the command from Admiral Harry Harris to Admiral Phil Davidson, and Harris' retirement from the US Navy. Harris has been nominated by US President Donald Trump to be the next US ambassador to South Korea.

US Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced at the ceremony that the command has been formally renamed the US Indo-Pacific Command in recognition of the "increasing connectivity of the Indian and Pacific Oceans," adding that it is the US' "primary combatant command."

In their speeches, Harris and Davidson emphasized that the command's mission was to ensure security and stability "from the coast of Africa to the coast of California and all points between," a US Department of Defense news release said.

The two members of Taiwan's top brass were part of a large international contingent that included representatives from Canada, Japan, Australia, the UK, the Philippines, Thailand and at least six more Asian nations.

Chinese representatives might not have been on hand, but Beijing's military ambitions were mentioned by Davidson, who reaffirmed the US' commitment to ensure freedom of the seas and skies, echoing comments his boss made the day before.

Mattis had told reporters en route to Honolulu that the US would continue to confront Beijing's militarization of the artificial islands it has built atop several reefs in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群岛), because it has not kept its promise not to put weapons on those islands. Those actions led the US last week to rescind its invitation to China to take part in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), held every two years in June and July near Hawaii.

Mattis added that "only one country" appears bothered by the US Navy's exercise of freedom of navigation in accordance with international law. He did not give a name, because he did not need to.

Beijing's South China Sea activities are expected to be among the hotly discussed topics at the three-day Asia Security Summit, which opened in Singapore yesterday with Mattis, his counterparts and defense officials from about 40 nations in attendance.

He is scheduled to give a talk this morning on "US leadership and the challenges of Indo-Pacific security," while senior officers in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) will be among the speakers at afternoon sessions, including one on "managing competition in regional security cooperation" and one on "strategic implications of military capability development in the Asia-Pacific."

While Beijing sent a low-level delegation to this year's conference, led by the vice president of the PLA's Academy of Military Science, it will still be interesting to see the response to their comments.

However, cynics will surely agree that it was no coincidence that a day after the Hawaii ceremony and the eve of the Singapore meeting, Chinese Ministry of National Defense spokesman Ren Guoqiang (任国强) announced that China's carrier group, led by the Liaoning, had reached "initial" combat readiness after carrying out successful training missions that included system combat capability.

While there has been a lot of focus domestically on whether China's exclusion from this year's RIMPAC might increase the odds of Taiwan being asked, the comments made by US officials

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before and after Wednesday's ceremony are a reminder that Taiwan is not alone in feeling threatened by China's aggressive posturing.

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