

US ready to parry Chinese threat

Written by Parris Chang 000
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US Secretary of Defense James Mattis visited Beijing for the first time from Tuesday to Thursday last week. Tensions between the US and China have been rising and there are many thorny issues between them.

Mattis had meetings with senior Chinese defense officials, as well as Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平), during which he expressed the US' stance and listened to China's position.

One of his key tasks was to persuade China to cooperate in encouraging North Korea to get on with the job of denuclearization, thus putting into effect the main goal of US President Donald Trump's summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore two weeks earlier.

Trump had been worrying about China getting in the way of the summit. In early May, Xi met Kim in the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian, where he advised the North Korean leader about what moves to make.

Mattis' visit to Beijing was preceded by a similar visit by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on June 14, just two days after the Trump-Kim summit.

Both visits were aimed at urging China to pressure North Korea to get down to the job of dismantling its nuclear weapons.

Trump has revealed to US media that the US has collected a list of managers of Chinese banks and other companies that are resisting UN sanctions against North Korea and continue to do business with the nation, saying that the US would punish them if necessary.

In the run-up to Mattis' visit, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense said that China attaches great importance to developing military relations with the US, and that the Chinese government and military leaders would exchange opinions with Mattis on state and military relations between the two nations, as well as questions of common concern.

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The US is unhappy about China's hegemonic actions in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region, which prompted the US Department of Defense to withdraw its invitation to the Chinese navy to take part in this year's Rim of the Pacific international maritime exercise.

On Jan. 19, the US Department of Defense published its Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America. This defense report is a companion to the National Security Strategy that Trump announced on Dec. 18 last year, and clearly identifies China as being the main threat and adversary facing the US.

It proposes an Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at strengthening US cooperation with its friends and allies as a counter to Chinese hegemony.

China does not yet fully understand Trump's defense team and its new strategic thinking, which is very different from the placatory approach that former US president Barack Obama's administration took toward China.

During his trip, Mattis gave his Chinese counterparts a clear explanation of US policies, as well as expressing the nation's determination to carry them out.

The US Pacific Command has been renamed the US Indo-Pacific Command.

This is not a mere name change, but shows that the US is watching China's military expansion in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. It sees the need to strengthen its defenses in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, deploying its forces to implement Trump's concept of "peace through strength."

With North Korea posing much less of a nuclear threat than before, the US would be free to pivot toward dealing with China's militarization of disputed waters in the South China Sea, where China has been building military facilities.

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There have been several reported incidents of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) illegally flashing lasers at US warplanes, in some cases injuring pilots.

Mattis no doubt told the Chinese side to cease such provocative acts, lest they lead to more serious clashes.

China is very unhappy about the warming relations between the US and Taiwan, which it says harm its core interests. To stop the US from playing the "Taiwan card," PLA warplanes and warships have been circling Taiwan in an attempt to deter the US and Taiwanese governments.

From US officials' viewpoint, the Taiwan Travel Act, which Trump signed into law in March, and the Taiwan-friendly clauses of last years' and this years' versions of the National Defense Authorization Act are defensive responses by the US to China's threats against Taiwan.

US officials and members of Congress have repeatedly declared that the US, based on the Taiwan Relations Act and in accordance with US national defense interests, would continue to provide Taiwan with the means for self-defense.

During his visit to Beijing, Mattis would have told Chinese military leaders not to underestimate the US' determination to help Taiwan defend itself.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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