

US, China exchange criticism as military tension rises

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Body

By Ben Blanchard

27 Aug (Reuters) - The United States and China exchanged criticism as military tensions grew between the world's two largest economies, with the U.S. chief of defense promising not to "give up an inch" in the Pacific and China saying Washington was endangering the lives of soldiers.

Both disagree on issues ranging from technology and human rights to Chinese military activities in the controversial South China Sea, where each accusing the other of deliberately provocative behavior.

In the last U.S. move against China before the November presidential election, Washington blacklisted 24 Chinese companies and individuals linked to construction and military action on the busy South China Sea waterway on Wednesday.

In Hawaii, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Beijing is using an aggressive military modernization program in an attempt to project power globally.

"To advance the communist party of China's agenda, the People's Liberation Army continues to pursue an aggressive modernization plan to achieve a world-class army by mid-century," Esper said.

"This certainly implies the provocative behavior of the Chinese armed forces in the south and east seas of the country, and anywhere else the Chinese government has considered critical to its interests."

However, the United States also wants "hopefully to continue working with the People's Republic of China to return to a trajectory more aligned with the order based on international rules," Esper added.

Speaking before a regional tour, Esper described the Indo-Pacific as the epicenter of a "great power race with China."

In Beijing, China's Defense Ministry responded to "certain U.S. politicians" who he said were damaging Chinese-American military ties in the run-up to the November election for their own selfish benefit, even trying to create military clashes.

"This kind of behavior endangers the lives of officers and soldiers on both sides," spokesman Wu Qian told reporters at a monthly press conference on Thursday.

Tensions, including China's maneuvering this week along its shores, have raised fears of an accidental conflict, against which Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen warned Thursday.

(Information from Ben Blanchard in Taipei; additional information by Cate Cadell and Yew Lun Tian in Beijing; edited by Clarence Fernandez, translated by Michael Susin in the writing of Gdansk)

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