



ASIA PACIFIC

# Building of Islands Is Debated, but China and U.S. Skirt Conflict at Talks

By **MATTHEW ROSENBERG** MAY 30, 2015

SINGAPORE — It was an unexpectedly direct exchange: With nearly every significant Asian defense official gathered in a single room, a senior Chinese military officer on Saturday defended his country’s island-building spree in the South China Sea and rebuked Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter for saying it threatened the region’s stability.

If anything, “the region has been peaceful and stable just because of China’s great restraint,” said Senior Col. Zhou Bo, the Chinese officer.

Yet a few moments later, away from the crowd and cameras, Colonel Zhou’s defiant tone gave way to a seemingly more subtle appreciation of the complex relationship that binds the United States and China together and, at the same time, pushes them apart. The speech by Mr. Carter that prompted his comments had “balance,” Colonel Zhou said in a brief interview.

“We do not disagree on all things,” he added, before rushing off to huddle with fellow Chinese officers at the conference.

After a week of public rancor over China’s rush to build artificial islands on reefs, rocks and atolls in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, the first full day of the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual security meeting in Singapore that attracts almost every major and minor player in Asia, gave both sides the chance to lower the temperature.

Though Mr. Carter did not hold any formal meetings with Chinese officials, lower-ranking American officials did, and it was apparent that they in effect agreed to disagree on what constitutes sovereign Chinese territory for the time being. But

American officials made it clear that the dispute would not hinder nascent military cooperation with China or threaten the deep economic ties that are the bedrock of Asia's stability and prosperity.

Adm. Harry Harris, the new chief of American forces in the Pacific, summed it up succinctly in a briefing with reporters at the end of the day: "Conflict is bad for business."

The dispute over the South China Sea has festered for decades with China, Vietnam, the Philippines and a handful of other countries all making overlapping claims to a stretch of ocean rich with natural gas and other resources. While this issue simmered in the background for a long time, disputes have escalated in recent years, most notably when China placed an oil rig near Vietnam last year, but also with skirmishes between naval forces and fishing boats from the various claimants.

Those tensions have heightened as the scope of the Chinese building spree became apparent — American officials say 2,000 acres of land were added in the past 18 months — and a pair of mechanized artillery pieces were briefly spotted on two of the islands, raising fears that China was moving to back up its claims to the new islands with military force.

Chinese forces also this month ordered an American surveillance plane to leave the skies over Fiery Cross Reef, where China has built an island with a landing strip. The American aircraft did not comply.

Then last week China released a document outlining a strategic vision for its navy to project force beyond its coastal waters into the open oceans. Western officials said the release appeared timed to challenge participants at the conference.

Other countries have also built outposts in the South China Sea. But the construction was done before 2002, when China and nine Southeast Asian nations signed a nonbinding agreement to "exercise self-restraint" and refrain from trying to inhabit any land features that were uninhabited at that time. And the pre-2002 construction was never done at the pace and on the scale of China's recent land reclamation efforts.

Mr. Carter, whose speech opened the day, reiterated a call he made earlier in the week for China to halt the construction, saying that American warships and military aircraft would continue to operate in the area, which the United States still considers to be international waters, not Chinese territory. He also listed numerous weaponry that the United States could bring to bear in Asia — though he did not directly link

any of it to China — and unveiled a new American effort to help China's neighbors build up their naval capabilities.

But he balanced his tough talk with entreaties to China to work with its neighbors and the United States to ensure stability in the region, saying that through cooperation “everybody wins.”

He also sought to assuage Chinese fears that the United States was using the dispute over the sea simply to keep China in check. The United States expected countries like China to broaden the scope of their interests as they grew more powerful, and it was ready to work with them to keep the peace, he said.

The United States “has never aimed to hold any nation back or push any country down,” he said.

Mr. Carter also cited areas where the American and Chinese militaries were already cooperating, and new initiatives, such as a measure the two sides are working on that would help prevent dangerous air-to-air encounters between military aircraft.

The official Chinese response was to come Sunday when Adm. Sun Jianguo, the deputy chief of the general staff of the People's Liberation Army, addresses the conference. American, European and Asian officials here said they expected blustery language, and that had little expectation that the Chinese would suddenly halt their effort to construct new territory in the South China Sea.

Colonel Zhou may have provided a preview on Saturday during the question-and-answer period that followed Mr. Carter's speech.

After calling Mr. Carter's criticism groundless, he said that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea was not a problem because it was never really free, and then concluded with a loaded question. “The U.S. has taken some measures, such as harsh criticism toward China, and military reconnaissance activities, your military threat,” he said. “Do these measures help to resolve the dispute in the South China Sea and maintain peace and stability?”

The American answer was that its military has always flown and sailed in international airspace and water, and that it is China that is trying to alter the facts on the ground, not the United States.

But neither side for now appears willing to do much more than demand that the other stop.

In the meantime, American officials said they would continue to build the military capacity of allies in the region, and forge closer ties with former adversaries like Vietnam, so they too could benefit from American military assistance. Over time, the hope is that stronger neighbors backed by the United States would serve as a deterrent to China.

Senator John McCain, who led a Congressional delegation to the conference, told reporters that he planned to introduce legislation next week to lift parts of an embargo on sending weapons to Vietnam.

American allies, though, did not appear entirely convinced that the United States had a long-term plan, or that it would back up its talk about freedom of navigation and the need to respect international laws with action.

“If we leave any unlawful situation unattended, order will soon turn to disorder, and peace and stability will collapse,” Gen Nakatani, the defense minister of Japan, told the forum. “I hope and expect all the countries, including China, to behave as a responsible power.”

But few, if anyone, seemed willing to see order enforced at the risk of war. “This has the potential to escalate into one of the deadliest conflicts of our time, if not history,” said Hishammuddin Hussein, the defense minister of Malaysia. “Inflamed rhetoric does not do any nation any good.”

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