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McCain: Disinvite China from Next Year's RIMPAC Exercise

by Bryant Jordan

May 06, 2015

One year after China made its debut appearance at the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, the largest joint military exercise in the world, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee wants the country disinvited when ships from 20 of the world's navies gather in the region in 2016.

McCain said the invite should be pulled because of China's "bad behavior," including its construction of artificial islands around islands for which several countries make competing claims.

"In the last number of years they had filled in 60 acres of land around these islands," he told Bloomberg News. "In the last year they have filled in 600 acres and they are putting in a runway. I don't think there is any doubt about their territorial ambitions."

China lays claim to the Senkaku Islands – which it calls the Diaoyu Islands. Japan wrested them from China more than a century ago, but after World War II the U.S. maintained they belonged to Japan.

It's not only China's action that has McCain and others worried. In 2013, China unilaterally declared an air defense identification zone over a major portion of the East China Sea, in effect

declaring a national defense interest in tracking, identifying and questioning any aircraft venturing into or passing through the airspace.

Now, with its build-up of man-made islands in the South China Sea, McCain believes China might declare a new air defense identification zone over that region.

"That would a de facto assertion that it is Chinese airspace. I don't think there's any doubt the Chinese are acting in an aggressive manner," McCain told Bloomberg. He said the U.S. Pacific Command has been warnings about China's moves in the region, but that the Obama administration has ignored them.

In a July 2014 report to Congress, the Congressional Research Service noted a number of instances of China harassing U.S. ships and being more aggressive in its claims to disputed islands, stating that these disputes "showed some limits to mil-to-mil engagement."

In one case, 40 Chinese Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets "flew near the Senkaku Islands, while eight [Chinese] ships entered Japan's claimed territorial waters around the islands, and Japan scrambled F-15 fighters."

A later China news report called the action a drill, with the Chinese fighters conducting "simulated precision strikes against land and maritime targets."

In his remarks last July, while RIMPAC was underway, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey noted the "rising tide of nationalism in the region."

"Relationships of trust remain paramount to the Asia-Pacific," he said. "That's why sustained mil-to-mil engagements and exercises like RIMPAC ... are important to strengthen the bonds for our shared future."

RIMPAC is held every two years in and around the Hawaiian islands. Hosted by the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the 2014 exercise included participation by 22 countries, which sent 49 surface vessels, six submarines, more than 200 aircraft and 25,000 personnel, according to the U.S. Navy.

Among the countries taking part were Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, China, Peru, South Korea, the Republic of the Philippines, Singapore, Tonga and the United Kingdom.

China was invited to RIMPAC in 2014, officially taking part with the guided missile destroyer CNS 171 Haikou, while also sailing near the exercise with an uninvited spy ship, the AGI 853 Dongdiao.

Nicole Forrester, then with the Pacific Forum Center for Strategic and International Studies and a former Australian diplomat, said at the time that fears over China's presence were misguided. If anything, she suggested that China's observations of American and allied capabilities might be sobering.

"Direct exposure to U.S. equipment, personnel, and capabilities should give the Chinese a more realistic assessment of what the U.S. and its allies are capable of doing. Mistaken notions of U.S. decline are likely to be corrected in the process," she wrote.

Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Frazier, who died two months ago, had written as recently as December 2014 that China likely sees U.S. actions and decisions in the region every bit as confrontational as the U.S. views China's.

"First, the United States' handing of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands back to Japan in 1971 occurred at a time when Sino-American relations hardly existed," Fraser wrote. "There was little thought of the fact that Japan had taken those islands from China in 1895, and it has turned out to have been a provocative decision. It was an event that was ignored at the time, though, as China had no means then of asserting itself"

China may also feel provoked by the U.S. move to reassert itself in Asia, he said, noting that China believed the U.S. tried three years ago to get Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, reopened as a U.S. naval base.

"China has welcomed U.S. diplomatic engagement, but at the same time wonders what policy America is actually pursuing -- one of consultation and discussion and perhaps collaboration, or one of rearmentation, encirclement and containment," Fraser wrote. "Which America is going to win out? The one that wishes to talk, or the one that relies on military solutions?"