

U.S.-Japan Drills Risk New North Korea Flare-Up



Japan's Ground Self Defense Force Type 90 tanks (front) and U.S. Marine Corps LAV-25 Light Armored Vehicles take part in their joint exercise.

TOKYO (Dispatches) -- Japanese jets conducted air maneuvers with U.S. bombers southwest of the Korean peninsula on Wednesday as North Korea considered whether to fire missiles towards the U.S.-administered territory of Guam.

North Korea has made no secret of its plans to develop a missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and of reaching the United States to counter constant U.S. threats of invasion - such as U.S. war drills with neighboring South Korea and Japan.

The exercise in the East China Sea involved two U.S. Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers flying from Andersen

Air Force Base on the Pacific island of Guam and two Japanese F-15 jet fighters, Japan's Air Self Defense Force said in a news release.

"The exercise is meant to improve interoperability and bolster combat skills," it said.

The U.S. planes, which were designed to carry nuclear bombs and later switched to conventional payloads, have flown several sorties in East Asia over the past several weeks. In addition to air drills with Japanese fighters, the bombers have also exercised with South Korean aircraft.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un delayed a decision on firing missiles

towards Guam and U.S. officials have since taken a gentler tone, but tension in the region nonetheless remains high.

The situation is tense since President Donald Trump said the U.S. military was "locked and loaded" for an action against North Korea. Those words in turn prompted a warning from China for both sides to tone down the rhetoric.

North Korea is likely to be infuriated by the current maneuvers and U.S.-Japanese annual joint military drills next week.

In his first public appearance in about two weeks, Kim on Monday inspected the command of the North's army, examining the plan to fire four missiles aimed at landing near Guam, the official KCNA news agency reported.

"He said that if the Yankees persist in their extremely dangerous reckless actions on the Korean peninsula and in its vicinity, testing the self-restraint of the DPRK, the latter will make an important decision as it already declared," KCNA said.

The DPRK stands for North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a telephone conversation with Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's minister for foreign affairs, said tensions on the Korean peninsula were showing some signs of easing but had not passed.

The parties involved should "make a correct judgment and wise choice by taking a responsible attitude toward history and people," Wang said, according to a statement on the Chinese foreign ministry's website.

Hundreds of Rohingya Flee Fresh Myanmar Assault



Rohingya Muslims who fled Burma to Bangladesh to escape religious violence, sit in a boat after being intercepted crossing the Naf River by Bangladeshi authorities in Taknaf, Bangladesh.

DHAKA (AFP) -- Hundreds of Rohingya Muslims have crossed into Bangladesh in recent days following a fresh military build-up in Myanmar's Rakhine state, community leaders said Wednesday.

They said at least 500 Rohingya had made the difficult journey into Bangladesh, some claiming they had been abused by soldiers in Myanmar.

The latest influx follows a months-long bloody military crackdown on the mainly Muslim minority in Myanmar last year that led tens of thousands to flee across the border. The United Nations has said the violence may amount to ethnic cleansing.

Abu Toyyob said he escaped with his seven-member family as the army vandalised Rohingya houses and detained young men.

"They arrested my younger brother from home and injured my two-year-old son by kicking him with boots," the 25-year-old told AFP.

"I immediately set off with my family and crossed the Naf two nights ago," he added, referring to the river that divides the two countries.

Dhaka estimates that nearly 400,000 Rohingya refugees are living in squalid refugee camps and makeshift settlements in the resort district of Cox's Bazar, which borders Rakhine.

Their numbers swelled last October when more than 70,000 Rohingya villagers began arriving, bringing stories of systematic rape, murder and arson at the hands of Myanmar soldiers.

Bangladesh border guards said they had stepped up patrols after reports of a military build-up on the other side of the river. Last week, the UN special rapporteur Yanghee Lee voiced alarm at reports that an army battalion had flown into Rakhine to help local authorities boost security in the region.

Buddhist-majority Myanmar has long faced criticism for its treatment of the more than one million Rohingya who live in Rakhine, who are seen as interlopers from Bangladesh, denied citizenship and access to basic rights.

But they are also increasingly unwelcome in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, where police often blame them for crimes such as drug trafficking.

Dhaka has floated the idea of relocating tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees to a remote, flood-prone island off its coast, despite opposition from rights groups.

An official with the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM), which looks after settlements for unregistered Rohingya refugees, said the organization was aware of new arrivals.

The numbers were "not as alarming as the October influx," the official said.

China, U.S. Ink Deal to Avoid 'Miscalculations'

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- The United States and China have agreed to enhance their direct military communication line in order to reduce chances of any "miscalculations" amid the Korean peninsula crisis and other standing issues between Washington and Beijing.

The joint strategic dialogue mechanism agreement was signed Tuesday between Marine Corps Gen. Joe Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his counterpart Gen. Fang Fenghui of the Chinese army.

The agreement is designed to handle crisis mitigation and provides a "direct communication" channel between the Pentagon's top leadership and the Chinese military. Such a channel will "enable us to communicate to reduce the risk of miscalculation," the Pentagon said in a statement.

The agreement also envisions face-to-face dialogue between the militaries, the first of which is scheduled for November.

Tensions in the Korean peninsula are one of many points of contention between the two countries. Beijing has long been frustrated by Washington's assertions that China is the one country that must do more to tackle the issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Beijing has also been irritated over



U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford and his Chinese counterpart, chief of the general staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Gen. Fang Fenghui, attend a signing ceremony in Beijing, Aug. 15, 2017.

the U.S. decision to use the issue as a pretext for deploying the advanced THAAD missile defense system in South Korea.

In addition, China has repeatedly called out the U.S. for exacerbating tensions on

its borders through beefing up its military capabilities and intensifying their so-called freedom of navigation patrols in the South and East China Seas.

At the same time, Beijing continues to be

suspicious of Washington's policy toward Taiwan, which China considers an inherent part of China.

During the meeting, Fang said both military leaders discussed North Korea, Taiwan and the South China Sea. Fang further noted that cooperation between the two militaries was the only correct choice for the two countries, according to Reuters.

The new agreement offers hope that any existing tensions between the two countries do not escalate into a military confrontation.

"The military-to-military contacts between the United States and China are important because there will always be some friction between the two countries," Dunford noted during the meeting in Beijing.

The U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reiterated that military contacts between the two Pacific powers "will lessen the chances of a miscalculation."

Scientists Narrow Search Areas for 2014 Missing Jet

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) -- Scientists have potentially narrowed the search area for the missing Malaysian airliner to three specific locations in the southern Indian Ocean, through new satellite and drift analysis of the 2014 crash released Wednesday.

But the Australian Transport Safety Bureau cautioned that the drift analysis by Australian science agency CSIRO is based on French satellite images of "probably man-made" floating objects without evidence that they were from Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.

But the locations could provide potential starting points to search within a 25,000-square-kilometer (9,700-square-mile) expanse identified by a panel of experts in November as the most likely resting place of the Boeing 777 and the 239 passengers and crew on board.

That search adjoins the original search zone far southwest of Australia that was identified through satellite analysis of the final hours of the flight that apparently ended when the plane ran out of fuel.

Malaysia, China and Australia agreed to suspend the deep-sea sonar search in January after 120,000 square kilometers (46,000 square miles) of seabed were combed without finding any trace of Flight 370.

The new analysis is based on French military satellite images gathered on

March 23, 2014 - two weeks after Flight 370 mysteriously veered far off course during a flight by Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Beijing and were taken near the original underwater search zone.

The Australian bureau took over the search for Flight 370 from Malaysia a week later. Satellite experts at Geoscience Australia were not asked to analyze the images until March this year. The experts concluded that a dozen objects appeared to be man-made.

The CSIRO then investigated where the objects might have originated before drifting for two weeks.

"So that is a way of potentially narrowing down the search area with the very important caveat that, of course, we can't be totally sure that those objects seen in the images are actual pieces of plane," CSIRO oceanographer David Griffin said.

"This might be a really good clue. It might be a red herring. But if you are going to search, then you'd be silly to ignore this potential clue," he said.

The Australian bureau's Chief Commissioner Greg Hood said in a statement: "Clearly we must be cautious" of the lack a definite link to Flight 370.

Malaysia, China and Australia have decided that the search will remain suspended unless new evidence pinpoints the wreckage's whereabouts.

Ex-PM Sharif Legally Challenges His Ouster



Deposed Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif addresses a crowd during his visit to a mausoleum of Pakistani poet Mohammad Iqbal on the occasion of Pakistan Independence Day in Lahore, Aug. 14, 2017.

ISLAMABAD (AFP) -- Pakistan's former prime minister Nawaz Sharif has hit back against his ouster by the Supreme Court over corruption allegations, demanding a review of his case.

The Supreme Court sacked Sharif in late July following an investigation into corruption allegations against him and his family, making him the 15th

premier in Pakistan's history to be sacked before completing a full term.

The allegations against the prime minister spiraled from the Panama Papers leak last year, which sparked a media frenzy over the lavish lifestyles and luxury London property portfolio of the Sharif dynasty.

In a lengthy petition demanding that his case be reviewed, Sharif's legal team

laid out 19 points challenging the court's judgment, saying the ruling suffered "from errors floating on the surface."

"The petitioner seeks review of the final order of the court," read the application filed late Tuesday, according to a copy seen by AFP.

Saad Rasool, a Pakistani lawyer and constitutional expert, said the chance of the petition succeeding and Sharif being reinstated was slim.

"Reversing the judgment is close to impossible," Rasool told AFP.

"According to Pakistani laws and rules of the Supreme Court, the same exact bench reviews the petition."

The Supreme Court has also ordered the country's anti-corruption watchdog, the National Accountability Bureau, to open a criminal case against Sharif, his sons -- Hussain and Hassan -- and his daughter Maryam.

Last week Sharif led a defiant crowd of supporters from the capital, Islamabad, to his hometown, Lahore, in a days-long procession that brought thousands into the streets in a show of force.

During the trip Sharif repeatedly lambasted the court's ruling, saying the decision was an "insult" to Pakistanis.



MAIDUGURI, Nigeria (Dispatches) -- Boko Haram militants killed at least 30 fishermen in raids on communities around Lake Chad in northeastern Nigeria, the governor of Borno state, residents and military sources said on Wednesday.

The raids are part of renewed attacks by the militant group which, prior to the latest attacks, have led to at least 113 people being killed by Takfiris since June 1.

Last month members of an oil prospecting team were kidnapped in the restive Lake Chad Basin region, prompting a rescue bid that left at least 37 dead including members of the team. It was carried out by a Boko Haram ally allied to Daesh which has been active around Lake Chad.

LONDON/DUBLIN (Reuters) -- Britain has said there should be no border posts or immigration checks between Ireland and the British province of Northern Ireland after Brexit, in a paper that attempts to resolve one of the most complex aspects of its departure from the European Union. Some 30,000 people cross the 500-km (300-mile) border every day without customs or immigration controls; negotiators must work out new arrangements without inflaming tensions in a region that suffered decades of bloody turmoil before a peace deal in 1998. As part of a series of papers that Prime Minister Theresa May hopes will push forward talks with the EU, the government on Tuesday outlined its vision for a "frictionless" customs system, which drew criticism from some in Brussels.

NEW DELHI (AP) -- A day after the U.N. chief voiced concern about Indian plans to potentially deport tens of thousands of Muslim Rohingya refugees, an Indian government official said Wednesday that authorities are only working to identify those who fled persecution in neighboring Myanmar -- not expel them.

An estimated 40,000 Rohingya Muslims have taken refuge in various parts of India, though fewer than 15,000 are registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Last week, India's Home Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju told lawmakers that state authorities had been asked to identify and deport illegal immigrants, including but not only Rohingya. A ministry memo sent Aug. 8 to the states warns that immigrants are susceptible to recruitment by "terrorist" organizations and "not only infringe on the rights of Indian citizens but also pose grave security challenges."

MANILA (AFP) -- Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on Wednesday urged police to kill dozens of drug suspects every day, as he praised officers who shot dead 32 people this week in "shock and awe" raids.

Duterte's incendiary comments came as he acknowledged major problems in his drug war, which has claimed thousands of lives, admitting he could not win it as quickly as promised and lamenting a corrupt police force.

In one of the deadliest operations of the war, police reported killing 32 people in raids on Monday on suspected drug traffickers in Bulacan province, which neighbours the capital of Manila.

"The ones who died recently in Bulacan, 32, in a massive raid, that was good," Duterte said in a speech to an anti-crime organization that has backed the drug war. "If we could kill another 32 everyday, then maybe we can reduce what ails this country."

ATHENS (AP) -- Greece's fire department says it's close to containing a wildfire that is burning north of Athens for a fourth day.

Army bulldozers are being used to set up firebreaks around the Kalamos area, about 45 kilometers (28 miles) north of Athens, before an expected pickup in winds later Wednesday.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras visited fire-damaged areas by helicopter, while more than 300 firefighters remained deployed there, supported by five water-dropping planes and six helicopters.

No serious injuries have been reported since the fire broke out Sunday. The Fire Service hasn't issued a damage estimate, but the blaze is believed to have gutted or damaged several dozen homes.

Wildfires also continued in the Peloponnese in southern Greece and on the western island of Zakynthos.

JOHANNESBURG (AFP) -- Zimbabwe's first lady Grace Mugabe has requested diplomatic immunity after being accused of assaulting a 20-year-old model, South African police said Wednesday, confirming she had not fled the country. "The suspect's lawyers and her government representatives made verbal representations ... that the suspect wished to invoke diplomatic immunity cover," a statement from the police ministry said.