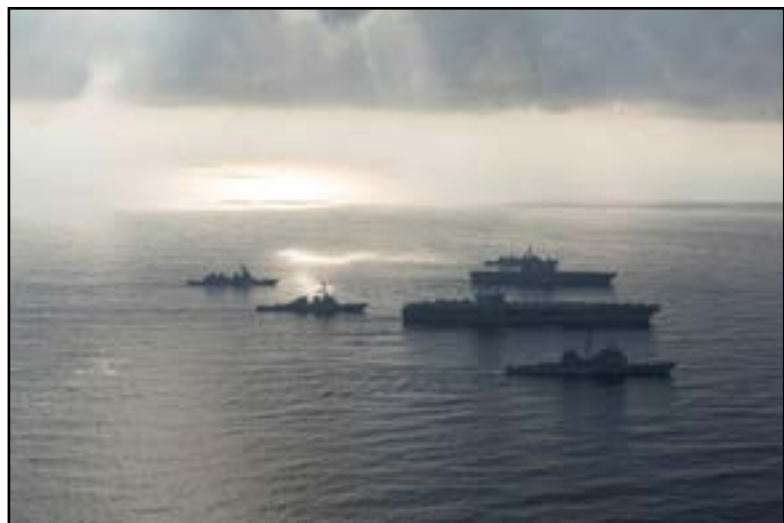


Military Researcher: U.S. Operations Could Spark Conflict With China



U.S. warships conduct a photo exercise with Japanese destroyers in the South China Sea August 31, 2018.

BEIJING (Reuters) - U.S. naval operations in the South China Sea could spark conflict and the United States would be to blame if a clash occurred, a Chinese military researcher said on Wednesday.

The warning came as Chinese and U.S. trade teams ended talks in Beijing that have raised hopes an all-out trade war could be avoided, but fears remain that strategic tension between two countries are growing.

“Both countries warships definitely have to come into close proximity and it’s easy for there to

be a misunderstanding or an error of judgment, even a collision,” Zhang Junshe, a researcher at China’s PLA Naval Military Studies Research Institute, told reporters.

“If there is a collision, the root cause is the United States.”

On Monday a U.S. guided-missile destroyer sailed near disputed islands the South China Sea in what China called a “provocation”, just as the trade talks began.

Zhang said whenever U.S. warships entered waters that China claimed, China had no option but to send

warships to deal with them.

Since Trump took office, there have been 14 incidents of U.S. Navy vessel entering waters that China claims to carry out what the U.S. military calls freedom of navigation operations, Zhang said.

China claims almost all of the South China Sea and denounces the United States and its allies over naval operations near Chinese-occupied islands.

Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and Taiwan have competing claims in the region.

He Lei, former vice president of China’s Academy of Military Sciences, said “foreign forces” that attempted to prevent the unification of China and Taiwan could compel Beijing to use force to bring the self-ruled island under its control.

“Foreign forces that pose as world police to interfere in China’s affairs, to obstruct and damage China’s unification, are the main culprits that could force the mainland to use force to resolve the Taiwan issue,” he told reporters.

U.S. President Donald Trump last week signed into law the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which reaffirms the U.S. commitment to Taiwan, including arms sales.

Chinese President Xi Jinping on Jan. 2 said nobody could change the fact Taiwan was part of China.

Bangladeshi Workers Protest Exploitation by West



Bangladeshi garment workers vandalize a vehicle during a protest in Savar, on the outskirts of Dhaka, Jan. 9, 2019.

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) - Bangladesh police fired tear gas and swung batons as thousands of garment workers demonstrated for better wages for a fourth day Wednesday, shutting down factories on the outskirts of the capital.

The Daily Star newspaper said one protester was fatally shot and three dozen others were injured in clashes

with police.

Police fired tear gas and water cannons to prevent demonstrators from blocking the road leading to Dhaka’s Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. Workers responded by hurling bricks at police and setting vehicles ablaze.

Bangladesh’s garment industry generates around \$30 billion in exports a year, making it the second

largest in the world after China. It makes products for big-name fashion retailers including Zara, H&M and Uniqlo.

For months, workers have been demanding a higher minimum pay than what the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has proposed.

Garment worker Shefali Begum said protesters want at least 16,000 taka, or about \$191, per month. “They give us nothing. Right now, our salaries are the same as for helpers hired to assist us,” Begum said.

Hasina’s ruling Awami League-led coalition swept a general election on Dec. 28 amid opposition complaints of voter intimidation and vote rigging. Hasina was sworn in Monday for a record third consecutive term as head of government.

The booming garment industry has been a pillar of Hasina’s economic development strategy for Bangladesh, where annual per capita income has nearly tripled since 2009 to \$1,750.

Under Hasina, the level of extreme poverty — classified as under \$1.25 per day — has dropped from 19 percent of the population to less than 9 percent in the last decade, according to the World Bank.

UK Lawmakers Clash Over PM May’s Brexit Plan

LONDON (AP) - Britain’s government and its lawmakers clashed Wednesday, as Prime Minister Theresa May brought her little-loved Brexit deal back to Parliament, a month after postponing a vote on the agreement to stave off near-certain defeat.

The House of Commons opened five days of debate on an agreement with the European Union setting out the terms of Britain’s departure from the bloc on March 29.

A vote, initially slated for mid-December, is now scheduled for Jan. 15 — and the government still looks likely to lose.

May insisted that her agreement was the only one available, and the only way to prevent a disruptive “no-deal” Brexit in just over 10 weeks.

“The only way to avoid no deal is to vote for the deal,” May told lawmakers in the House of Commons.

May called off the December vote

at the last minute when it became clear that a majority of lawmakers — from the governing Conservatives as well as opposition parties — opposed the deal, a compromise that has left both pro-European and pro-Brexit politicians unhappy.

May promised to seek reassurances from the EU on the most contentious issue, the status of the Northern Ireland-Ireland border. But the bloc refuses to reopen the agreement, and opposition to the negotiated deal remains strong among British lawmakers.

May told lawmakers that “further clarification” from the EU was possible, “and those talks will continue over the next few days.”

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the main opposition Labor Party, said that “not one single dot or comma has changed” since December’s aborted vote.

“Isn’t the prime minister bringing back exactly the same deal she

admitted would be defeated four weeks ago?” he asked.

Amid the political stalemate, pro-Brexit members of Parliament are urging the government to ramp up preparations for leaving the EU without a deal. But many lawmakers, and businesses, say that would cause economic turmoil, as goods moving between Britain and the EU suddenly faced customs checks, tariffs and other barriers.

On Tuesday, legislators determined to prevent a “no-deal” Brexit handed the government a symbolic defeat by backing an amendment to the Finance Bill that puts roadblocks in the way of government spending on preparations for leaving the EU without a divorce agreement.

The vote, which saw 20 legislators from May’s Conservative Party rebel and side with the opposition, indicates that a majority in Parliament opposes leaving the EU without an agreement and will try to stop it happening.

EU Parliament Laments Trans-Atlantic Ties Under Trump



President Donald Trump speaks from the Oval Office of the White House as he gives a prime-time address about border security Tuesday, Jan. 8, 2018, in Washington.

BRUSSELS (AP) - A key European Union legislative group has lambasted U.S. President Donald Trump’s “harmful” approach to trans-Atlantic relations, warning that the divisions it creates will only embolden global rivals.

In a letter to be sent to members of U.S. Congress on Wednesday, the delegation for U.S. relations criticized “the increasingly harmful approach from the White House,” and condemned the demotion of the EU ambassador to the U.S. in the largely ceremonial Diplomatic Order of Precedence to “the bottom of the list.”

Germany’s Deutsche Welle reported that the State Department had made the change at the end of last year without notifying Brussels.

In the letter, obtained by The Associated Press, the delegation pleads that both sides “not undermine each other.”

“The Trump administration could not have chosen a worse moment to attack the EU,” Marietje Schaake, the vice-chair of the EU delegation, told the AP.

Instead of fighting, the 28-nation EU and

U.S. should stand together to “face shared challenges from countries such as China, Russia and Iran,” Schaake said.

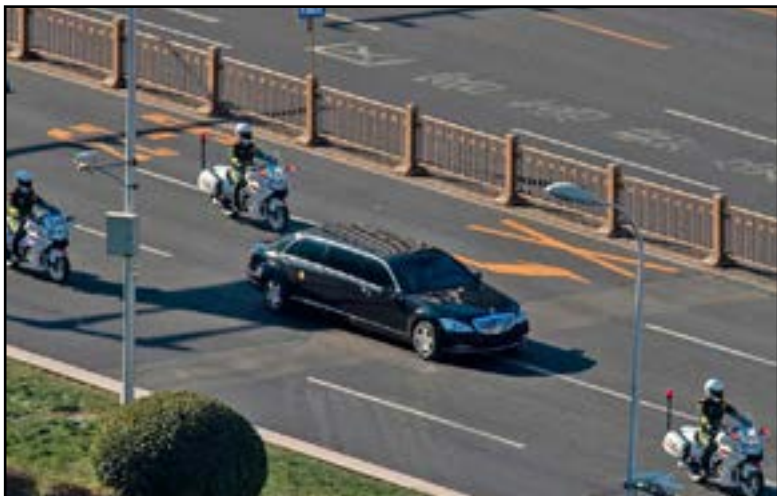
Trans-Atlantic relations have steadily worsened since Trump became president two years ago.

Since the start of his presidency, Trump has upset the decades-old tight relationship between Washington and the EU, slapping steel tariffs on EU imports, threatening tariffs on cars, ditching a deal the two sides have negotiated with Iran to contain its nuclear threat, and walking away from a global climate agreement pushed by the EU.

On top of that, the EU legislators complained that Trump and top administration officials “lambast the EU as bureaucratic ... and have praised populist and nationalist movements” in the face of sitting EU governments. The legislators feel all of this crystallized in the diplomatic snub.

“Such moves play into the hands of rival global powers and can only lead to greater fragmentation rather than much needed increased cooperation,” the letter said.

North Korean Leader Leaves Beijing After Key Talks



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s motorcade travels through the streets of Beijing on Jan. 8, 2019.

BEIJING (AFP) - Kim Jong Un’s train left Beijing on Wednesday after the North Korean leader visited his key ally on a trip seen as a strategy session ahead of his expected summit with Donald Trump.

Kim arrived in Beijing on Tuesday for his fourth visit to Pyongyang’s sole major diplomatic friend, meeting President Xi Jinping and reportedly visiting a factory.

The North Korean leader’s motorcade was spotted entering the Beijing central railway station on Wednesday afternoon, and the train departed shortly after on a day-long ride back to the northeast border, according to AFP journalists.

The unannounced trip was largely shrouded in secrecy. Beyond confirming his presence in Beijing, no details have been provided by either North Korea or China on his schedule, with no coverage in state media even in the nightly news broadcast hours after the train’s departure.

Kim met for one hour with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Tuesday -- believed to be the North Korean leader’s birthday -- and the two later dined with the wives at Beijing’s Great Hall of the People, according to South Korea’s Yonhap news agency.

“Chairman Kim Jong Un’s visit to China was at the invitation of President Xi Jinping, of course President Xi would hold meetings and talks with him,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said

at a regular press briefing, adding that more details would be released later.

Tuesday’s meeting focused on Kim’s expected meeting with Trump, according to Yonhap.

In a New Year speech, Kim warned that Pyongyang may change its approach to nuclear talks if Washington persists with sanctions.

Relations between China and North Korea had deteriorated in recent years over Pyongyang’s nuclear activities, but Kim has made sure to keep Xi informed about his dealings with the United States and South Korea as ties appear to have warmed.

Kim chose China for his maiden official trip abroad last year before holding meetings with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Trump.

The American leader said Sunday that the United States and North Korea are negotiating the location of their next summit.

Discussions between the U.S. and North Korea over Pyongyang’s nuclear arsenal have stalled since Kim and Trump’s high-profile summit in Singapore in June where they issued a vaguely worded declaration about denuclearization.

The U.S. insists that UN sanctions must remain in place until North Korea gives up its weapons, while Pyongyang wants them immediately eased. China also wants the sanctions to be relaxed.



MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia is ready to hold consultations with the United States about the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty at diplomatic and military levels, Tass news agency quoted Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov as saying Wednesday. “We are ready for dialogue if the United States will be ready for this,” Ryabkov told reporters in New Delhi, Tass reported. “If it happens tomorrow, then we are ready tomorrow. But the dialogue should be on the basis of equality of rights,” Ryabkov said. The Kremlin also rejected a British suggestion it might use a former U.S. Marine detained in Russia on espionage charges as a pawn in a diplomatic game and said it reserved the right to conduct counter-intelligence activities. Paul Whelan, a former U.S. Marine who also holds a British passport, was detained by Russia’s Federal Security Service on Dec. 28. His family have said he is innocent and that he was in Moscow to attend a wedding.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Top congressional Democrats said President Donald Trump “has chosen fear” in his drive to build a southern border wall and called on him to reopen the government shuttered because of the standoff over his demand for money for the barrier. Speaking moments after Trump made his case for the wall in an Oval Office address Tuesday night, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told a national television audience that the president’s rhetoric has been “full of misinformation and even malice.” Standing alongside her, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said America’s symbol “should be the Statue of Liberty, not a 30-foot wall.” He accused Trump of trying to “stoke fear and divert attention” from his tumultuous administration. They spoke moments after Trump warned of a “growing humanitarian and security crisis” at the border with Mexico.

WARSAW (Dispatches) --Italy’s Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini wants Poland and Italy to work together on a new Europe, he said at a press conference in Warsaw on Wednesday. “Poland and Italy will be part of the new spring of Europe, the renaissance of European values,” he told reporters during a press conference with Poland’s Interior Minister Joachim Brudziński. “The Europe that will come to form in June (after May’s European Parliament elections) will lead us all than the one that exists today and is run by bureaucrats.”

LONDON (Dispatches) -- Airport operators need do more to counter the illegal use of drones after flights were disrupted at Heathrow and Gatwick, Prime Minister Theresa May’s de-facto deputy said Wednesday. Cabinet Office Minister David Lidington said the government would consider toughening laws that ban the use of drones near airports but that operators could also invest more in protection systems. Departures from Heathrow, Europe’s busiest airport, were halted for an hour Tuesday evening after a drone was sighted, raising fears that operations could face the serious levels of disruption that hit London’s Gatwick last month. Gatwick Airport said it had upgraded its systems after it was targeted for three days in the run-up to Christmas.

ANTANANARIVO (Reuters) -- Madagascar’s top court proclaimed former leader Andry Rajoelina winner of a hard-fought presidential vote, rejecting his rival’s accusations of fraud. High Constitutional Court chairman Jean Eric Rakotoarisoa ratified results given by the Indian Ocean island’s electoral board last month saying Rajoelina won 55.66 percent of votes versus 44.34 percent for Marc Ravalomanana. “The victory is not only mine. It is also the victory of Malagasy people,” Rajoelina, a 44-year-old businessman, told jubilant supporters at his party’s headquarters. He had ousted Ravalomanana, 69, who is known as “the milkman” for his ownership of a dairy business, in a 2009 coup. Both men said this time they would accept the outcome of the vote. However, after a Dec. 19 runoff, Ravalomanana’s team asked the court to nullify the results and submitted more than 200 complaints about balloting and vote counting.

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) -- Anti-riot police with water cannon and armored vehicles surrounded Congo’s electoral commission on Wednesday ahead of the delayed announcement of the results of the presidential election. Residents of the capital, Kinshasa, said the heavy security presence was a bad sign, with some recalling the violence that followed past disputed elections. It “may be a message that the publication (of the results) won’t meet the expectations of the Congolese people,” resident John Kabamba said. The first results could be announced as early as Wednesday. Police installed metal barriers and blocked traffic outside the electoral commission as it continued meetings that began late Tuesday to discuss the results compiled so far.

KHARTOUM (Bloomberg) -- Sudan’s embattled long-time president Omar al-Bashir danced a jig on stage and told thousands of supporters that elections are the only way out of the current crisis, as he looked to reverse a tide of protests that have swept across the impoverished nation. In a televised rally in Khartoum, the capital, Bashir rejected calls to step down, saying there “are those who conspire against Sudan and seek to attack it.” There are no other options but a national dialog and elections, he said, as chants broke out of: “There is no alternative to al-Bashir.” Flanked by supporters, and sporting a brown leisure suit, Bashir danced on stage and waved his cane to cheers. The show of force by one of the region’s longest-serving rulers comes as the government faces continuing protests against soaring living costs.