

China Holds 'High-Intensity' Drill in South China Sea



This file photo shows China's Shandong aircraft carrier.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China has conducted "high-intensity" aerial drills over the South China Sea, as tensions escalate between Beijing and Washington in the strategic waterway.

China's Defense Ministry announced on Thursday that long-range Chinese bombers, the H-6G and H-6K, were among the aircraft that took part in the aerial exercises over the South China Sea.

The Chinese jet bombers carried out "high-intensity training, and completed day-and-night training exercises in taking off and landing, long-range assault, and attacks on sea targets," Ren

Guoqiang, the ministry spokesman, said at a virtual press conference in the capital, Beijing.

Ren added that the drills were part of the country's routine training and had "achieved the expected results."

The Chinese Defense Ministry stressed that the exercises had been pre-scheduled and were aimed at boosting the skills and capabilities of pilots to operate under various natural conditions.

The South China Sea is a gateway to major sea routes, through which about 3.4 trillion dollars' worth of trade passes each year.

The United States routinely sends

warships and warplanes to the South China Sea, ratcheting up tensions among the regional countries.

Earlier this month, Washington said Beijing's claims to most of the sea were illegal.

At the press conference in Beijing on Thursday, Ren lashed out at the U.S. administration, saying Washington must stop stirring up troubles in the South China Sea and that China is determined to safeguard its sovereignty and security in the strategic waterway.

"China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands and reefs in the South China Sea and their adjacent waters, which is based on sufficient historical and jurisprudential evidence," he said.

"We urge the United States to stop making erroneous remarks, taking provocative military actions in the South China Sea and sowing discord among countries in the region. The US move to stir up troubles in the South China Sea will only make China all the more determined to ride the waves, safeguard its sovereignty and security more resolutely, and safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea more firmly," Ren underlined.

Ren also censured a statement issued by the U.S. Department of State earlier in the month, which accused Beijing of seeking a "maritime empire" in the South China Sea and destabilizing the region with its drills on the Xisha Islands.

Japan Approves Strike Capability in Enemy Territory



An SM-3 (Block 1A) missile is launched from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer JS Kirishima (DDG-174).

TOKYO (Dispatches) -- A ruling party committee on Friday approved a proposal for Japan to acquire capabilities to halt ballistic missile attacks within enemy territory.

Giving long range munitions to Japan's Self Defense Forces is a controversial issue for a country that renounced the right to wage war after its defeat in World War Two. The proposal could also anger China and Russia, which could fall within range of any new strike weapons.

The proposals, crafted by senior Liberal Democratic

Party lawmakers including former defense minister Itsunori Onodera, will be presented to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as early as next week.

The recommendations will be discussed by Japan's National Security Council, which is expected to finalize new defense policies by the end of September.

Abe has pushed for a more muscular military, arguing Japan needs to respond to a deteriorating security environment in East Asia as U.S. inroads in the region and its standoff with China are escalating tensions.

A strike option against mobile launchers to hit requires close surveillance with satellites that Japan does not currently possess, meaning it would have to rely on help from ally the United States.

U.S. defense company Raytheon has been lobbying senior LDP lawmakers with a proposal to choose its SPY-6 radar rather than using Lockheed's system, sources earlier told Reuters.

"The government will make a decision regarding this by the end of September and our thinking will be reflected in that," Onodera said.

President Donald Trump has been pressuring Tokyo to purchase millions of dollars of U.S. weapons.

Abe's government has announced that it will spend a record 242 billion dollars on military equipment over the next five years, 6.4 percent higher than the previous five-year plan.

Japan plans to order about 100 U.S.-designed F-35 stealth fighter jets with an option to take off and land vertically, suggesting Tokyo is also developing aircraft carriers for the first time since World War II.

Last month, a photo appeared on Twitter which depicted the helicopter carrier Izumo undergoing modification for fixed-wing operations, apparently at the Japan Marine United shipyard in Yokohama.

Forbes said the \$28 million modifications will clear and reinforce Izumo's deck in order to transform the vessel from a helicopter carrier into a light aircraft carrier capable of supporting the Japanese air force's F-35B stealth jump jets.

Izumo's sister vessel Kaga is slated to undergo the same modifications, the U.S. magazine reported.

Russia Intercepts U.S. Spy Planes Over Black Sea



Russian Navy's ships and jet fighters are seen during the joint drills of the Northern and Black Sea fleets, attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin, in the Black Sea, off the coast of Crimea January 9, 2020.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- The Russian military has intercepted American spy planes over the Black Sea four times in the past week.

The Russian defense ministry said a Su-27 jet fighter buzzed two U.S. reconnaissance aircraft on Thursday after they had approached the country's border over the Black Sea.

The American spy planes were identified as an RC-135 strategic reconnaissance aircraft and a P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance plane.

"The American reconnaissance planes were not allowed to breach the Russian Federation's state border," the ministry said in a statement.

A similar incident took place on Monday over the Black Sea. The Russian air force also escorted a P-8A Poseidon plane away from the country's airspace last Thursday and again on Friday.

American bombers and spy planes, as well as NATO aircraft, have frequently been spotted near Russia's borders.

Moscow has time and again expressed its concern about the increasing presence and activities of the U.S.-led NATO forces near Russia's western borders.

The provocative flights have increased in frequency since 2014, when Crimea joined Russia following a referendum in which more than 90 percent of participants voted in favor of separating from Ukraine, and when the ongoing military conflict in eastern Ukraine broke out.

U.S. Marine Jailed

On Thursday, a court in Russia sentenced a former U.S. Marine to nine years

in prison for assaulting two police officers while drunk last year.

Trevor Reed, a 29-year-old student, has been in jail since last year when he was arrested for the attack, which, according to the judge, had caused the two police officers to suffer "mental and physical harm."

The court ruled that Reed's "state of intoxication" had played a decisive role in the incident and sentenced him to nine years in a penal colony.

Reed's conviction follows the high-profile trial of another former U.S. marine Paul Whelan, who received a 16-year jail sentence last month on espionage charges.

EU Sanctions Russian Intelligence

Meanwhile, the European Union on Thursday imposed sanctions on a department of Russia's military intelligence service over suspicions of participation in major cyberattacks across the world.

The EU accused the Russian service of being behind two cyberattacks that hit several companies in Europe in June 2017 and resulted in large financial losses. The service was also accused of two cyberattacks against Ukraine's power grid in 2015 and 2016.

Brussels also targeted firms from North Korea and China over the same claim, with both countries rejecting any involvement in the cyberattacks.

China's diplomatic mission to the EU said in a statement on Friday that Beijing "is a staunch defender of network security and one of the biggest victims of hacker attacks."

Germany Raps U.S. Pressure on UN Over Libya Envoy



Libyan transport minister Milad Matouq walks as he inspects damages at Tripoli's Mitiga airport after it was hit by shelling in Tripoli, Libya May 10, 2020.

NEW YORK (Reuters) -- The United States should not stop United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres from naming a new UN Libya envoy to replace Ghasan Salame who quit nearly five months ago, Germany's UN Ambassador Christoph Heusgen said on Thursday.

Salame, who headed the UN political mission and was charged with trying to mediate peace, quit because of stress after his last effort at peacemaking in the war-torn, oil-producing country failed.

The United States now wants to split the role to have one person run the UN mission - focus on UNSMIL - and another person known as UNDAF and in Libya, diplomats said.

"There have been questions raised by our U.S. partners with regard to the structure of UNSMIL. We believe that, yes, you can discuss that, but ... the U.S. shouldn't stop the Secretary-General nominating a successor to Ghasan Salame," Heusgen told reporters.

The UN Security Council traditionally greenlights such appointments by consen-

sus, but some of the 15 members are not in favor of the U.S. proposal to split the role, diplomats said.

Guterres has suggested former Ghana foreign minister and current UN envoy to the African Union, Hanna Tetteh, replace Salame and Washington has said it can support her nomination after Guterres appoints a special mediator, diplomats said.

The United States had proposed former Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt to be special envoy, but diplomats said she had withdrawn herself and Washington is now looking for a new candidate.

Libya descended into chaos after the NATO-backed overthrow of leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Since 2014, it has been split, with an internationally recognized government controlling the capital, Tripoli, and the northwest, while military leader Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi rules the east.

Haftar is supported by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia, while the government is backed by Turkey. Guterres has warned that there were "unprecedented levels" of foreign interference and mercenaries in the oil-producing country.

News in Brief

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) -- A massive sea and air search was under way on Friday for eight missing U.S. Marines off the Southern California coast after a training mishap on Thursday also resulted in one Marine dead and two others injured, the Marine Corps said in a statement. Fifteen Marines and one Navy sailor were aboard an assault amphibious vehicle that began taking on water around 5:45 p.m. Pacific time on Thursday (0045 GMT Friday), the statement said. One Marine was pronounced dead at Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla, and two others were taken to hospitals where one was listed in critical condition and the other in stable condition, the statement said. A U.S. Navy destroyer and a Coast Guard cutter searched at sea while three Navy helicopters and a Coast Guard helicopter searched overhead, in addition to several small Navy boats, the statement said. All the Marines involved were assigned to the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which is based at Camp Pendleton, the largest Marine base on the West Coast of the United States, between Orange and San Diego counties.

BEIJING (AP) -- China is celebrating the completion of its BeiDou Navigation Satellite System that could rival the U.S. Global Positioning System and significantly boost China's security and geopolitical clout. President Xi Jinping, the leader of the ruling Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army, officially commissioned the system Friday at a ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. That followed a declaration that the 55th and final geostationary satellite in the constellation launched June 23 was operating after having completed all tests. The satellite is part of the third iteration of the BeiDou system known as BDS-3, which began providing navigation services in 2018 to countries taking part in China's sprawling "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative along with others.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- The first dog to test positive for the coronavirus in the United States has died, National Geographic magazine reported, after struggling with symptoms that may be familiar to many of the virus's human sufferers. Buddy the seven-year-old German shepherd became sick in April, around the same time his owner Robert Mahoney was recovering from COVID-19, according to the magazine this week. Buddy seemed to have a stuffed nose and difficulty breathing, and his condition only worsened over the following weeks and months. Mahoney and his wife Allison, who live in New York, eventually euthanized the dog on July 11 after Buddy began vomiting blood clots, urinating blood and was unable to walk.

BRASILIA (AFP) -- Brazil's first lady Michelle Bolsonaro tested positive for the new coronavirus Thursday, the government said, after her husband spent two weeks in quarantine with it. The announcement came five days after President Jair Bolsonaro said he was over his illness and had resumed his normal work routine. Michelle Bolsonaro, 38, "is in good health and will follow all established protocols," the president's office said. Bolsonaro, 65, has faced criticism for his handling of the pandemic as Brazil has surged to become the country with the second-highest number of infections and deaths in the world, after the United States: more than 2.5 million and 91,000, respectively.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- The Kremlin said on Friday it hoped that more than 30 Russian private security contractors detained in neighboring Belarus and accused of plotting acts of terrorism would soon be released. Russia had earlier demanded an explanation over what it called Minsk's wrongful arrest of the group, an incident that risks worsening already strained relations between Belarus and traditionally ally Moscow. Belarus this week detained the group of Russian men near the capital Minsk, saying it had received information that over 200 fighters had entered the country to destabilize it before an Aug. 9 presidential election.

ANGLLET, France (AFP) -- A wildfire fanned by soaring temperatures tore through a pine forest in southwestern France on Thursday, burning down at least one house and forcing dozens of people to flee their homes. Around 100 firefighters and two water bombers tried to beat back the fire, which consumed one home and around 40 hectares (100 acres) of the Chiberta forest by 10:30pm, the local prefecture said. Strong winds and thunderstorms were forecast for overnight. The southwest of France experienced particularly hot weather on Thursday, with the nearby town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz setting its new temperature record of 41.9 degrees Celsius (107 Fahrenheit).

BUKAVU, Congo (Reuters) -- A soldier shot dead 12 people and injured nine others during a drunken rampage in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on Thursday evening, regional authorities said. Security services are conducting a search for the gunman in the city of Sange, 15 miles (24 km) from the Burundian border, where the shooting took place, the governor of South Kivu province, Theo Kasi, said in a statement. President Felix Tshisekedi called the attack a heinous crime and offered his condolences to the victims' families. Congo's vast army is widely seen as poorly trained and unprofessional, and its personnel are frequently accused of committing crimes against civilians. Senior generals are under U.S. and EU sanctions for alleged abuses, and are accused by the United Nations of having supplied weapons to rebels and criminal gangs.

Australia to Force Google, Facebook to Pay for News

SYDNEY (AFP) -- Australia unveiled a draft law Friday to force Google and Facebook to pay news media for their content in a "world-leading" initiative sure to prompt a confrontation with the digital giants.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg announced the "mandatory code of conduct" to govern relations between the struggling news industry and the tech firms after 18 months of negotiations failed to bring the two sides together.

In addition to payment for content, the code covers issues like access to user data, transparency of algorithms and ranking of content in the platforms' news feeds and search results.

"Nothing less than the future of the Australian landscape is at stake with these changes," he said at a news conference.

Frydenberg said legislation implementing the code would be introduced into parliament in the coming weeks and include "substantial penalties" that could cost the tech companies hundreds of millions of dollars.

While the code could eventually apply to any digital platform using Australian news content, Frydenberg said it would initially focus on Facebook and Google, two of the world's richest and most powerful companies.

Australia's initiative has been closely watched around the globe as news media worldwide have suffered in an increasingly digital economy where advertising revenue is overwhelmingly captured by Facebook, Google and other big tech firms.

The news industry crisis has been exacerbated by the economic collapse caused by the coronavirus pandemic, with dozens of Australian newspapers closed and hundreds of journalists sacked in recent months.

Facebook and Google have strongly opposed any move forcing them to share advertising revenue, hinting they could simply boycott Australian media if mandatory payments are imposed.

But Frydenberg warned that the code would prohibit any "discrimination" against Australian media by the tech companies.

"Today's draft legislation will draw the attention of many regulatory agencies and many governments around the world," Frydenberg said, calling the initiative a "world-leading regulatory framework".

He said the aim was "not to protect Australian news media businesses from competition, or from disruption that's occurring across this sector" but rather "to create a level playing field to ensure a fair go for Australian news media businesses."

Under the code, drawn up by the Australian anti-trust watchdog ACCC, tech companies will be required to negotiate with news firms "in good faith" over payments for use of their content.

If agreement cannot be reached within three months, the issue will go to binding arbitration to determine the amount of payments.