

US says Chinese military base likely in Pakistan, Beijing says remarks 'irresponsible'

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Beijing: Beijing says it is "firmly opposed" to a Pentagon report that highlighted China's construction of military facilities on man-made islands in the disputed South China Sea and speculated that Beijing would likely build more bases overseas.

The annual report made "irresponsible remarks on China's national defence development and reasonable actions in defending our territorial sovereignty and security interests in disregard of the facts," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told reporters on Wednesday.

"China is firmly opposed to that," Hua said, adding that her government was a force for safeguarding peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and the world.

While Hua declined to comment on possible overseas bases, she said China and Pakistan - one of the countries considered most likely to host a Chinese military presence - were close friends that conduct mutually beneficial cooperation in a variety of fields.

China is now building its first overseas base in Djibouti, which it says will help facilitate its participation in anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and UN peacekeeping operations in the region. The base is near Camp Lemonnier, the US base in the Horn of Africa nation, although American military leaders have said they don't see it as threatening US operations.

"China most likely will seek to establish additional military bases in countries with which it has a longstanding friendly relationship and similar strategic interests, such as Pakistan, and in which there is a precedent for hosting foreign militaries," the Pentagon report said. "This initiative, along with regular naval vessel visits to foreign ports, both reflects and amplifies China's growing influence, extending the reach of its armed forces."

The assessment also focused on the military buildup in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, which China claims virtually in its entirety.

It said that as of late last year, China was building 24 fighter-sized hangars, fixed-weapons positions, barracks, administration buildings and communication facilities on each of the three largest outposts - Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief Reefs. Each has runways that are at least 2,700 meters (8,800 feet) long.

China claims the bases are there to improve navigation safety and assistance for fishermen. But it also says they help reinforce China's sovereignty claims and that China is fully entitled to provide them with defensive capabilities.

"That we develop national defence is to safeguard China's independent sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is a legitimate right of a sovereign state," Hua said, without mentioning the islands directly.

While China objects vocally to US naval operations in the South China Sea, it is eager not to be seen as a threat, and its criticism of the annual Pentagon assessment is part of a drive to avoid being perceived as attempting to seize the mantle as the region's dominant military force.

It has also engaged in a series of dialogues and exchanges with the US military, although the two continue to view each

other warily. "We hope the US side will put aside the Cold War mentality, view China's military development in an objective and rational manner, and take concrete actions to maintain steady growth of the military relationship between the two countries," Hua said.

- (With AP inputs)