

China urges US to stop 'unfriendly, dangerous' military activities

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Beijing: China on Tuesday denied its fighter jet pilots operated dangerously during an encounter with a US surveillance plane+ in international airspace in which the American pilot took evasive action to avoid a possible collision. Spokesman Ren Guoqiang said in a statement on the defence ministry's microblog that the performance of the pilots of the two J-10 fighters was "legal, necessary and professional."

Ren criticized frequent close-in surveillance runs by US planes as raising the chance of accidents, saying such missions "threatened China's national security, harmed China-US sea-air military safety, endangered the safety of pilots from the two sides and were the root cause of China-US sea-air unexpected incidents."

The US should stop such "unsafe, unprofessional and unfriendly military activities," Ren said, in a repetition of China's standard policy toward US surveillance missions intended at collecting Chinese computer and voice data in hopes of gaining insight into the workings of the People's Liberation Army.

Asked about the incident at a daily briefing, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said Beijing objected to such missions but remained "committed to building military mutual trust with other countries."

US Navy Capt. Jeff Davis said the Chinese fighters intercepted the US EP-3 surveillance plane on Sunday in international airspace between the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea, in an area he described as west of the Korean Peninsula.

Davis said one of the Chinese planes approached at a high rate of speed from beneath the American plane, then slowed and pulled up, prompting the EP-3 pilot to take evasive action. He called the Chinese pilot's move unsafe.

China in 2013 declared an air defense identification zone over a partly contested portion of the East China Sea, demanding foreign aircraft declare their presence and follow Chinese orders. The US and others swiftly dismissed the zone as invalid and have largely ignored it. It wasn't clear if Sunday's encounter+ took place inside the zone.

Such incidents continue to occur despite an agreement between the two sides to prevent them from sparking an international crisis, as happened in April 2001 when a Chinese jet fighter collided with a US EP-3. That led to the death of the Chinese pilot and China's detention of the US air crew for 10 days after their crippled plane landed at a PLA Navy air base on the island province of Hainan.

While China has long chafed at US surveillance operations targeting its military, the PLA itself has been conducting such missions further and further from its home ports.

Earlier this month, China sailed a spy ship through the narrow Tsugaru Strait separating the Japanese islands of Honshu and Hokkaido, while another was spotted last week within Australia's exclusive economic zone where allies Australia and US were conducting major war games.

- AP