

US 'playing with fire' on Taiwan, China says ahead of defence meeting

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China has been particularly incensed by recent U.S. Navy patrols in the Taiwan Strait, U.S. legislation in support of Taiwan and a meeting between Taiwan's national security chief David Lee and White House national security adviser John Bolton. (File)

Beijing: The United States is 'playing with fire' with its support for self-ruled Taiwan, China said on Thursday. China's comments come ahead of a meeting between Chinese defence minister Wei Fenghe and acting U.S. defence secretary Patrick Shanahan.

Already locked in an escalating trade war, the two countries are also at odds over a series of strategic issues, from the disputed South China Sea to democratic Taiwan. China has claimed Taiwan as its sacred territory, to be taken by force if needed.

Shanahan, who on his first day as acting defence secretary in January said the U.S. military would focus on 'China, China, China', will be meeting Wei at the annual Shangri-La defence forum in Singapore which begins on Friday.

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Speaking at a regular monthly news briefing, Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Wu Qian described military ties between Beijing and Washington as generally good. But he took a much darker tone when asked about U.S. support for Taiwan, an issue China has long described as the most sensitive in relations between the two countries.

'Recently, the U.S. sides has been continually playing the 'Taiwan card', trying in futile to 'use Taiwan to control China'. This is deluded,' Wu said.

'The series of actions the U.S. side has taken is playing with fire, seriously harms the development of military relations between China and the United States, and seriously harms peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait area.'

Taiwan's air, sea and land forces conducted an exercise to repel an invading force on Thursday, as its defence minister pledged to defend the island against what it sees as China's rising military threat.

Washington has no formal ties with Taipei but is its most important international supporter and main supplier of arms.

A senior U.S. defence official said that the fact that Shanahan was going to the Shangri-la dialogue during a period of tension with Iran was a sign that the United States was committed to the region and its allies.

During a meeting with Wei, Shanahan is expected to bring up better communication between the two militaries to avoid

the risk of miscalculation, the U.S. official said.

While Wei will likely tackle the Sino-U.S. trade dispute and the hardening Trump administration approaches to Taiwan and the South China Sea, Asian states will be looking for calming messages, according to security experts and regional diplomats. "Regional countries will be expecting reassurances that China's intentions are in fact peaceful given its growing military might," said Ian Storey, a regional security analyst at Singapore's ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

Storey said that Wei must also speak to his domestic constituents, given the fact his address and a rare question-and-answer session are expected to be shown prominently in China. "In the current environment maybe they wouldn't want him to be too accommodating. He can be expected to blame the U.S. for growing tensions in the South China Sea and there is no way he is going to admit that China is part of the problem."

- Reuters