

'China trying to coerce neighbours'

A satellite image shows a J-11 combat aircraft deployed at China's base on Woody Island in the Paracels. Reuters

China's military build-up in the South China Sea and its deployment of high-end weapons systems in the disputed waters is designed to intimidate and coerce neighbours, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said on Saturday.

His broadside at a security summit in Singapore drew a sharp rebuke from a Chinese General, who lashed out at "irresponsible comments" on the contested sea.

Speaking just 10 days before President Donald Trump is due to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Mr. Mattis also said the U.S. military continues to support diplomats pushing for the "complete, verifiable and irreversible" denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

Beijing has deployed a range of military hardware, including anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles and electronic jammers across the South China Sea, where it has built islets and other maritime features into hardened military facilities, Mr. Mattis said.

China has also landed heavy bombers on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands.

"Despite China's claims to the contrary, the placement of these weapon systems is tied directly to military use for the purposes of intimidation and coercion," Mr. Mattis told the Shangri-La Dialogue.

'Reneging 2015 promise'

He also blasted Chinese President Xi Jinping for reneging on a 2015 promise made at the White House that Beijing would not militarise the island features in the South China Sea.

But Chinese Lieutenant General He Lei issued a fiery response, telling the summit that "irresponsible comments from other nations cannot be accepted".

"It is for the sake of defending ourselves," he added, and warned Beijing would take "firm measures" if other countries sent ships and aircraft close to what it considers its islands in the South China Sea.

China claims almost the entire resource-rich sea, through which \$5 trillion in shipping trade passes annually, with competing claims from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Mr. Mattis's address in Singapore returned to a theme that he and other senior U.S. officials have hammered home since Mr. Trump took office — that America is here to stay in the Asia-Pacific region and that allies should stick with Washington instead of aligning with Beijing.

Few consequences

Despite frequent warnings from Washington about China's rising might and the pitfalls of its "Belt and Road" global infrastructure initiative, Beijing has faced few consequences for its South China Sea build-up and sweeping territorial claims.

One modest exception came last week when the Pentagon cancelled invitation for China to take part in biennial maritime exercises in the Pacific. Mr. Mattis characterised this action as an "initial

response”.

But “there are much larger consequences in the future when nations lose the rapport of their neighbours”, he warned.

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