

Cheap Talk or Serious Resolve? *Chinese and US policies on the East and South China Seas*

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Cheap Talk or Serious Resolve?

Chinese and US policies on the East and South China Seas

Dr. Krista E. Wiegand

Last week, newly-confirmed US Secretary of Defense James Mattis made his first state visits, to South Korea and Japan, to reassure both US allies that the new Trump administration planned to uphold the long standing defense treaties between the US and both states. In Japan, Secretary Mattis stated on the record that the US defense treaty with Japan covered the disputed Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands), claimed by China: “I made clear that our longstanding policy on the Senkaku Islands stands — the US will continue to recognize Japanese administration of the islands. And as such, Article 5 of the US-Japan security treaty applies.” Prior to this statement about the East China Sea dispute, the Trump administration has been ambiguous on its position about China’s actions and policies regarding its territorial and maritime claims in the East and South China Seas.

Although the media have covered this statement as if it is a serious policy shift, it does not represent a new position by the Trump administration, but rather a continuation of a policy stance the Obama administration took in 2014. Prior to 2014, the US had taken an ambiguous position on whether the defense treaty included the disputed islands in the East China Sea. The statement by Mattis was made primarily to assure the Japanese government and military that the US was not planning to back down on the defense treaty. Specifically to allay any concerns in Japan and South Korea about comments made by President Trump during the campaign season, prior to the election, that he would like to reduce US forces in Japan and South Korea and have each state finance more of their own militaries. With this rhetoric causing some alarm in policy circles in South Korea and Japan, it was appropriate for Mattis’ first state visits to be to these two states, and for Japanese Prime Minister Abe to visit Washington, DC to meet with Trump, especially given the strong rhetoric the Trump administration has voiced about China. With Obama’s “Asia pivot,” and the increased assertiveness pursued by China in both the East and South China Seas, it is critical for the Trump administration to provide a clear position on China’s territorial and maritime claims. In addition to Chinese-Japanese naval run-ins in the East China Sea, China continues to build up and militarize “islands” in the South China Sea, failing to comply with the international arbitration decision against China in July of last year. All of this when coupled with a lot of “cheap talk” or mere rhetoric not backed by true intent by President Trump, along with a lack of any US resolve by the Trump administration about its territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea. This has signaled to China that it may have an open window with which to make moves in the disputed seas without any US response. Fortunately, Mattis’ direct statement about the East China Sea dispute quelled that concern, but US resolve about the South China Sea dispute remains questionable.

Not surprisingly, China’s response to Mattis’ statement was strong and negative. According to a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, China urged “the US side to take a responsible attitude, stop making wrong remarks on the issue involving the Diaoyu islands’ sovereignty, and avoid making the issue more complicated and bringing instability to the regional situation.” Was this cheap talk or serious resolve from China? This statement is like hundreds of others made by Chinese

officials in past decades about the East China Sea, as well as the South China Sea, much of it strong words but cheap talk. Yes, rhetoric matters, but actions speak louder than words, and China's continued assertiveness in both the East and South China Seas testifies to China's resolve. China is not inclined to reduce its immense trade relations, nor get involved in a military confrontation with the US, but China is resolved about its territorial and maritime claims. Its claims are not just for the sake of the disputed islands and marine resources, but primarily to serve as a major step in expanding its power and influence in East Asia and beyond, balancing against the traditional role of US power in the region.

If the Trump administration has paid attention to China's rhetoric in response to any past US statements made about the disputed islands in the East China Sea, it had to know that the comments made by Secretary Mattis, specifically referencing the disputed islands, would rile up China. During the campaign and in the first few weeks of his administration, Trump has continuously made negative remarks about China and its relationship with the US. Although the focus of President Trump's tirades against China have focused primarily on US-Chinese trade and outsourcing US jobs, he has entered dangerous waters by being so openly hostile toward China, casually throwing out the question of whether the US should continue to support the "one China policy" that has been in place for decades. At the same time, in preparation for a talk between China's President Xi and President Trump, National Security Advisor Michael Flynn spoke with China's State Council who oversees the Foreign Ministry, with Flynn stating that it is important to develop strong and powerful relations between the two states and properly manage "sensitive issues." With such mixed messages, it is hard to know what is cheap talk, and what is serious resolve.

Much of the rhetoric is cheap talk, and Mattis' statement on the East China Sea serve as a key signal of US resolve in the region, indicating that the US is committed to certain policy positions in East Asia. Playing this game with China though has severe repercussions, not only for the US economically and militarily, but for Japan, South Korea, and all the disputant states involved in the South China Sea – the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Brunei.

Trump and many of his advisors are still learning how US foreign policy and international diplomacy works. They will soon have to be clear about what is actually cheap talk and what is actually resolve. Otherwise, China will continue to take advantage of the new administration's ambiguity and expand its military power in East Asia. The buildup of military installations in South China Sea and regular maneuvers in the East China Sea signal resolve by China, regardless of cheap talk, and the US needs to be consistent on its signals to China. President Trump may prefer a war of words against China, but this is not a game and consistency and resolve are necessary.