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Reuters

China military warns of confrontation over seas

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China's military warned the United States on Saturday that U.S.-Philippine military exercises have raised risks of armed confrontation over the disputed South China Sea in the toughest high-level warning yet after weeks of tensions.

China's official Liberation Army Daily warned that recent jostling with the Philippines over disputed seas where both countries have sent ships could boil over into outright conflict, and laid much of the blame at Washington's door.

This week American and Filipino troops launched a fortnight of annual naval drills amid the stand-off between Beijing and Manila, who have accused each other of encroaching on sovereign seas near the Scarborough Shoal, west of a former U.S. navy base at Subic Bay.

The joint exercises are held in different seas around the Philippines; the leg that takes place in the South China Sea area starts on Monday.

"Anyone with clear eyes saw long ago that behind these drills is reflected a mentality that will lead the South China Sea issue down a fork in the road towards military confrontation and resolution through armed force," said the commentary in the Chinese paper, which is the chief mouthpiece of the People's Liberation Army.

"Through this kind of meddling and intervention, the United States will only stir up the entire South China Sea situation towards increasing chaos, and this will inevitably have a massive impact on regional peace and stability."

Up to now, China has chided the Philippines over the dispute about the uninhabited shoal known in the Philippines as the Panatag Shoal and which China calls Huangyan, about 124 nautical miles off the main Philippine island of Luzon.

China has territorial disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan across the South China Sea, which could be rich in oil and gas and is spanned by busy shipping lanes.

Major General Luo Yuan, a retired PLA researcher well-known for his hawkish views, amplified the warnings from Beijing issued through state media.

"China has already shown enough restraint and patience over this incident," Luo said of the friction with Manila, according to an interview published on Chinese state television's website (<http://news.cntv.cn>).

If the Philippines "takes irrational actions, then the current confrontation could intensify, and the Chinese navy will certainly not stand idly by," he added.

REGIONAL TENSIONS

Beijing has sought to resolve the disputes one-on-one with the countries involved but there is worry among its neighbors over what some see as growing Chinese assertiveness in staking claims over the seas and various islands, reefs and shoals.

In past patches of tension over disputed seas, hawkish Chinese military voices have also risen, only to be later reined in by the government. The same could be true this time.

Since late 2010, China has sought to cool tensions with the United States. Especially with the ruling Chinese Party preoccupied with a leadership succession late in 2012, Beijing has stressed hopes for steady relations throughout this year.

Nonetheless, experts have said that China remains wary of U.S. military intentions across the Asia-Pacific, especially in the wake of the Obama administration's vows to "pivot" to the region, reinvigorating diplomatic and security ties with allies.

The Liberation Army Daily commentary echoed that wariness.

"The United States' intention of trying to draw more countries into stirring up the situation in the South China Sea is being brandished to the full," said the newspaper.