

# China dispatches low-level official to security conference

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In this March 8, 2018 file photo, Vice President of China's Academy of Military Sciences, Lt. Gen. He Lei gestures as he speaks during a press conference on the sidelines of the National People's Congress at the State Council Information Office in Beijing. China has dispatched a low-level military delegation to an annual security conference in Singapore that has dwelled heavily on Chinese activities in the South China Sea. (AP Photo/Andy Wong, File)

China has dispatched a low-level military delegation to an annual

security conference in Singapore that has dwelled heavily in past on Chinese activities in the South China Sea.

China's presence at the Shangri-La Dialogue meeting this weekend is being led by Lt. Gen. He Lei, vice president of the People's Liberation Army's Academy of Military Science.

The move follows a recent pattern of not sending high-level officials to the three-day forum that begins Friday, in an apparent attempt to deflect attention from China's shoring up its claims to virtually the entire South China Sea.

At last year's meeting, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis sharply criticized what he called Beijing's disregard for international law by its "indisputable militarization" of artificial islands in disputed areas of the South China Sea. The waterway, crucial to global trade and rich in fish and other resources, is claimed in whole or in part by six governments.

In comments at a regularly scheduled briefing Friday, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying rebuffed suggestions that China was contributing to tensions in the region.

"I think all regional countries with the sharp eyes hope the U.S. can play a constructive role, and not be a destroyer but a contributor to the regional peace and stability," Hua said.

Mattis is again representing the U.S. at this year's forum, which comes amid on-again, off-again prospects for a summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that had been planned for this month. China is North Korea's most important ally and has encouraged talks while seeking to preserve its own economic and diplomatic interests.

The Singapore gathering also follows the Pentagon's decision last week to withdraw its invitation for China to participate in a multinational naval exercise in what it called "an initial response" to China's militarization of the South China Sea.

The Pentagon cited evidence China has deployed anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile systems and electronic jammers to contested areas in the Spratly Islands, where China has built military installations on man-made islands.

Despite strong mutual suspicions, the U.S. had included China in the past two versions of the naval exercise known as Rim of the Pacific, or RimPac, in 2014 and 2016.

China's Defense Ministry on Thursday said it still hoped for a "sound a healthy" relationship with the U.S. military.

At the same news conference, ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang also confirmed China's development of its latest-model type 055 guided missile destroyer, which weighs 10,000 tons and features both stealth design and a land-attack capability.

The PLA navy is believed to be planning to link the 055s with its slightly smaller type 052 destroyers as part of its future aircraft carrier strike forces. China operates one carrier at present, while another is undergoing sea trials and others are believed to be in the construction or planning stages.

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