News Transcript

# Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room

Press Operations

Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook  
May 19, 2016

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Q:  China is rejecting the U.S. claims that the planes flew in an unsafe manner.  Where is your review right now?  And do you all still believe that you guys were flying in a safe --  
  
MR. COOK:  That our folks were flying in a safe manner?  We believe our folks were flying in a safe manner for sure.  
  
Q:  That they were flying in an unsafe manner.  You still --  
  
MR. COOK:  Yes, this incident is still under review.  But certainly our air crew felt that this was not conducted in the safest and most professional way.  And so we'll continue to review all the facts in this case.  And this is an area where we have not had really a significant number of issues like this since some of the confidence-building measures over the last -- last few months.  And so, obviously this is a concern that something like this would happen.  We'll go through the review process and determine what, if any, appropriate action is needed.  
  
Q:  Can you walk us through the facts of what's known about what happened in this intercept?  
  
MR. COOK:  We're still going through the review.  But again, our aircraft was flying in international airspace.  And again, I can't walk you through every single detail, but there were two Chinese aircraft that approached and our air crew felt that the approach was not conducted in the safest -- a safe and professional manner.  
  
And so that's the concern that we have and that's what's being reviewed at this time.  
  
Q:  It seems like it's happening -- (inaudible).  So doesn't that give credence to China's claims that the U.S. is trying to, you know, violate their airspace or, you know, violate their sovereignty or something like that?  
  
MR. COOK:  My understanding is this happened in international airspace over the South China Sea.  And we have continued to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows.  And -- and we feel confident that our crew was conducting this, again, in international airspace as allowed under international law.

Q:  Have you brought this up with the Chinese yet, specifically how this might go against the agreement?  
  
MR. COOK:  I think we're reviewing it and we'll, of course, use all the appropriate diplomatic channels to register our concerns as appropriate once we've concluded ourselves what happened here and the circumstances.  
  
Q:  So, this happened on Tuesday.  When do you think the review is going to be completed?  
  
MR. COOK:  Well, we'll let you know.  I don't have an exact deadline for you.  
  
But again, there are diplomatic channels for us to pursue in these instances, and we'll do so.  
  
Q:  Can you tell us what distance of -- (inaudible) -- the American plane was when it was intercepted by the two Chinese aircraft?  
  
MR. COOK:  I do not know from here.  We can try to take that question, if you'd like.

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 19, 2016

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 5/19/2016

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:23 P.M. EDT

Q    Thanks, Josh.  Two Chinese tactical jets have intercepted an American reconnaissance plane in the South China Sea.  And I was wondering, how seriously are you taking this incident?  Do you see it as a provocation?

MR. EARNEST:  Well, Andrew, the Department of Defense is reviewing public claims of a May 17 intercept of a U.S. maritime patrol reconnaissance aircraft by two tactical aircraft from the People’s Republic of China.  The incident occurred in international airspace during a routine U.S. patrol in the South China Sea.  Initial reports of the incident characterized it as “unsafe.”

I can tell you more generally that the Department of Defense has made progress reducing the risk between U.S. operational forces and those of the People’s Republic of China.  We've reduced that risk by improving dialogue at multiple levels under the bilateral confidence-building measures and the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement.  These are established diplomatic and military channels that allow the United States and China to communicate clearly and raise concerns about these kinds of issues when they arise.

I'm told that the next Military Maritime Consultative Agreement talks are actually scheduled for May 24 and 25 in Hawaii.  So there is a well-established diplomatic and military channel to work through these kinds of concerns.  Over the course of the last year, the Department of Defense has seen improvements in the way that Chinese military pilots fly consistent with international guidelines and consistent with the way that aircraft can be operated in a safe and professional manner.  But suffice it to say that the Department of Defense is addressing this issue through the appropriate channels.

Q    Is the President typically told about these incidents, or this one in particular?

MR. EARNEST:  Well, I think the President is certainly apprised of these developments as warranted.  I don't know whether or not he received a specific briefing on this particular situation.  Again, based on the kinds of improvements that we've seen over the last year, I think these kinds of incidents are not common.  But there also was a pretty significant incident in the first few months of the Bush administration with Chinese military aircraft intercepting U.S. intelligence aircraft that resulted in a much more significant geopolitical incident.  The reports of this incident obviously didn’t result in the same kind of consequences.

Q    This is obviously not an accident.  Do you think that it’s going to coincide with the President’s trip to Vietnam?

MR. EARNEST:  Well, we’ll try to address this issue through the established channels.  And presumably, in those channels, Chinese officials can explain their perspective on what exactly occurred.  But I would hesitate to ascribe a motive at this point.

**John Kirby**

**Spokesperson**  
**Daily Press Briefing**

**Washington, DC**

**May 19, 2016**

**QUESTION:** Can we stay in China?

**MR KIRBY:** China?

**QUESTION:** In Asia. Do you have anything on the – what DOD claimed to be unsafe intercept of a U.S. military aircraft by two Chinese flight – fighter jets over the South China Sea? Has there been any diplomatic communications between these two countries after this incident?

**MR KIRBY:** I’m not aware of any specific communications about this incident. This was a – obviously, we share the concerns that were expressed by the Defense Department over these unsafe maneuvers. They’re not doing anything to lessen tensions and to decrease – to do anything to decrease the possibility for miscalculations and perhaps put people in real harm’s way. So we absolutely share the concerns that were expressed by Defense Department leaders about these maneuvers. I just don’t have any specific diplomatic conversations to read out. This is something that we routinely have raised in the past when it’s happened, and I’m quite certain that we’ll continue to raise our concerns about this going forward.

**QUESTION:** Could you give us a sense of the current mechanism between these two countries to prevent miscalculation or incidents like this?

**MR KIRBY:** I’m sorry, say that again?

**QUESTION:** The current mechanism between U.S. and China to prevent incidents like this and to prevent miscalculation.

**MR KIRBY:** Well, again, I’d refer you to DOD to talk about specific mechanisms. But this is not a military with which we don’t have a relationship. It’s not a military in which we don’t have avenues for communications. We do routinely on many, many levels. So there’s certainly plenty of vehicles available for the United States military and the PLA to have appropriate communications on these kinds of incidents. That’s not the problem. The problem isn’t are you talking or not. The problem is this kind of behavior, this very unsafe, dangerous behavior in the air, which puts people’s lives at risk unnecessarily.

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 20, 2016

Press Call on the Upcoming Trip to Vietnam and Japan

Via Telephone

4:22 P.M. EDT

And I think our goal has been, in the United States, to use our trade enforcement laws aggressively to do that.  But we know that this is a global problem that requires a global solution, and we want to do a better job of coordinating with our international partners in the G7 and in other forums.  
   
Q    Thanks for the call.  It’s a question for Ben or Dan.  We’ve seen, again, in the last 24 hours, another escalation of tensions, and so I was trying to see what this intercepts -- the discussion about the Vietnam arms embargo, which is annoying the Chinese, and the ruling coming up.  I was just wondering if you can say -- can tell us how are you kind of -- take a little bit of heat out of this issue, and whether you actually want to take a little bit of heat out of this issue.  
   
MR. KRITENBRINK:  Look, our approach to the South China Sea has been very consistent, and you’ll continue to see that going forward.  We have demonstrated very clearly that we don’t take a position on any of the competing sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, but we do very clearly take a position on how those disputes are resolved, and we make very clear they need to be resolved peacefully and in accordance with international law.  
   
And at the same time, we’ve demonstrated that the United States, as with all countries, enjoys certain rights under international law, including the freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight.  
   
You have seen, as we have, the reports that there was an unsafe intercept in the South China Sea in the last 24 hours.  We’re looking into that incident.  I don’t have further details for it, but I think you’re well aware that we routinely carry out naval and other operations, both in the airspace over the South China Sea and in the international waters of the South China Sea. We do those routinely, in a safe manner, and we’ll continue to do that going forward.  
   
Although maritime issues is not the central focus of the visit per se, obviously these issues are of great importance to all countries in the region, including to Vietnam and to Japan, obviously to the United States.  And I’m confident that when the President sits down with the Vietnamese leadership and with Prime Minister Abe, that this will be one important topic of discussion.  And I also anticipate that the leaders at the G7 will have the opportunity to engage on these issues as well.  
   
MR. RHODES:  The only thing I’d add, Andrew, is just a couple things.  I mean, one is we also have worked to ensure that we have military-to-military engagement with China, in part so that we have the capacity to raise concerns around particular issues, and just have open lines of communication.    
   
The second thing that I’d say is that the United States’ role in the region has been to reinforce international rules of the road and peace and stability.  And for decades, that presence has helped facilitate peaceful development in the Asia Pacific region.  And to the extent to which there is behavior that seeks to take these types of territorial disputes and put them into the type of dynamic where a bigger nation is seeking to inserts its rule over a smaller one, I think that raises concerns in the region.  And it only reinforces the need to have a dialogue around support for clear international rules of the road.    
   
And so we pursued that discussion at Sunnylands with the ASEAN countries -- several of whom are claimants, several of whom aren't -- but all of them have an interest in the peaceful resolution of disputes and the free flow of commerce through the South China Sea.  We'll certainly have that discussion with Vietnam.  It's only one element of many aspects of our cooperation on security and economic issues.  
   
But again, I think what we see is an interest in the region and the United States being present as a country that is committed to international rules and norms.  And that will be our consistent message throughout the course of the visit.