

BEIJING (Reuters) -

□□□□□□□ China on Monday confirmed that it will participate for the first time in a major U.S.-hosted naval drill this month, sending four ships including a destroyer and frigate, even as deep military distrust persists between the two countries.



Beijing's agreement to join the drills comes at a moment of heightened tension in the disputed East and South China Seas, and growing unease in the United States over China's rapid military buildup and its cyber capabilities.

The Rim of the Pacific exercise, known as RIMPAC, is billed as the world's largest international maritime exercise, with 22 nations and more than 40 ships and submarines participating the last time it was held off Hawaii in 2012.

Not all the participants are treaty allies with the United States. Last year's participants included Russia and India.

But China has never participated in the event, although it did send observers to RIMPAC in 1998, the Pentagon says. U.S. officials said in March that China had accepted the invitation. [ID:nL1N0CEAGF]

The official People's Liberation Army Daily, quoting a navy spokesman, said it would be the first time the Chinese navy would be participating in the joint exercises organized by the U.S. navy.

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Besides the two warships, a supply ship, a hospital ship and two helicopters will also be part of the Chinese delegation, the newspaper added.

The exercises the Chinese navy will join run the gamut from cannon firing exercises, maritime security actions, and maritime warship exercises to military medicine exchanges, humanitarian aid and disaster reduction besides diving drills, it said.

A medical forum will also be held for the Chinese and the U.S. sides, with visits to each other's ships, the paper added.

The exercise is due to be held in the middle of June in the waters near the U.S. Pacific island of Guam, while Singapore and Brunei will also send ships, it said.

Last week China's Defense Ministry slammed the Pentagon for a report estimating China's true military spending exceeded \$145 billion last year and warning that China was stepping up its military modernization program. [ID:nL1N0ON06M]

(Reporting by Ben Blanchard; Editing by Clarence Fernandez)

China confirms attendance at U.S.-hosted naval exercises in June

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