



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

IN THE NEWS

Pentagon Downplays 'Close Encounter' Between US, Chinese Planes Over S. China Sea

February 10, 2017 | *Voice of America*

By: Jeff Seldin

Related Expert: Thomas G. Mahnken

Dr. Thomas G. Mahnken, president of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, told VOA that while there is an effort by the Chinese to exert control over the South China Sea and treat it like Chinese airspace, it's important to acknowledge that pilots do sometimes make mistakes.

"If we look at the totality of Chinese behavior, it's some mixture of those two things, and the challenge for American policymakers and American soldiers is to disentangle what's deliberate and what is unprofessional," he said. "We don't want to lump in a deliberate behavior with unprofessional, poor piloting."

Mahnken said he thinks the Chinese are trying to create an atmosphere where U.S. officials tacitly acknowledge that large parts of the international waters in the South China Sea are Chinese territory.

"They want us to avoid operating in and near these artificial features they've created," Mahnken said, referring to man-made islands erected by the Chinese as military bases near the Philippines.

It is important, Mahnken said, for the U.S. to remind the Chinese that under international law, the islands "do not exist."

"It's perfectly legitimate for the United States, and in accordance with our long-standing policy, to essentially treat those man-made features for what they are: They're hazards to navigation. They're not Chinese sovereign territory," he said. "So we should operate around, above, near those man-made features routinely, limited only by the safety of our ships and the safety of our aircraft."