Japan uses submarine incident to whip up anti-Chinese nationalism

John Chan
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In the early hours of November 10, a Chinese submarine was detected intruding into Japanese territorial waters off the Okinawa islands, some 1,600 kilometers southwest from Tokyo. The incident rapidly escalated into a full-blown diplomatic row as the entire Japanese political establishment stirred up fear and suspicion with alarmist statements about the Chinese military threat on Japan's doorstep. An examination of the events reveals that the alarm was largely fabricated.

According to the US-based thinktank Stratfor, the first meeting of Japanese defense officials to discuss the presence of the Chinese sub was not held until 6:50 am—several hours after it was spotted. It was only at 8:10 am that a crisis management task force was set up at Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's office, and another 30 minutes before the defense minister, Yoshinori Ono, ordered the dispatch of two destroyers and a helicopter to intercept the intruder.

The submarine refused to obey Japanese orders to surface and fled the area. Even though the vessel had already left Japanese waters, it was tracked by a P-3C maritime patrol plane for hours.

These aggressive actions by the Japanese military toward a Chinese vessel were unprecedented. In March 1999, Japan fired on two North Korean spy ships near Noto Peninsula and Sado Island. In December, 2001 a North Korean ship was sunk by Japanese forces in the Amami-Oshima islands. Under conditions where the vessel was known to be Chinese, however, this bellicose response marks a shift.

Okinawa is the site of the largest US military base in the Pacific and the waters surrounding it are one of the most closely monitored military zones in the world. The navies of China, Japan, Taiwan and the US—and in the past the Soviet Union—all operate in the area. During the Cold War and since, strict rule of engagement have been in effect to avoid any accidental clashes.

The delays following the first reports of the intrusion indicate that Japan's response was the subject of intense discussion in political and military circles. The decision to intercept the sub and try and force it to the surface was a course of action that could have led to a military confrontation between China and Japan.

Stratfor noted that Defense Minister Ono "chose to order the military into action without convening a National Security Council meeting or a cabinet meeting, and instead simply sought Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's go-ahead for the dispatch." The crisis management task force invoked Article 28 of the Japanese Self-Defence Law, which allows the Maritime Defence Force to deal with security issues solely on the order of the prime minister.

The fact that the identity of the vessel was known at the time the Japanese forces were dispatched to hunt down the sub was revealed over the ensuing days. The Taiwanese military reported to the media that they had watched the whole drama unfold and had identified the intruding vessel as a "Han"-class Chinese nuclear-powered escort designed to provide protection for China's main nuclear missile-launch submarines.

On November 16, the Japanese foreign ministry confirmed receiving information on the Chinese submarine from the US. Earlier, on November 12, Japanese authorities had indicated that they had reason to believe the submarine might have been experiencing technical difficulties as they had spotted two Chinese ships in the same region, including one believed to be a submarine rescuer.

In other words, the Japanese government knew that they were most likely dealing with a Chinese nuclear submarine in some form of distress—not one carrying out any form of covert operations—but sent out an interception force regardless.

After the identity of the submarine was finally revealed, the Japanese media and political establishment unleashed a vicious campaign of anti-China hysteria.

On Friday, November 12, Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura met with Chinese embassy official Cheng Yonghua to formally make "a strong protest and demand an apology". The Chinese foreign ministry refused to comment on the incident, declaring that they were conducting an investigation.

A nationalist outcry dominated the next day's editorials in Japan's major newspapers.

The *Yomiuri Shimbun* declared: "Tokyo had every reason to request an apology from Beijing for its violation of Japanese sovereignty and demand it to make sure nothing like the recent incident will ever happen again. The Chinese submarine's behavior was enough to arouse our great distrust."

The conservative *Sankei Shimbun* demanded that China "must clarify the cause of the incident and promise us it will never do this again.... If we are soft in handling the incident, China will likely repeat illegal acts over and over."

Japan's parliamentary political parties were virtually united in portraying the incident as evidence that Japan had to strengthen its military position against China and even take counter-measures.

The secretary-general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Tsutomu Takebe, demanded an apology from China:

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“Japan shouldn’t shy away from saying what it has to say to China, though maintaining stability in Asia is important.”

The president of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Katsuya Okada, although maintaining Japan had to keep a “cool head”, demanded an apology from Beijing and called for the scaling back of economic assistance to China. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) issued a statement insisting the Chinese government release the results of its investigation “as soon as possible” and admit its responsibility for the incident.

The exaggerated outrage in Japanese political circles over the incident was eventually extended to Koizumi as well; with accusations being made he had been “too slow” in sending out military forces against the Chinese sub.

After a week of silence, the Chinese foreign ministry admitted one of its submarines had strayed into Japanese waters. Tokyo immediately declared this to be an apology. Beijing, in turn, denied it had apologised and insisted it had simply “informed” the Japanese government of “relevant matters”.

Underlying the reaction in Japan, and the insistence that China make an apology, is the steady growth of tensions between the two countries.

After nearly a decade-and-a-half of economic stagnation, Japan’s global position has been weakened and society is wracked by tremendous class and social conflicts. The demands of the corporate elite for restructuring to reestablish Japan as a dynamic economic power have resulted in the slashing of jobs, the elimination of life-time employment guarantees, and the privatisation of public services. Social inequality has grown and alienation from the political establishment is widespread.

The promotion of nationalism and militarism is seen in Japanese ruling circles as a means of both diverting the social tensions and asserting Japanese corporate and economic interests within the region and internationally. A particular focus of the Koizumi administration has been to remove the restraints on Japan’s military imposed by the post-war pacifist constitution.

The LDP wasted no time in releasing its latest draft constitutional amendments after the submarine incident. Scheduled for 2005, the changes include an emphasis on the emperor as the “symbolic head of state”, holding a separate popular vote for an executive prime minister and establishing “collective defence” to actively contribute to international security, “which may involve the use of arms”.

Since coming to office in 2001, Koizumi has already taken a provocative nationalist stance. He has visited the Yasukuni Shrine, where convicted war criminals are interred, rejecting Chinese and South Korean protests as interference in Japan’s affairs. Koizumi’s foreign minister, Nobutaka Machimura, previously as minister of culture approved two history textbooks in April 2001 that whitewash the crimes of Japanese imperialism during World War II.

Following September 11, Koizumi backed the Bush administration’s declaration of a “war on terror” and used it to justify the deployment of Japanese military forces to Afghanistan and then Iraq—the first time Japanese troops have been dispatched to what is indisputably a war zone since the end of World War II. With an annual budget exceeding $US45 billion, the Japanese military is rapidly becoming one of the most sophisticated in the world.

Amid growing economic and strategic rivalries among all of the major powers, the Japanese ruling elites regard the present constitution as an intolerable restriction upon their use of the military overseas to assert Japan’s interests. The Koizumi government has seized on the submarine incident not only to send a message to Beijing but to lay the basis for Japan to play a far more aggressive role in North East Asia and internationally.

One focus of Japanese rivalry with Beijing is the question of energy. Japan is totally dependent on oil imports from the Middle East and elsewhere. China’s growing competition for oil supplies—China is now the second largest oil importer in the world—is leading to conflicts.

Earlier this year, China invited Japan to participate in a joint offshore oil exploration project in areas of the East China Sea close to Japan’s economic exclusion zone. The proposal was rejected by Tokyo which sent its own exploration vessel to the area in July—a move considered a provocation by China. In October, the Japanese trade minister accused China of attempting to extract gas from Japanese waters.

Japan has also put forward a competing bid to a Chinese proposal to construct oil pipelines in Russia’s East Siberia. China’s plan calls for a pipeline running to the Manchurian city of Daqing, while Japan is insisting on pipelines that run to Nakhodka—the Russian coastal area opposite to Japan. Japanese companies are competing with China over oil exploration rights in other regions too, such as Indonesia.

The submarine incident occurred only three days after the Japanese media published commentary on a study by the Japanese military into possible scenarios in which China attacked Japan.

The Koizumi government is using the discussion of a Chinese threat to justify the re-deployment of jet fighters from Okinawa to the island of Shimoji, closer to Taiwan. Japan is also considering establishing an electromagnetic wave-detecting station on Miyako Island—near where the Chinese submarine was spotted—to intercept the communications of Chinese warships and aircraft.

While both Tokyo and Beijing are now downplaying the significance of the submarine incident, it underscores the sharpness of economic and military rivalries in the region.

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