

US-Japan security statement heightens tensions with China

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A joint statement issued by top US and Japanese defence and foreign affairs officials in Washington on February 18 has heightened tensions in North East Asia by explicitly identifying Taiwan for the first time as a mutual security concern. Those present included US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld along with their Japanese counterparts, Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura and Defence Minister Yoshinori Ono.

The formal security statement set out in very general terms the broad objectives of the US-Japan alliance and included standard references to North Korea and cooperation on the “war on terrorism”. But it was the apparently innocuous reference to Taiwan—“to encourage the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue”—that was significant.

Since the early 1970s, both countries have adhered to the so-called One China policy—the recognition that Taiwan is an integral part of China. At the same time, however, Washington has given guarantees to Taiwan that the US would come to its aid in the event of any Chinese military attack. In line with that pledge, the US continues to supply Taiwan with sophisticated weapons systems.

Until now, Japan, concerned not to offend China, has maintained a more equivocal position. It has never offered any explicit defence guarantees to Taiwan, which was a Japanese colony prior to 1945. By simply including a reference to Taiwan in a joint US-Japan security statement, Tokyo has signalled a more aggressive assertion of its interests within the region, particularly toward China.

In comments to the *Washington Post*, Shinzo Abe, acting secretary general of Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party, made the threat more explicit. “It would be wrong for us to send a signal to China that the US and Japan will watch and tolerate China’s military invasion of Taiwan. If the situation surrounding Japan

threatened our security, Japan can provide US forces with support,” he said.

Referring to the statement, a US State Department official told Reuters: “It’s diplomatically significant. Militarily and politically nothing changes. But the fact that Japan, which does not like to talk about security issues beyond its borders, is part of the statement reflects our concern and concern in the region that China-Taiwan is a hot-button issue.”

Not surprisingly Beijing, which regards Taiwan as a “renegade province”, reacted angrily to the statement, declaring that it “interferes with China’s internal affairs and hurts China’s sovereignty.” China’s state news agency berated Japan for its “wild behaviour” in joining with the US to express their “common strategic objectives” in Taiwan.

The Japanese foreign ministry later clarified that any backing for US military action in defence of Taiwan would be limited to logistical support because direct military action is prohibited by the Japanese constitution. Such a reassurance, however, only confirms that Beijing potentially confronts the joint military might of the world’s two largest economic powers.

Moreover, since coming to office, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has taken definite steps to end the constitutional restrictions on the country’s armed forces. The Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” has proven to be an ideal pretext for revising the constitution to allow for the overseas deployment of the Japanese military. Japanese warships were dispatched to the Indian Ocean to assist the US navy during the US military intervention in Afghanistan. With the deployment of military engineers to Iraq last year, Japanese troops have now been to an active war zone for the first time since World War II.

Under the guise of “fighting terrorism”, Japan is reasserting itself as a major military power. At this stage,

Tokyo is willing to act as a junior partner in the US and to support its military adventures. In the future, however, Japan will inevitably seek to use its military muscle to pursue its own imperialist interests. It is this possibility that is provoking concern in countries that previously suffered under Japanese colonial domination—China in particular.

In Japan and the US, China is regularly portrayed as a military threat. A CIA report issued to the US Congress on February 16, for instance, stated that the “improved” Chinese military capacity “threatened” US forces in the region. Such statements ignore the fact that China’s annual military expenditure—\$20 billion—is dwarfed by the US defence budget of more than \$400 billion.

Japan’s own defence spending—\$50 billion—is also much greater than China’s. While it has no overtly offensive weapons such as long-range bombers or nuclear weapons, it has considerable military muscle. The Japanese Self-Defence Forces have a similar number of warplanes to Britain, but more combat personnel, twice as many warships and nearly three times as many tanks. The government heavily subsidises a military industry of some 2,500 “civilian” enterprises, capable of producing advanced weaponry.

In many areas of military technology, Japan has led the world. Most of the microchips controlling the US “smart weapons” are made in Japan. The material used to coat the surface of US “stealth” warplanes is also Japanese technology. It is estimated that if Japan were allowed to export arms, it would rapidly capture 40 percent of the market for electronic systems, 46 percent of military vehicles, 25 to 30 percent of aircraft and 60 percent of naval vessels.

The joint US-Japan statement is in line with Japan’s more aggressive stance in recent months toward China. In November, Prime Minister Koizumi seized on the intrusion of a Chinese submarine into Japanese waters near Okinawa, to argue for remilitarisation to counter the “threat” from China. A National Defence Program Outline released in December, pinpointed China first time as Japan’s largest security concern in the next decade.

Last month, Kyodo news agency leaked Japanese defence ministry plans for dealing with conflict in Japan’s “south western islands”. Without specifically naming the enemy, the document called for the rapid mobilisation of 55,000 troops as well as destroyers and warplanes in the area north of Taiwan, including Senkaku or Diaoyu—an island disputed by China and Japan.

The Koizumi government has also made a definite

orientation to Taiwan. Last year, Tokyo ignored Beijing’s objections and issued a visa for former Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to visit Japan. Lee is a long-standing advocate of an independent Taiwan and a closer partnership with Japan.

Akihiko Tanaka, a China expert at Tokyo University, told the *Financial Times* on February 14: “The influence of what they called the China school in the foreign ministry has obviously declined. There are several recent instances where Japan did not make concessions, where in the past it would have been less rigid. Those who are advising a conciliatory attitude towards China are becoming weaker.”

Japan faces a dilemma in relation to China, which is sometimes called “cool politics and hot economics”. Japan’s booming trade with China has been the main factor behind its limited economic recovery from a decade-long stagnation. Last year, China overtook the US as Japan’s largest trade partner with bilateral trade of \$214 billion or a fifth of Japan’s total. There are some 18,000 Japanese companies in China, double the number a decade ago.

Major Japanese investors have been urging closer relations with Beijing. But such an orientation comes into conflict with Koizumi’s political ambition of creating a social base for his government by appealing to right-wing Japanese nationalism. He is the first Japanese prime minister to ignore the objections of neighbouring countries and openly visit the Yasukuni shrine to Japan’s war dead.

China and Japan are rivals for access to raw materials, particularly oil and gas. Last December, Tokyo outbid Beijing to win the contract to build an oil pipeline from Siberia. Tensions are developing in the East China Sea as well. Tokyo claims that Chinese gas exploration is taking place inside Japan’s “exclusive economic zone”. Tokyo has doubled this year’s budget for hydrocarbons exploration in the East China Sea to \$217 million.

The joint US-Japanese security statement confirms that Koizumi has no intention of placating China but is seeking a more dominant role for Japan in North East Asia—a course that has potentially disastrous consequences for the entire region.



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