Fishing dispute between Taiwan and Japan leads to diplomatic tensions

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A longstanding territorial dispute has led to sharp tensions between Taiwan and Japan after Japanese coast guard vessels harassed Taiwanese fishing boats in disputed waters last month.

The waters surrounding a group of uninhabited islets in the East China Sea, known to China and Taiwan as the Diaoyu islands, and the Senkakus in Japan, is a rich fishing zone which is claimed by China, Taiwan and Japan. Natural gas reserves have also been found. Both Taiwan and Japan claim sovereignty over a 200-nautical mile "economic zone" around the islands.

The Japanese coast guard has repeatedly threatened and chased Taiwanese fishermen after Tokyo announced an "exclusive economic zone" two years ago. Since 2001, Japanese authorities have detained 13 Taiwanese fishing boats for "illegal" fishing and only released them after they paid fines of 4 to 5 million yen ($US35,000 to $44,500).

On June 8, Japanese coast guard boats again chased five Taiwanese fishing trawlers from the area. After years of harassment, Taiwanese fishermen responded angrily to the latest incident in what they consider their traditional fishing grounds. The following day, as many as 60 Taiwanese fishing boats sailed toward the disputed waters to protest against Japan's actions.

An unnamed official of Taiwan's Fishing Association told Reuters: "Recently, Japan has repeatedly sent patrol boats to expel or harass our fishing boats in the overlapping economic waters, and our boats have been detained or fined. We are all very angry. If they continue to do this, we will have no place to fish. We are left with no choice but to take the matter in our own hands."

The Taiwanese government, anxious to prevent a diplomatic row, dispatched seven coast guard patrol boats to force the fishermen back. For its part, Japan did not send patrol boats as had been expected, but instead had several reconnaissance planes monitor the protest.

The escalating tensions did not stop Japan's continued provocations. On June 18, a Taiwanese fish boat was spotted by Japanese patrol vessels within Japan's "economic zone". The Taiwanese boat rejected Japanese demands to board and attempted to flee. The Japanese ships pursued the trawler and captured it several hours later. The crew were detained and charged with "illegal" fishing in Japanese waters. The boat was not released for 24 hours, after the payment of a large fine.

Japan's actions provoked outrage in Taiwan, threats by fishermen of major protests and placed Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian between a rock and a hard place. His Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) advocates declaring Taiwan a separate nation-state, in defiance of mainland China's claim that Taiwan is sovereign Chinese territory. To counter any threat from China, the Taiwanese nationalists have traditionally looked to Japan, as well as the US, for support.

China complicated Chen's dilemma by seizing upon the first incident on June 8 to assert its sovereignty not only over the Diaoyu, but over Taiwan as whole, and to declare its solidarity with the Taiwanese fishermen. On June 9, the Chinese government lodged an official protest with the Japanese embassy in Beijing. Its statement declared: "For Japan to forcibly expel Taiwanese fishermen doing common work in that ocean area is a violation of China's rights and sovereignty."

In Taiwan, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) and People First Party (PFP), both of which support some form of political unification of Taiwan with China, also demanded action against Japan. On June 17, KMT legislators called for a referendum to assert Taiwanese sovereignty over the Diaoyu islands.

Under intense public pressure, Chen's government was compelled to take an unusually hard-line response to the second incident. On June 21, the Taiwanese defence minister, Lee Jye and parliament speaker Wang Jin-pyng, along with 15 parliamentarians, boarded two missile-guided frigates and made a highly publicised intervention into the disputed area.

Lee Jye told reporters: "This area belongs to us historically, geographically and legally. We must defend our

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sovereignty and protect our fishing rights". A DPP lawmaker declared: "We will be patrolling in our own backyard to let the Japanese government know we are determined to protect our fishermen."

The likely future leader of the KMT, Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jeou, responded with an even more bellicose declaration that Taiwan should be prepared to fight "a war" with Japan to settle the dispute.

Concerns in the Taiwanese ruling elite over a possible rift with Japan were highlighted by the position of the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) of former president Lee Teng-hui, an ardent Taiwanese nationalist who has close ties with Japan. The TSU denounced the government's sending of warships and the KMT's call for war as "mad".

Before the deployment of the naval vessels, Chen's government and the DPP had also tried their best to play down the maritime dispute and prevent any rift with Tokyo. In parliament on June 17, the head of the DPP caucus openly opposed sending naval vessels into the contested waters as it would create "difficulties" in negotiations.

The conflict is unlikely to go away, however. The actions against the Taiwanese fishermen are part of a concerted push by the Japanese government to assert sovereignty over the Diaoyu islands and other disputed islets and expand its maritime borders.

In an unprecedented action, Tokyo sent naval forces last November to attack a Chinese submarine it alleged was intruding in Japanese waters. Earlier this year, the Japanese government took over a light tower erected by a right-wing nationalist group, the Japan Youth Society, in the Diaoyus. In May, it registered 20 Japanese citizens as "residents" of the uninhabited Diaoyu Island.

Similar provocative measures have been taken in regards to Dokto Island, which is claimed by Japan and South Korea. In early June, South Korean and Japanese patrol boats confronted each other in an area both countries assert to be their own "exclusive economic zone" around the island.

Tokyo's claims are part of an increasingly aggressive foreign policy by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Since taking office, his government has dispatched military forces to assist the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan and sent troops to take part in the occupation of Iraq—the first time Japanese ground forces have deployed into a war zone since the end of the World War II. With the backing of Washington, Koizumi is taking an uncompromising stance within the immediate region.

Japan's assertion of sovereignty over the Diaoyus is one of the clearest examples of Koizumi's right-wing nationalist stance. The annexation of the islets and Taiwan in 1895, following a war with China, marked the beginning of Japan's colonial expansion over the following decades. Under the Treaty of Shimonoseki with China's Manchu dynasty, the Diaoyus were ceded to Japanese control and incorporated into the Okinawa prefecture.

In 1943, with Japan's defeat in World War II looming, the Cairo Declaration signed by the US, China and Britain stated that "all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa [Taiwan], and the Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China" and "Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence or greed".

During the post-war period, Japan took a conciliatory attitude toward the contested islands. When Tokyo shifted its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 1972, for example, both Tokyo and Beijing agreed to put the issue of the Diaoyus to one side. The late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping even proposed a "joint development" zone with Japan in the East China Sea Continental Shelf.

In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the foreign policy of Japanese imperialism has shifted. After a decade-and-and-half of economic stagnation and intense competition in world markets, sections of Japanese ruling elite see a revival of militarism as essential to protect their interests and, in particular, to guarantee their access to energy resources. This has led to growing conflict with China, which is also being driven to compete for oil and gas supplies.

Behind the tensions over "fishing" in the East China Sea is the more important issue of control over potentially lucrative gas fields in the disputed waters. Since 1996 there have been 14 rounds of talks between Taiwan and Japan to settle their maritime borders. Tokyo, however, has refused to make any concessions, as it does not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign nation. A new round of talks over the fishing disputes is planned for this month but no resolution is likely.

What is striking is that 60 years after the end of World War II, Japan is still asserting territorial rights on the basis of its pre-war colonial possessions. Now, under Koizumi, it is flexing its military muscle to back these claims.

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