

Japan-China tensions flare up over disputed Diaoyu islets

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Tensions between Japan and China have risen sharply after two Japanese Coast Guard vessels reportedly collided with a Chinese fishing trawler in the waters off the disputed Diaoyu Islands (known as Senkaku in Japan) on September 7. Both governments have taken a particularly hard-line stance, insisting that their sovereignty over the islands was “indisputable” or “undeniable”.

The Japanese government provocatively arrested the captain and 14 crew members of the small 166-tonne trawler, who were taken to Okinawa. Tokyo also lodged a complaint with the Chinese ambassador in Japan over the trawler’s activities in Japanese waters. Despite Beijing’s protests, a Japanese court authorised the detention of the vessel’s captain Zhan Qiziong who is accused of deliberately striking a Japanese patrol vessel. He faces up to three years imprisonment.

China has sent fishery enforcement ships to the disputed area. Tokyo issued another formal protest last Saturday, alleging that a Chinese ship had tried to stop a Japanese coast guard vessel 280 kilometres northwest of the Japanese island of Okinawa.

Beijing has demanded that Tokyo release Zhan Qiziong and end its “illegal interception” of vessels in “Chinese waters”. The Japanese ambassador to China, Uichiro Niwa, has been summoned four times by Chinese officials—on the last occasion by State Councillor Dai Bingguo, whose rank is equal to a vice premier. According to the Chinese media, Dai told Niwa that Tokyo must not “misjudge the circumstances and [must] make the wise political choice” of immediately releasing the fishermen. The crew members, but not the captain, were released yesterday.

According to the Japanese Coast Guard, there has been an increased presence of Chinese fishing boats in or near the disputed waters since mid-August. On the day of the alleged collision, Japan claimed that 160 Chinese fishing vessels were spotted in the area, 30 of which were within its claimed territorial waters—22 kilometres from Diaoyu.

The dispute over Diaoyu—a few islets located between Taiwan and Okinawa—has intensified over the past decade. Both the Japanese and Chinese governments have exploited the issue to whip up nationalism as well as to justify their respective military build-ups. The disagreements have been further complicated by differing claims on how to define territorial waters in the East China Sea. At stake are potentially significant undersea energy resources as well as fishing areas.

However, the latest flare-up is bound up with broader rivalries that include the US, not just China and Japan. In recent months, the Obama administration has provocatively challenged China’s claims in the South China Sea and also in waters near the Korean Peninsula. At a forum of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Hanoi in July, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted for the first time that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. Beijing has told US officials that the maritime area constituted one of China’s “core interests”, like Taiwan and Tibet.

The Obama administration has also been determined to maintain its large US Marine airbase on Okinawa, which is strategically located off the Chinese mainland. The ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was forced to back down on a promise in last September’s election to move the base off Okinawa. After caving in to US demands, Yukio Hatoyama resigned as prime minister,

paving the way for Naoto Kan to assume the post in June.

Since taking office, Kan has lined up with the US and taken a tougher stance in territorial disputes with China. Despite Chinese objections, the US and South Korea held a joint naval exercise in the Sea of Japan in response to North Korea's alleged involvement in the sinking of the South Korean warship, the Cheonan, in March. Kan pointedly sent three Japanese naval officers to participate. Also in July, Tokyo announced plans to expand the Japanese submarine fleet for the first time since 1976, in order to counter the "Chinese naval threat".

Last month, the Kan government foreshadowed the listing of 25 islands outside the main Japanese archipelago, including Diaoyu/Senkaku, as "national property". The statement explicitly declared that the islands and their surrounding undersea mineral and fishing resources belonged "exclusively" to Japan. Although not officially confirmed, the Japanese media has also reported that Tokyo will hold a large-scale joint military exercise with the US focussed on "island seizing".

Last Friday, the government released its Defence White Paper warning of China's growing naval activities, including "in waters near Japan". It expressed concern that China's military spending had quadrupled over the past decade, while Japan's had shrunk by 4 percent, due to the economy's sluggish growth. The document concluded that Japan needed the US military as a deterrent against China.

Japan's relations with China are a significant factor in the decision of Ichiro Ozawa to challenge Kan today for the position of DPJ leader and thus prime minister. Ozawa has called for a reopening of negotiations with Washington over the Okinawa base and proposed a more independent foreign policy that is not so closely aligned with the US. He has called for better relations with China.

Ozawa reflects growing concerns in the Japan's corporate elite that Tokyo's support for Washington's more aggressive policy will damage economic relations with China, Japan's top trading partner. China-Japan trade reached \$238.7 billion last year and could hit \$300 billion this year.

China is also taking a strident stand on Diaoyu and the

arrest of the trawler captain. In Beijing, a few dozen protesters gathered outside the Japanese embassy last week and on Monday. At this stage the Chinese government is reining in protests, including a plan by rabid nationalists from Hong Kong and Macau to land on the islets to proclaim China's sovereignty.

The Chinese regime, however, could easily unleash ugly anti-Japanese protests as occurred in 2005 when demonstrators attacked Japanese companies and individuals. In the past 20 years, the Chinese Communist Party has been consciously promoting nationalism, especially anti-Japanese chauvinism, to divert mounting social tensions at home. In doing so, it blames the crimes of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s on the Japanese people as a whole and deliberately encourages antagonisms towards what the Chinese ruling elite regards as one of its main rivals in Asia.

Just prior to last week's naval incident, all nine top Chinese leaders, including President Hu Jintao, held a public commemoration of the anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II at the Museum of the War of the Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.

A comment in today's state-owned *Global Times* called on the government to consider "stronger retaliatory measures" if Japan did not back down on the release of the Chinese trawler captain. "Japan may not have realised how much it has to lose due to its actions," it declared, pointing to Japan's dependence on China for export markets. After referring to the DPJ leadership election, it concluded: "No matter who wins, the Japanese leader will have to face the fact that Japan cannot intimidate or antagonise China without serious consequences."

Whatever the outcome, last week's incident near Diaoyu highlights the potential for a dangerous confrontation in North East Asia, as major power rivalry involving the US, China and Japan escalates.



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