

# Japan-China dispute in East China Sea flares up

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Japan's detention of a Chinese trawler captain in disputed waters in the East China Sea rapidly flared into a major diplomatic row between the two countries over the weekend.

Despite repeated Chinese demands for the release of the captain, Zhan Qixiong, a Japanese court on the island of Okinawa announced on Sunday that he would be held for 10 more days. Zhan was arrested on September 7 for allegedly causing a collision with two Japanese Coast Guard ships. Beijing insists that he is a Chinese citizen detained in Chinese territory, invalidating Japanese law.

Responding to the Japanese court decision, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu warned: "If Japan insists on making one mistake after another, the Chinese side will take strong countermeasures, and all the consequences should be borne by the Japanese side."

China has announced the suspension of all contact with Japan at the ministerial and provincial levels, and has cancelled a meeting to discuss increasing the number of flights between the two countries. Plans for Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan to meet next week on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly have been dropped.

Washington is undoubtedly egging the Japanese government on. In recent months, the Obama administration challenged China's claims in the South China Sea and plans to go ahead with a joint US-South Korean naval exercise in the Yellow Sea despite Beijing's objections. The Diaoyu Islands (known in Japan as Senkaku), which are at the centre of the current dispute between Japan and China, are strategically placed off the Chinese mainland.

The US welcomed the victory of Kan over challenger Ichiro Ozawa in last week's election for leader of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the post of prime minister. In opposition to Kan's decidedly pro-US

orientation, Ozawa made clear he favoured a more independent foreign policy and closer relations with China. In the course of the campaign, Ozawa proposed reopening negotiations with Washington over the retention of a controversial US military base on the island of Okinawa.

Washington's bias towards Tokyo was evident in its response to Japan's monetary intervention last Wednesday to force down the value of the yen. While criticisms of Japan's unilateral action were voiced in the US Congress as well as in Europe, the Obama administration has so far maintained a studied silence on the issue—in marked contrast to its calls for China to do more to allow the yuan to rise against the dollar.

Commenting on the appointment of Seiji Maehara as Japan's new foreign minister, US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg remarked that Maehara had many friends in Washington and a positive track record in relations between the two countries. In fact, Maehara is known for his hawkish position on China and support for the US alliance.

As DPJ leader in 2005, Maehara delivered a speech at the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies declaring that China's military expansion was a "very real concern". He called for the revision of the so-called pacifist clause of Japan's constitution to allow the military to operate with the US in international conflicts. He made the comments despite mounting opposition in Japan to the deployment of Japanese troops in 2004 to Iraq.

In the same speech, Maehara foreshadowed the use of the military to protect Japanese corporations developing energy resources in the East China Sea in direct opposition to China's claims. He argued that Japan was "a maritime nation surrounded in all directions by the sea, but if we think of that fact she lacks natural resources, and that the Japanese economy is basically supported by trading activities, we have to regard the protection of sea lanes as being of

paramount importance.”

At his first press conference last Friday, Maehara accused China of preparing to unilaterally drill for gas in areas claimed by Japan in the East China Sea. In 2008, after years of disputes, both countries agreed to jointly develop oil and gas reserves. In the midst of the latest tensions, China has now suspended a planned discussion over the gas fields due this month. Maehara threatened to take “necessary actions”, including drilling for gas in the same area, if Beijing proceeded with any drilling operations.

The disputed area in the East China Sea covers 210,000 square kilometres, including a 970 kilometre long trough that is estimated to contain 495.5 billion cubic metres of natural gas and 20 million barrels of oil. Tokyo has accused China of breaking the 2008 agreement by commencing drilling operations close to the disputed territory that will drain gas from Japan’s claimed “Exclusive Economic Zone”.

Diaoyu is well within the disputed area and close to the gas fields. To protect the islets, Japan has stationed 20 coast guard ships in the area and established regular aircraft patrols several times a day. Tokyo also established radar stations on nearby islands to monitor the region. Over the past two years, China has also taken a more assertive stance, sending warships and fighters to patrol the gas fields and the Diaoyu islands. There have been several confrontations between Chinese and Japanese ships and aircraft.

Last Friday, Maehara questioned China’s overall military buildup and demanded “an explanation” from Beijing. In fact, the Kan government has been using the “China threat” to justify the expansion of the Japanese military. The Kyodo news agency reported on Monday that Tokyo is considering enlarging the country’s Ground Self-Defence Force from 155,000 to 168,000—the first expansion since 1972. In July, Kan’s cabinet announced an increase in Japan’s submarine fleet—the first since Japan limited submarine numbers in 1976.

As well as the economic and strategic interests at stake, Tokyo and Beijing are exploiting the current dispute to stir up reactionary nationalist sentiment to divert social and political tensions at home. The Hong Kong media has reported that a number of Chinese immigrant schools in Japan have received bomb threats and abusive letters from right-wing Japanese nationalists in the past few days. Last week the Japanese media reported unsubstantiated claims of Chinese “cyber attacks” on Japanese defence ministry and police web sites.

In China, a series of small anti-Japanese protests took place last Saturday—the anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. These protests, which would not have proceeded without tacit government approval, were dominating by racist slogans such as “Down with little Japan”, “Get out of the Diaoyu islands” or “Wipe out the Japanese devils!”

The debate in China over countermeasures against Japan is heating up. On Monday, General Peng Guangqian from the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences provocatively called for the permanent postponement of the talks with Tokyo over the East China Sea gas fields, the dispatch of armed patrol ships to the Diaoyu islands to protect Chinese fishing ships and the use of Diaoyu as a “fire practicing zone” for Chinese military forces, as the US did during the Cold War.

Economic retaliation is also being discussed. Feng Zhaokui from the Chinese Academy of Social Science has argued that boycotting Japanese goods would not be as effective as buying Japanese assets, which would force up the yen’s value and precipitate a recession in Japan. Other commentators have called for heavy taxes on Japanese businesses in China or restrictions on the export of natural resources to Japan.

The rapidly escalating dispute over the Diaoyu islands highlights the danger of a confrontation between the two major powers and also the recklessness of the Obama administration in deliberately sharpening tensions with China throughout the region.



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