

China-Japan standoff continues over disputed islets

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Tensions between Japan and China have continued this week, with new claims and counterclaims, despite the release of the Chinese trawler captain, Zhan Qixiong, who has been at the centre of the confrontation. Zhan was detained by Japanese authorities after an alleged collision on September 7 between his fishing boat and two Japanese coast guard ships in waters near the disputed Diaoyu islands (known as Senkaku in Japan) in the East China Sea.

Last week Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao warned of “severe consequences” if Japan did not unconditionally release Zhan. The following day, four Japanese nationals were arrested for allegedly spying on a Chinese military zone. Moreover, although denied by Beijing, traders reported that China had blocked the export of rare earths to Japan that are vital to hi-tech manufacturing, including of electronics and metal parts. Zhan was freed on Friday.

Having stoked up nationalist sentiment over the issue for weeks, Beijing made no move to ease the standoff. Zhan arrived home on a chartered flight to a hero’s welcome and blanket coverage in the state media. The foreign ministry further inflamed tensions by denouncing Japan’s actions as “unlawful and invalid” and calling for an apology and compensation. The four Japanese citizens accused of spying remain in detention.

Facing intense criticism over the captain’s release, Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan on Sunday emphatically rejected China’s latest demands, saying: “I have no intention of accepting [the demands] at all. Senkaku is a Japanese territory. From that point of view, apology or compensation is unthinkable.”

The issue has created a political crisis for Kan’s government. Within his own Democratic Party of Japan

(DPJ), a dozen lawmakers issued a statement, declaring: “This [release] is a defeat for Japan in the eyes of the world community, and this loss of our diplomatic authority is intolerable.”

A group of about 100 parliamentarians from the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) issued a statement denouncing the captain’s release. In another move, LDP secretary-general Nobuteru Ishihara described the release as “totally unacceptable” and declared that he would summon officials to testify in parliament.

The Japanese press has also weighed in. The *Asahi Shimbun* criticised the Kan government for having “given an impression to China that Japan will yield to pressure”. The conservative *Sankei Shimbun* declared: “We cannot help but say that Japan... made a disastrous mistake. Japan’s sovereignty and national interest were seriously diminished. It’s beyond repair.” The newspaper provocatively called for stronger security measures on Senkaku, such as the building of a heliport or the deployment of warships to support coastguard patrol boats.

On Monday, chief cabinet secretary Yoshito Sengoku demanded that China pay for damage to the Japanese patrol boats involved in the September 7 collision. He also called on China to withdraw its fishery vessels from the disputed islets. Sengoku then urged China to seek a “strategic relationship of mutual benefit,” saying “the ball is now with China”.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu responded by declaring that China would continue to send its fishery enforcement vessels to the disputed area. “The waters near Diaoyu Islands are traditional fishing grounds for Chinese fishermen. We hope that Japan will put a stop

to its harassment and stalking of Chinese fishing boats,” she said.

Sections of Japanese big business, which are heavily dependent on China for exports and as a cheap labour platform, have called for an easing of tensions. Panasonic president Fumio Ohtsubo declared on Monday: “I ask for consideration that, in this global world, we are doing business together, and we hope the government will find a path toward a resolution.”

Tokyo announced yesterday that Kan would seek to organise a meeting with Chinese Premier Wen at the Asia-Europe summit in Brussels next week. Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang appeared somewhat more conciliatory yesterday, saying that both countries needed to “jointly work together and meet each other halfway”. But to date no meeting has been scheduled.

The Japanese government has been encouraged to take a tough stand in the dispute by the Obama administration’s aggressive actions in recent months. Amid intensifying trade tensions between the US and China, Washington has intervened directly into territorial disputes between China and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) members in the South China Sea.

While publicly appealing for calm between China and Japan, the American administration has been quietly supporting the Kan government in the dispute.

Following a meeting between US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara last Thursday, US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley appeared to advocate a neutral position, declaring that Washington did not take a position on the sovereignty of the Senkakus.

Clinton informed Maehara, however, that Senkaku was covered by article 5 of the US-Japan security treaty, as the islands are currently administrated by Tokyo. In other words, in the event of a conflict between Japan and China over the islands, the US would be obliged to support Japan militarily.

US military backing of Japan was underscored by the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen. After saying that Washington hoped that diplomatic efforts would ease tensions between Japan and China, he

added: “Obviously, we’re very, very strongly in support of ... our ally in that region, Japan.”

President Barack Obama and Chinese Premier Wen met last week but no agreement was reached on US demands for a more rapid revaluation of the Chinese yuan. The two sides did agree to discuss restoring military-to-military contact, which Beijing cut off after the White House approved arms sales to Taiwan earlier this year.

Nevertheless, the Pentagon is proceeding this week with a joint naval exercise with South Korea in the Yellow Sea despite objections by China. While the operation is nominally directed against China’s ally, North Korea, over its alleged sinking of a South Korean warship in March, the US is determined to maintain its “right” to navigate in international waters close to the Chinese mainland.

It is no accident that the US is intervening in disputes over key strategic waters. To provide for its rapidly expanding industrial base, China has been compelled to seek energy resources and other raw materials from around the globe and is building up its navy to protect key shipping lanes. China’s economic and military expansion comes into conflict with the longstanding US strategy of maintaining naval dominance and the ability to cut off supplies to its rivals.

The US has formal military alliances with the Philippines, Japan and South Korea, which, together with Taiwan, effectively encircle the Chinese mainland, from the Yellow Sea to the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Japan’s southern island chains, including Okinawa, where the US maintains major military bases, and Senkaku, form an essential component of this encirclement.

The American media are becoming increasingly strident in their criticisms of China’s “provocative” actions. In truth, it is the Obama administration’s actions that have encouraged a dangerous confrontation between the world’s second and third largest economic powers.



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