

China stirs anti-Japanese protests over disputed islands

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Tensions between China and Japan are again heating up after 14 pro-Chinese activists from Hong Kong were arrested last week by Japanese police when they attempted to land on the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands (known as Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea. Both countries, as well as Taiwan, claim the islets.

The immediate standoff ended on Friday after Japan released the protesters, who included two reporters from the pro-Beijing Phoenix channel in Hong Kong. Yesterday, however, anti-Japanese protests flared in a number of Chinese cities after Japanese nationalists swam ashore from boats to land, with Japanese flags, on one of the disputed islands, Uotori. The right-wing activists had earlier been denied permission by Japanese authorities to visit the islands.

The orchestrated character of last week's provocative incident indicates at least tacit support from Beijing. The Hong Kong-based "Action Committee for Defending the Diaoyu Islands" timed the landing on the islands for August 15—the date of Japan's surrender at the end of World War II.

According to China, Japan seized the Diaoyu Islands during the 1895 Sino-Chinese War and should have returned them to China in 1945. However, the US took over the islands and handed them to Tokyo in the 1970s, triggering a long-running dispute between Japan and China.

The same Hong-Kong group landed on the disputed islands in 1996 and 2004, but its other attempts to declare Chinese sovereignty have been blocked by Chinese or Hong Kong authorities. By contrast, China's state-controlled media broadcast the latest

incident live, with commentators emphasising the historic basis of China's claims. The coverage also showed Japanese coast guard ships shadowing the boat and making the arrests.

The *People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), published an editorial declaring that China would "eradicate Japan's illusion to get control of the Diaoyu Islands." The hawkish *Global Times* warned in its editorial that "Japan has to make a choice: back up and create the conditions to reduce tensions ... or head into a full confrontation with China. Whatever Japan's choice, China will respond accordingly."

Dozens of people held an anti-Japanese protest in front of the Japanese embassy in Beijing, with banners emblazoned with such chauvinist slogans as "declare war on Japan." Large numbers of police were deployed, but made no attempt to block the demonstrators. Anti-Japanese rallies occurred in a dozen Chinese cities over the weekend, with the one in Shenzhen reportedly involving 20,000 people.

Last week's incident threatened to provoke a diplomatic row similar to the confrontation in September 2010, when the Japanese coast guard arrested a Chinese fishing boat crew in the same area. During a two-week standoff, Beijing threatened to cut off exports to Japan of rare earth metals, which are vital for electronics and high-tech industries.

Japan's Vice-Foreign Minister Kenichiro Sasae last week summoned Chinese ambassador Cheng Yonghua in order to "strongly protest" against the "illegal entry" of the protesters. China's Vice-Foreign Minister Fu Ying called in Japan's ambassador to China, Uichiro

Niwa, to reiterate China's sovereignty over the islands and demand the immediate release of the Chinese nationalists.

On Friday, two days after the protest, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda decided to deport the 14 Chinese in a bid to avoid further diplomatic clashes.

Noda had deliberately exacerbated tensions by hinting that his government could “nationalise” the Senkaku Islands—that is, buy them from their private Japanese owner—in line with a similar proposal by right-wing Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara. Noda made the statement on July 7—a sensitive date for China, as it was the anniversary of the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident that marked Japan's full-scale invasion of China. Noda declared on July 26 that Japan would use force to defend its territorial claims, including over the Senkaku Islands.

Noda's willingness to stoke tensions with China has been encouraged by the Obama administration, which has adopted a confrontational stance toward Beijing throughout the Asia Pacific region. During the 2010 stand-off, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly declared the US would be obliged to militarily assist its ally Japan if a conflict erupted with China over the Senkaku Islands. The US also encouraged Japan to refocus its defence posture from its north, toward Russia, to the southwest island chains in the East China Sea, effectively against China—a shift that was outlined in a 2010 defence guideline.

Both the Japanese and Chinese governments are whipping up reactionary nationalist sentiment to divert rising social tensions at home. Noda has just passed deeply unpopular legislation to double the country's sales tax in a bid to rein in burgeoning public debt. Support for the ruling Democratic Party has slumped to just 6.7 percent. In recent months, Noda's government has also faced large protests against its decision to restart the country's nuclear power stations.

In China, the CCP regime is facing a mounting social crisis amid signs of an economic slowdown that will lead to rising unemployment. The CCP is about to hold its 18th party congress to hand power to the next

generation of leaders, yet sharp divisions in the ruling elite have been exposed by the corruption scandal surrounding former Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai. Behind the scandal lie sharp factional differences over the direction of economic policy.

Beijing is also exploiting the Senkaku/ Diaoyu dispute to blunt widespread opposition in Hong Kong to the anti-democratic installation of another pro-Beijing administration and the widening gulf between rich and poor. Up to 400,000 people took part in street protests last month against Hong Kong's new chief executive Leung Chun-ying and visiting Chinese President Hu Jintao. Thousands of parents have held demonstrations in recent weeks against an attempt by the authorities to publish Chinese-style “patriotic” textbooks for Hong Kong's schools.

China and Japan are not alone in fomenting nationalist sentiment to divert domestic discontent. Earlier this month, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak visited the disputed island of Dokdo (known as Takeshima in Japan), provoking protests from Tokyo. Seoul has called for “stern measures” against any Japanese provocation and planned a military exercise near the islands next month. Facing a presidential election later this year, Lee's ruling New Frontier Party confronts growing popular anger over falling living standards.

These nationalist responses to rising social tensions at home, compounded by Washington's aggressive attempts to undermine Chinese influence in Asia, are heightening the danger that one or other of the region's many flashpoints could trigger open military conflict.



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