

Tensions between China and Japan flare over disputed islands

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The Japanese government's announcement on Tuesday that it had completed the purchase of three of the five Senkaku islands (known in China as Diaoyu) from their private owner threatens a new confrontation with Beijing, which also claims sovereignty over the islands.

The Chinese foreign affairs ministry issued a statement opposing the decision, declaring that the purchase “cannot alter the fact [that] the Japanese side stole the islands from China.” Chinese defence ministry spokesman Geng Yangsheng registered “staunch opposition and strong protest,” warning that the Chinese military was unwavering in its determination “to defend national territorial sovereignty.”

Two Chinese Marine Surveillance (CMS) vessels reached the waters around the rocky islets on Tuesday. The Xinhua news agency reported that the CMS had drafted an “action plan” to assert China's claim to the disputed islands. The presence of the Chinese ships raised the danger of a maritime altercation with the Japanese coast guard, which has been handed responsibility for the islands and the surrounding waters.

Both the Chinese and Japanese governments are exploiting the issue to stir up nationalist sentiment at home and divert attention from deepening domestic social and political tensions.

The Japanese government's decision to buy or “nationalise” the three islands at a cost of 2.05 billion yen (\$US26 million) from the Kurihara family was driven by political considerations. The government had previously exercised full control by leasing the islets.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, whose popularity has sunk to record lows after ramming through a sales tax hike, suggested in July that his government would buy the islands—a proposal first made by right-wing Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara. Noda claims that he made the purchase to defuse Ishihara's even more provocative plan to build a port and facilities on the islands, but this ruse has not mollified Beijing.

For the Chinese regime, the row over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands serves as a useful diversion from sharp tensions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the lead-up to its congress and leadership change. The congress will likely take place next month, but no date has been announced. In the latest strange incident before the congress, Vice-President Xi Jinping, who is expected to take over as Chinese president, has disappeared from public view. No official explanation has been given. Apparent divisions in the CCP leadership reflect broader social tensions being fuelled by China's economic slowdown.

The dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands flared up last month when pro-Chinese fanatics based in Hong Kong landed on one of the islets and were detained. There is no doubt that Beijing gave the green light for the incident—the group was accompanied by a Chinese news crew that broadcast live coverage to state-owned television in China. Japanese authorities released the activists, but tensions remained high after a group of right-wing Japanese nationalists then staged their own provocative landing.

The risks involved in an escalating confrontation are

underlined by the diplomatic row that erupted in August 2010 when Japanese authorities detained the captain of a Chinese fishing boat after an alleged collision with a Japanese coast guard vessel in the disputed waters. The Japanese government threatened to put the captain on trial but backed off after China retaliated by ending vital rare earths exports to Japan.

The US has intervened in the current dispute between the world's second and third largest economies, warning of its global economic ramifications. US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell declared: "This is the cockpit of the global economy and the stakes could not be bigger... We think in the current environment we want cooler heads to prevail, frankly... We have enormous stakes in the maintenance of peace and stability."

Washington's sanctimonious posturing as the voice of peace and reason is entirely cynical. Over the past three years, the Obama administration has ratcheted up tensions throughout the region by encouraging allies such as Japan to take a more aggressive stance toward China. While nominally declaring its neutrality in the territorial dispute, the White House has repeatedly indicated that it would come to Japan's aid militarily in any conflict with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Japanese control of the islands dates back to 1895, when they were annexed by Japan during the Sino-Japanese war, which ended in China's defeat. Following the end of World War II, the US administered the islands, along with Okinawa, returning them to Japanese control in 1972. Both China and Taiwan claim the islands and insist that they should have been returned under post-World War II agreements.

While the islands are small rocky outcrops, the surrounding territorial waters have rich fishing grounds and potentially important energy and mineral reserves. The island group is also strategically located in the so-called "first island chain" off the Chinese coastline—running from northern Japan through its southern islands, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu group, to Taiwan and the Philippines. Strategically it acts as a

potential barrier to Chinese naval operations into the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Despite its posture of neutrality, the US has a vested interest in ensuring continued Japanese control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Every link in the "first island chain" is currently controlled by an American military ally or a country with long-standing military ties to the US. Pentagon strategists view Okinawa and neighbouring islands as critical to its plans throughout the region, which involve the restructuring and build-up of military forces for a potential conflict with China.

The Obama administration's confrontational stance toward China has inflamed not only the dispute between China and Japan but also tensions in the South China Sea, where the Philippines and Vietnam are at loggerheads with China over maritime claims. By deliberately stirring up these flashpoints, the US is heightening the risks of conflict and war.



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