

Amid rising tensions, US defense secretary visits China and Japan

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US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's trip to Japan and China this week has again highlighted the duplicitous and reckless character of American foreign policy. While appealing publicly to both countries to avoid conflict over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, Panetta took further steps to boost the US-Japan military alliance, thus tacitly encouraging the Japanese government to take a more aggressive stance towards China.

Panetta's trip took place amid rapidly sharpening tensions between Tokyo and Beijing, after Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda announced his government's purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from their private Japanese owners. The decision has led to widespread anti-Japanese protests in many Chinese cities. Chinese maritime-fishery patrol vessels and Japanese coast guard ships continue to face off near the islands.

In comments on the way to the region, Panetta appealed for calm and warned against provocations over the disputed islands. Well aware of the consequences, he added: "It raised the possibility that a misjudgement on one side or the other could result in violence and could result in conflict and that conflict would... have the potential of expanding."

Panetta met with Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Wednesday as part of his three-day visit to China. He cynically portrayed Washington as an honest broker, telling the media: "By virtue of both countries understanding how important that relationship is with the United States, if we can encourage both of them to move forward and not have this dispute get out of hand, we can play a positive role."

In reality, the Obama administration's "pivot" or "rebalancing" to Asia is centrally aimed at building up its military forces and strengthening its alliances in order to undermine China's economic and strategic position. The tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, as well as between China and the Philippines over disputed territory in the South China Sea, are a direct consequence.

The US posture of "neutrality" in the territorial dispute between China and Japan is entirely dishonest. During discussions with both the Chinese and Japanese defence ministers, Panetta confirmed that Washington would not remain neutral if a conflict erupted between the two countries over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, but would come to Japan's defence.

Moreover, while in Japan, Panetta announced the establishment of a second X-band radar station to enhance the capacity of the US military to track and shoot down ballistic missiles. Japan and the US, which have been collaborating closely on the development of a "missile shield", have already built an X-band radar installation in northern Japan. The second will be constructed in the south of the country.

Panetta insisted that the anti-missile system was a defensive measure directed against North Korea. Its real target, however, is China. As US officials told the *Wall Street Journal*, the radar stations are "also being positioned to track a Chinese ballistic missile." Far from being "defensive", the missile shield, by neutralising any Chinese retaliation, greatly strengthens the ability of the US to launch a pre-emptive first nuclear strike.

During his meeting with Panetta, Vice Chairman Xi described the Japanese government's purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as "a farce." The state-run Xinhua news agency reported that Xi told the US defense secretary: "Japan should rein in its behaviour and stop any words and actions that undermine Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity."

A commentary in the official *People's Daily* on Thursday declared: "The US-Japan Security Treaty is a by product of the Cold War era and should not damage the interests of third parties, including China." It warned obliquely: "Any nation that seeks to interfere in the Diaoyu Islands issue will experience a loss of their interests."

Xi did not, however, challenge the Obama administration's stance on the disputed islands. Xi, who is poised to become the next Chinese president at the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) congress due this year, was making his first high-profile appearance in two weeks. His unexplained absence, including the cancellation of a planned meeting with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, may be another indication of CCP factional infighting prior to the congress. (See "The strange absence of China's vice president")

After his meeting with Xi, Panetta told young Chinese officers and cadets at the Armoured Engineering Academy in Beijing: "Our rebalance to the Asia Pacific region is not an attempt to contain China. It is an attempt to engage China and expand its role in the Pacific. It is about creating a new model in the relationship of two Pacific powers."

As the Obama administration has repeatedly made clear, any role for China in the Pacific and internationally has to be within the present framework of international strategic and economic relations dominated by Washington—that is, on US terms. America's "rebalance" to Asia is aimed at preparing for conflict if China does not bow to Washington's demands.

Over the past three years, the US has strengthened its alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New

Zealand and the Philippines and boosted strategic partnerships throughout the region, especially with India. These steps include a new basing arrangement with Canberra to establish US Marines in Darwin and allow greater access to Australian naval and air bases. American forces in Japan and South Korea are being restructured and reinforced to provide greater flexibility. Earlier this year, Panetta announced that by 2020, the US navy would have 60 percent of its warships based in the Pacific.

This "rebalancing" has only one purpose—to prepare for a potential military conflict with China. The military build-up has gone hand-in-hand with an American diplomatic offensive aimed at undercutting Chinese influence across the region. Washington has exploited divisive issues such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and China's disputes in the South China Sea with Vietnam and the Philippines to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours. In doing so, the US has recklessly raised tensions in Asia and greatly heightened the danger of war.



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