

Air incident escalates Japan/China tensions over disputed islands

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15 December 2012

The entry of a Chinese maritime surveillance aircraft on Thursday into the airspace around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has further heightened tensions with Japan, which scrambled eight F-15 fighter jets and an early warning aircraft to intercept the plane. The small twin-engine aircraft, which went undetected by the Japanese military's radar, left the area without a direct confrontation.

The incident is a marked escalation of the island dispute both by China, which dispatched an aircraft to the area for the first time, and Japan, which responded with the heavy-handed use of force. Both sides have exploited the issue to stir up nationalism to divert attention from a worsening economic and social crisis at home.

Japan's chief cabinet secretary, Osamu Fujimura, described China's actions as "extremely regrettable." While appealing for calm, he nevertheless warned that Japan would "respond firmly according to Japanese law in the event of any breach of our sovereignty." Japan called in China's envoy yesterday to issue an "extremely severe protest" over the incident and an incursion by four Chinese maritime surveillance vessels on the same day. He said that the defence ministry was considering patrols by AWACS and E2C early warning aircraft.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei dismissed the criticisms, insisting that the Chinese airplane and ships were conducting "completely normal" activities in its territory. Referring to Japanese coast guard patrols, he said: "China requires the Japanese side to stop illegal activities in the waters and airspace of the Diaoyu islands."

Hong Lei's remarks indicate that China intends to make such flights routine in a bid to challenge Japan's control

over the island group. Yesterday China submitted a detailed claim to the UN to waters in the East China Sea, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. A UN commission of geological experts will examine China's arguments but has no authority to resolve the conflicting claims.

The flight on Thursday coincided with the 75th anniversary of the notorious Nanjing Massacre in 1937, in which Japanese occupying troops slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and disarmed soldiers. The timing was calculated to further whip up nationalist sentiment over the island dispute.

Xi Jinping, who was installed as China's top leader last month, is deliberately using the issue as a diversion as the Chinese economy slows and the regime prepares to press ahead with a far-reaching pro-market restructuring that will inevitably exacerbate social tensions. Last week he called for a further boosting of the Chinese armed forces, saying: "To realise the great revival of the Chinese nation, we must preserve the bond between a rich country and a strong military."

All sides are well aware of the danger of war over the islands. An editorial in the hawkish state-owned *Global Times* called for China to make regular air patrols of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. "The situation could easily veer into a serious military clash... Japan needs to be clear that China will not retreat in the face of its provocations," it warned.

In Japan, the air incident took place amid an election campaign that has been dominated by nationalism and militarism. Both major parties—the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—have taken a tough stance on the disputed islands. Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda deliberately

inflamed tensions in September by “nationalising” or purchasing three of the islands from their private Japanese owner, provoking widespread anti-Japanese protests in China.

The DPJ and LDP are committed to building up the Japanese coastguard to strengthen patrols around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In September, the government passed legislation allowing Coast Guard officials to make arrests on remote islands and reinforcing their powers to expel foreign vessels from Japanese territorial waters.

Right-wing LDP leader Shinzo Abe, who, according to the latest polling, appears likely to win the election tomorrow, has called for structures to be built on the uninhabited islands—a move that would certainly produce an angry Chinese reaction. The LDP is also calling for a revision of the so-called pacifist clause of the constitution to transform Japan’s Self-Defense Forces into a regular military able to engage in “collective self-defense”—that is, to freely form military alliances to pursue Japanese strategic interests.

Tomorrow’s election is also likely to result in a significant parliamentary presence for the new Japan Restoration Party headed by Shintaro Ishihara. As Tokyo governor, he deliberately stirred up the island dispute by announcing a private fund to purchase the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Ishihara has called for the scrapping of the current constitution and even suggested that Japan consider building its own nuclear weapons.

The resort to reactionary nationalism in the election campaign takes place as the latest official statistics indicate Japan has re-entered a recession after two decades of economic stagnation. Despite the economic impact of frictions with China, powerful sections of the Japanese ruling elite are pushing for a stronger military in a bid to reassert the country’s dominant position in Asia against its rival China.

At the same time, the major parties are promoting Japanese nationalism to try to carve out a social base of support for drastic economic measures that will be required to overcome the country’s massive public debt. The profound alienation of working people with the entire political establishment is underscored by the fact that some 40 percent of voters are still undecided.

The US has stepped into the island dispute by appealing for calm. US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell told the media: “We are encouraging all sides to take appropriate steps so that there will be no misunderstanding or miscalculation that could trigger an environment that would be antithetical to peace and stability.”

Campbell’s comments are utterly hypocritical. The Obama administration has deliberately encouraged Tokyo to take a tougher stance against Beijing as part of its so-called pivot to Asia aimed at containing China and undermining its influence throughout the region. While declaring its “neutrality” in the territorial dispute, top American officials have repeatedly declared that the US would back Japan militarily in any conflict with China over the islands.

Since September, Japanese and Chinese maritime vessels have played a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse in the waters off the disputed islands. Both countries have kept their naval vessels out of the immediate area in order to minimise the risk of a clash. However, the entry of Chinese aircraft into the contested airspace further elevates the danger as Japan deploys war planes to defend its territorial claims.

The potential for a military conflict only underscores the recklessness of the Obama administration’s foreign policy, which in its bid to maintain US dominance against its rivals, especially China, has primed a string of similarly dangerous flashpoints throughout Asia and internationally.



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