

# Island dispute continues to fuel China-Japan tensions

Peter Symonds  
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Two incidents near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea have underscored the danger of simmering tensions between China and Japan erupting into a major confrontation.

The Japanese coastguard reported yesterday that four Chinese marine surveillance ships sailed within 12 nautical miles of the Japanese-controlled islands, known in Japan as Senkaku and in China as Diaoyu. The Japanese foreign ministry issued a formal protest to the Chinese embassy in Tokyo. The alleged intrusion was the first this year and the 21st since Tokyo “nationalised” the islands in September, provoking sharp protests from China.

On Saturday, the Japanese military scrambled fighter jets to head off a Chinese civilian surveillance plane that was apparently heading toward the islets. According to Japanese officials, the Chinese aircraft did not enter what Japan considers its airspace. It is the second such episode—on December 13, eight Japanese F-15 fighters were dispatched to intercept a Chinese plane.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are not the only source of tension. On December 29, the Japanese coastguard detained a Chinese fishing vessel that had entered the 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone around the southern Japanese island of Yasushima. The captain and two crew members were taken to Kagoshima city, on Kyushu, for questioning before being released.

In September 2010, Japan detained the captain of a Chinese fishing vessel after an alleged collision with a Japanese coastguard vessel in waters off the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and threatened to put him on trial. The arrest rapidly evolved into a tense standoff, in which China threatened to cut off exports of vital rare earths to Japan. The dispute was only resolved when Japanese authorities released the captain.

While these latest incidents have not escalated into a dangerous diplomatic row, each had the potential to do so. The governments of both countries have been deliberately stirring up nationalist sentiment over the island dispute in a bid to divert attention from worsening economic difficulties and growing social tensions at home.

The Chinese regime gave the green light for widespread anti-Japanese protests in September, directed against Tokyo’s decision to formally buy the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from their private Japanese owner. Chinese authorities have steadily escalated surveillance patrols designed to challenge Japanese control over the islands, heightening the danger of a clash. The state-owned media has repeatedly argued for a tough stand against Japan.

Last month’s election of a right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government in Japan will only exacerbate tensions with China. During the campaign, Shinzo Abe, now prime minister, called for stronger measures to defend the islands, and for the revision of Japan’s so-called pacifist constitution to transform the country’s self-defence forces into a regular military. In his New Year’s message, he vowed to “defend our land, airspace and territorial waters.”

The Japanese government yesterday announced a review of national military strategy, designed to replace the previous government’s five-year defence spending plan and defence guidelines. According to the *Mainichi* newspaper, the government is considering increasing military spending by 2 percent to 4.7 trillion yen (\$US54 billion) in the next fiscal year. Japan already has the world’s sixth largest military budget.

The Obama administration, as part of its so-called pivot to Asia, has encouraged Japan to take a more aggressive stance toward China, including in the island

dispute. While claiming neutrality in the territorial issue, American officials have repeatedly declared that the US would side militarily with Japan in any conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The US Congress reinforced that stance last month when it inserted an amendment into the defence authorisation act that acknowledged Japan's administration over the islands.

Japan's new government sought to ease tensions with South Korea by sending a special envoy to Seoul last week to deliver a letter from the Japanese prime minister. Friction between the two American allies over another island dispute last year impeded an intelligence-sharing agreement that had been pushed by Washington. Incoming South Korean President Park Geun-hye welcomed the visit, but emphasised that cooperation had to be accompanied by a "correct understanding of history."

Abe is known for his right-wing nationalist views, including his calls for the revision of the country's history books and earlier formal apologies for some of the war crimes of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s. Abe has previously denied that so-called comfort women in Japanese-occupied territories were coerced into sex slavery by the Japanese military, provoking angry reactions from South Korea as well as China.

The *Economist* noted that the majority of the 19-member Japanese cabinet share Abe's views: "Fourteen in the cabinet belong to the League for Going to Worship Together at Yasukuni, a controversial Tokyo shrine that honours leaders executed for war crimes. Thirteen support Nihon Kaigi, a nationalist think-tank that advocates a return to 'traditional values' and rejects Japan's 'apology diplomacy' for its wartime misdeeds. Nine belong to a parliamentary association that wants the teaching of history in schools to give a better gloss to Japan's militarist era. They deny most of Japan's wartime atrocities."

Last Friday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told reporters that the government would maintain the 1995 apology over Japan's wartime aggression that was endorsed by parliament. But Suga foreshadowed a separate "future-oriented" statement that will undoubtedly reflect the views of the cabinet on historical issues. At the same time, he signalled a revision of a 1993 statement on "comfort women" by

calling on historians to re-study the issue.

Any of these historical issues could inflame relations with China, and also South Korea, compounding the already tense territorial disputes. Amid the worsening global economic crisis, these tensions reflect the deepening economic and strategic rivalry in Asia, which has the potential to spark a conflict.

*Financial Times* analyst Gideon Rachman recently identified friction between Japan and China as one of the "five big events that shaped the past year." He noted: "The fact that China and Japan are indulging in military shadow boxing over the ownership of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea is a frightening pointer to the future—all the more so since America has made clear that the islands are covered by the US-Japan security treaty."



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