

Japan, Philippines boost ties as tensions with China escalate

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On January 10, newly appointed Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida visited Manila, and spoke with his counterpart Albert del Rosario and with Philippine President Benigno Aquino. The meeting was arranged to bolster economic, political, and military ties between the two countries, as tensions with China have sharply escalated throughout the Asia Pacific region.

Kishida and del Rosario signed an agreement for Japan to sell 10 multi-role response vessels to the Philippine coast guard to patrol the disputed waters of the South China Sea, as well as maritime communication equipment. The vessels are expected to be delivered in the next 18 months.

Referring to maritime disputes with China in the East and South China Seas, Kishida stated that strengthened ties between Manila and Tokyo were needed as “the strategic environment in the region is changing” and the current meeting would “enhance the strategic partnership between the two countries.” In particular, he continued, ties would be boosted “on the political security front” where they had agreed to “enhancing maritime cooperation.”

On the same day, Philippine foreign secretary del Rosario denounced China for taking “very threatening” actions in the South China Sea, referring to the presence of Chinese patrol boats in the disputed waters. After Kishida’s visit, del Rosario reiterated to the press that the Aquino government supports Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s moves to repeal the so-called pacifist clause in the Japanese constitution. He stated that Asia needed a “militarily stronger Japan” which would act “as a counter-balance in the region” against an “increasingly assertive China.”

Since the landslide election of Abe and the LDP on December 16, the rightward shift in Japanese politics to nationalism and militarism has accelerated.

Concentrated on the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands—‘nationalized’ by the outgoing government in September—and fueled by the aggressive drive of the Obama administration against China, the resurgent tide of Japanese nationalism is demanding the conversion of the Self-Defense Forces into a “normal” military—that is, one able to aggressively prosecute the interests of Japanese imperialism.

The governments of both Japan and China are deliberately stirring up nationalism in an attempt to divert widespread public hostility over declining living standards under the impact of the global economic crisis. In the process they have turned the dispute over five uninhabited islets in the East China Sea into a dangerous geopolitical flashpoint.

There is an abiding hostility toward the legacy toward Japanese militarism throughout the East and Southeast Asian region. When Aquino, president of a country ravaged by Japanese imperialism during the Second World War, gives his repeated benediction on the reemergence of Japanese militarism, he is performing a vital service for the interests of the Japanese ruling elite and for the agenda of Washington.

It is thus no accident that Kishida first visited the Philippines prior to a wave of Japanese diplomatic meetings throughout the region. After his stop in the Philippines, Foreign Minister Kishida journeys to Brunei, Singapore and Australia and concludes his travels with a stop in Washington to meet with outgoing Secretary of State Clinton on January 18. Prime Minister Abe will be travelling to Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia next week.

Del Rosario’s remarks were calculated to defuse long-standing historical objections to Japanese expansionism prior to Kishida and Abe’s travels in the region.

Washington is directly responsible for the alarming

escalation of tensions in the Asia Pacific region. While they have claimed to be neutral in the territorial dispute, US officials have repeatedly stated that Washington would back Japan militarily in a conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Similar claims have been made by American officials in the Philippines regarding the disputed Spratly Islands.

Both Japan and China have instituted regular air and sea patrols over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, resulting in the potential for open conflict. On Thursday, Japanese newspaper *Sankei Shimbun* stated that Abe's government was considering authorizing Japanese F-15s to fire tracer rounds at Chinese surveillance aircraft in disputed airspace.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei stated "China firmly opposes Japan's moves to gratuitously escalate the situation and create tensions."

The hard-line Chinese state-run paper *Global Times* issued an editorial entitled "Japan tracer bullets will bring war closer" and then a second editorial which stated, "A military clash is more likely. We shouldn't have the illusion that Japan will be deterred by our firm stance. We need to prepare for the worst. China and Japan are likely to become long-term rivals or even enemies. Japan has become the vanguard of the US' strategy which aims to contain China."

The Obama administration's reckless "pivot" to Asia and encirclement of China has raised tensions in the region in a manner reminiscent of the lead-up to the outbreak of World War II.



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