US inflames island dispute between Japan and China

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The Obama administration has entered the dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, further inflaming tensions between the two countries and raising the danger of military conflict.

Speaking last Friday after meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated that the US was neutral on the issue of sovereignty over the islands. But she added: "We oppose any unilateral action [by China] that would seek to undermine Japanese administration."

Washington's professions of neutrality have always been a sham. Senior American officials, including Clinton, have declared that the US would support Japan militarily in any conflict with China over the islands. Clinton's comments were a thinly-disguised warning that the US could intervene if Chinese maritime surveillance vessels and aircraft continued to challenge Japanese control over the seas and airspace surrounding the rocky outcrops.

China bitterly criticised Clinton's comments. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei branded her remarks as "ignorant of facts and indiscriminate of rights and wrongs." He accused the US of having an "undeniable historical responsibility" for the dispute. After Japan's surrender in 1945, the US continued to occupy Okinawa and the surrounding islands, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu group, until 1972, when it handed control to Tokyo.

The current standoff between China and Japan flared last September when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)-led government "nationalised" the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets by buying them from their private Japanese owner. China condemned the move and gave the green light for widespread anti-Japanese protests that attacked Japanese businesses and individuals in China. Both sides have whipped up nationalist sentiment to divert mounting economic and social tensions at home.

The right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won last month's lower house election in Japan after a campaign dominated by nationalism and militarism. Almost immediately, newly-elected Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced increased military spending and a strengthening of "island defence." Last Sunday, Abe declared: "I am resolved to lead the way and protect to the very end our people's lives and assets, and our territorial land, water and skies."

The risks generated by the confrontation over the islands have markedly increased. On several occasions, beginning last month, Japan's military has scrambled F-15 fighters in response to Chinese maritime surveillance aircraft approaching or entering the airspace around the contested islets. On January 10, China sent up its own J-10 fighters, bringing warplanes from the two countries into close proximity.

Last Wednesday, Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera indicated that Japanese warplanes might fire warning shots at Chinese aircraft violating Japan's claimed airspace. Asked about the use of tracer bullets, he replied: "Every country has procedures for how to deal with a violation of its territory that continues after multiple cautionary measures."

In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lei declared that China was on high alert. The hardline state-owned *Global Times* declared that if Japan started firing tracer bullets, "it will definitely trigger a military confrontation between China and Japan. Chinese people will certainly ask the government to send naval and air forces to retaliate."

Professor Huang Jing from the National University of Singapore told the *Guardian* that Japan and China

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appeared to be still treading a “fine line neither side is trying to cross.” He warned, however, that “political survival on both sides is more important than avoiding a skirmish or even war.” While both countries could step back at present, it would be far harder “to patch up [relations] after something happens,” Huang said.

Clinton’s remarks last Friday are in line with Obama’s provocative “pivot to Asia,” which is aimed at undermining China’s strategic position throughout the region. The Obama administration has been pressing Japan to take a more aggressive stance toward China in North East Asia. In 2010, Washington’s refusal to move a US base off Okinawa played a key role in forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who had sought to improve Japan’s relations with China.

Last November, Abe outlined a strategic orientation that parallels Obama’s pivot, in an essay entitled “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond.” It was a revival of the so-called strategic Quadrilateral that he proposed during his first period as prime minister in 2006-07. The “security diamond” envisages a strategic partnership between the Asia Pacific’s so-called democracies directed against China.

After referring to the island dispute, Abe declared that Japan had to “expand the country’s strategic horizons” and, as a “mature maritime democracy,” choose similar partners. “I envisage a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific. I am prepared to invest, to the greatest possible extent, Japan’s capabilities in this security diamond.”

Naval control over such vast areas of ocean by the US and its strategic partners constitutes a direct threat to China, which relies on these waterways to transport energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. American naval strategists have long maintained that the US has to retain control over key chokepoints through South East Asia, such as the Malacca Strait, and thus the ability to blockade China in the event of confrontation or conflict.

Abe has just concluded a visit to Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, aimed at strengthening security ties in South East Asia, as well as boosting avenues for Japanese investment. He cut short his tour last Friday to return to Japan amid the Algerian hostage crisis, which included Japanese citizens. The government is now politically exploiting the bloody end to the Algerian standoff to press for an expanded role for the Japanese military, freed from the restraints of the country’s so-called pacifist constitution.

The atmosphere of poisonous nationalism being cultivated in Japanese ruling circles was highlighted last week by the response to a visit by former Prime Minister Hatoyama to China.

Speaking to reporters in Beijing, Hatoyama differed with Japanese government claims that no territorial dispute existed over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. “If you look at history, there is a dispute,” he said. Defence Minister Onodera reacted to the remarks by declaring on television: “At that moment, the word ‘traitor’ arose in my mind.”

In this tense political atmosphere in Tokyo and Beijing, Japanese and Chinese vessels continue to manoeuvre in the contested waters. Three Chinese maritime ships returned to the area on Monday. When challenged by the Japanese coastguard, they broadcast a message over loudspeakers: “This is historically Chinese territory.” Each such incident heightens the risk of a miscalculation that rapidly escalates into a full-blown confrontation.

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