Tokyo accuses Chinese navy of “locking onto” Japanese targets

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Amid a tense on-going territorial dispute over islands in the East China Sea, Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera on Tuesday accused the Chinese navy of locking radar guidance systems onto a Japanese warship last month. No weapons were fired. Branding the action as “extremely abnormal behaviour,” he said, “A small mistake could have led to a very dangerous situation.”

Yesterday, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stepped up the pressure on China, accusing Beijing of deliberately inflaming tensions between the two countries. “It was a unilateral, provocative act and extremely regrettable,” he said. “I urge strong restraint by China so the situation will not unnecessarily escalate.”

The Chinese government has yet to respond to Japan’s claims. Onodera provided few details of the alleged incident on January 30, saying only that it involved Chinese frigates and a Japanese destroyer in the East China Sea. He also said that a Chinese ship had targeted a Japanese navy helicopter on January 19 in a similar manner.

The latest Japanese accusations follow months of escalating friction between the two countries, after the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government “nationalised” the disputed islands in September. Beijing responded by dispatching maritime surveillance vessels, and more recently aircraft, to the area to challenge Japan’s administration of the islands and surrounding waters and airspace.

The result has been increasingly dangerous manoeuvring in the vicinity of the islands, as Japan has responded by sending coast guard vessels and scrambling F-15 fighters to challenge Chinese ships and aircraft. On January 10, China dispatched its own J-10 fighters to the area, bringing warplanes from the two countries into close quarters. Japan has hinted that it could authorise its fighters to fire warning shots against “intruders.” All of this increases the risk of a miscalculation or mistake, triggering a military clash that could rapidly escalate out of control.

The military standoff has been accompanied by the deliberate stirring up of nationalism and militarism by both governments, which have exploited the dispute to divert attention from mounting social tensions at home. The Chinese regime gave the green light in September for widespread anti-Japanese protests that involved attacks on Japanese businesses and citizens. The state-owned Chinese media has subsequently published a rash of articles and commentary on an impending war with Japan.

In comments last week, new Chinese leader Xi Jinping was uncompromising. As reported by the state-run Xinhua news agency, he warned: “No foreign country should ever nurse hopes that we will bargain over our core national interests, and nor should they nurse hopes that we will swallow the bitter fruit of harm to our country’s sovereignty, security and development interests.”

The Japanese elections in December brought Abe and the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) back to power, promising to bolster the military and take a tougher stance against China. The Abe government has increased the defence budget for the first time in a decade, made the first moves towards modifying the country’s so-called pacifist constitution, and called for a reconsideration of the previous limited apologies issued for Japanese war crimes in the 1930s and 1940s.

Abe visited the southern island of Okinawa, some 500 kilometres from the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets, on Sunday. Speaking at the Naha air force base, he promised “to strengthen the defence structure” for the

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southwest islands region, to deal with “continuous challenges to Japan’s sovereignty.” He added: “I will stand in the forefront and am determined to resolutely protect our territory, territorial waters and airspace.” Abe also visited the regional coast guard headquarters responsible for patrolling the disputed islands.

The Japanese coast guard, which is already well equipped, announced last week that it would form a special unit over the next three years dedicated to patrolling Japanese waters in the East China Sea. The unit will include 10 new and larger patrol boats, two sophisticated helicopter carriers and a specialised force of 600 additional troops.

The British-based *Guardian* reported in early January that both countries were stepping up their drone surveillance capacities. The Japanese military has plans to purchase US drones—long-range Global Hawks that can fly continuously for up to 30 hours at a height of up to 20,000 metres.

While the US has called for calm from both countries, the Obama administration is responsible for stoking tensions in the East China Sea, and for inciting territorial disputes between China and South East Asian countries in the South China Sea. As part of his aggressive “pivot to Asia”, Obama has encouraged Japan to end the constitutional limitations on its military and adopt a tougher stance towards China.

Top Obama officials have repeatedly declared that Washington was “neutral” in the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, warning at the same time that the US would side with Japan against China if a conflict broke out. Last month, outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provoked an angry response from Beijing when she called for an end to “unilateral actions that would seek to undermine Japanese administration” of the islands—comments that tacitly acknowledged Japanese control.

In late January, Natsuo Yamaguchi, the leader of New Komeito, the junior partner party in the LDP-led ruling coalition, visited Beijing and delivered a letter from Abe to the new Chinese leader Xi Jinping. In the course of the meeting, Xi reportedly called for an improvement in bilateral relations. While tensions between the two countries appeared to ease for a few days, the situation has worsened since.

Last Saturday, the Japanese coast guard detained a Chinese fishing boat and its crew of 12, alleging that it had engaged in illegal coral fishing. The vessel was not in the disputed waters, but off Miyako Island, around 150 kilometres away from the Senkaku/Diaoyu group. Nevertheless in the heated atmosphere between the two countries, any incident, no matter how minor has the potential to trigger a conflict. The captain and crew were released on Sunday.

The allegations of Chinese warships locking onto Japanese targets followed a diplomatic dressing down of the Chinese ambassador to Tokyo on Monday. The foreign ministry summoned the ambassador to register another “strong protest” over the presence of Chinese ships in waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. According to the Japanese coast guard, two Chinese maritime surveillance vessels spent around 14 hours in the area.

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