

# Former top Obama official warns of “powder keg” in Asia

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An interview with Kurt Campbell, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Asia and the Pacific, in the *Australian* this week has again underlined the acute dangers posed by the tense standoff between China and Japan over disputed islands in the East China Sea.

Campbell, who was Obama’s top diplomat to the region until two weeks ago, bluntly described the situation in North East Asia as “like a powder keg.”

There has been a continual escalation of the territorial dispute since the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government “nationalised” the islands last September, provoking widespread anti-Japanese protests in China. Both Tokyo and Beijing have whipped up reactionary nationalist sentiment over their respective territorial claims.

Not prone to exaggeration, Campbell said that in his four years as assistant secretary he had faced many difficult diplomatic situations, but “none more difficult than this.” He continued: “I’ve rarely seen diplomats on both sides more white-knuckled, or on both sides the sense that no retreat or compromise is possible.”

Lack of room for compromise is not simply a matter of the intentions of individual diplomats or politicians. Having stirred up nationalism to divert from economic and social tensions at home, any retreat by either government has serious political consequences.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime speaks for layers of the Chinese bourgeoisie and middle classes frustrated that the country’s rise is being blocked by the major imperialist powers. The dispute over the islands known as Diaoyu in China has become a touchstone for ending China’s “humiliation” in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Japan took control of the rocky outcrops, known as Senkaku, after defeating China in 1895.

For the Japanese government, China’s challenge to

its control of the islands has become a symbol of the country’s economic and strategic decline over the past two decades. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who assumed office in December after his right-wing Liberal Democratic Party won the election, has flatly ruled out any negotiation over the islands, ensuring a continuing confrontation.

During the interview, the *Australian* commented: “It is all very well for Campbell to tell us about the dangers of this problem, but up to two weeks ago he was one of the most senior people in any government dealing with it on a day-to-day basis, and expected in some sense to solve it. So what is the US doing about this?”

Campbell responded: “This is still a very challenging set of circumstances. We urge both sides to get back to dialogue and discussion. The US is not seeking to be a mediator, but privately we have offered some suggestions and help.”

These comments, however, are completely disingenuous. As assistant secretary of state, Campbell was the point-man for Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the region. For the past four years, he has been centrally involved in the US “pivot to Asia”—a comprehensive diplomatic and strategic offensive throughout Asia aimed at undercutting Chinese influence.

The Obama administration has pressed Tokyo to take a tougher stance in North East Asia towards China and to boost its military to play a more prominent “strategic role.” When DPJ leader and prime minister Yukio Hatoyama pushed for a different approach—an easing of tensions and closer Japanese relations with China—the US exploited the contentious issue of the American military base on Okinawa to push him to resign in 2010. Campbell was intimately involved in this

skulduggery.

Subsequent DPJ prime ministers did not make the same mistake and stood fully behind the so-called US “pivot.” The rising tensions with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, firstly in 2010 then 2012, were the consequence.

No doubt, the Obama administration would prefer not to be drawn into a war with China over insignificant islets in the East China Sea—thus, recent US efforts to calm the situation. The same, however, is true of China and Japan—neither side “wants” a devastating war. But having deliberately inflamed the dispute between the world’s second and third largest economies, the US has set in motion forces that it does not control.

Campbell told the *Australian*: “We worry about unpredictable and accidental events. Both nations have assets—coast guard and military—in place.” Indeed, the room for error has narrowed considerably as China has dispatched maritime surveillance ships and aircraft into or near the disputed waters and airspace to challenge Japan’s territorial claims. Japan has responded by boosting its coastguard presence in the area and scrambling F-15 fighter jets to intercept Chinese aircraft.

Campbell highlighted the potential damage to US economic interests. “With the slowdown in Europe and difficulties in the US, you can make the case that northeast Asia really is the cockpit of the global economy,” he said. We’re anxious that the actions they’re taking are having an effect on their economies, but we could also be looking at this causing worries about shipping in these waters.” He noted that 50 percent of global trade by tonnage and 30 percent by value involved shipping lanes near the two countries.

Nevertheless, despite the obvious economic repercussions, the Obama administration is proceeding with the “pivot.” Campbell hinted at the underlying reasons when he emphasised the importance of Asia to the US. “The lion’s share of the history of the 21st century will be written in Asia. So if the US is to be relevant in the 21st century, it has to be relevant in Asia,” he said.

US imperialism is determined to offset its economic decline and maintain its global “relevance” or more accurately, dominance, by using its military and strategic might to undermine potential rivals. Nowhere is this more the case than in the “cockpit of the global

economy.”

The *Australian* interview was conducted by the newspaper’s foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, who is notable only for his unswerving support for the US-Australia alliance and close connections to the military and foreign policy establishment in Washington. He sought to draw out Campbell on one of his hobby horses—the failure of the Gillard government in Canberra to boost defence spending.

Campbell was unwilling to antagonise a government that had so completely supported the Obama administration’s policy in Asia, including opening up Australian military bases to US Marines, warships and warplanes. But he did hint that the US expected more, saying: “Australia’s immediate and more distant environment has grown more complex and arguably more dangerous, and we’re counting on Australia to do its share.”

Sheridan expressed his amazement “that a situation Campbell describes as a powder keg between China and Japan, Australia’s largest and second-largest trading partners, has received so little attention in Australia,” adding: “This may indicate that Canberra is asleep at the wheel.”

There is nothing amazing, however, about the general silence in Australian media and political circles about the dangers of a war between China and Japan that would not only drag in the United States but also Australia. In fact, the Gillard government’s total support for Obama’s pivot has ensured that the Australian population will be on the frontline of any conflict.

The last thing that the Australian political establishment wants is for working people to be aware of the danger as that would inevitably fuel widespread, anti-war sentiment and political opposition.



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