

# Visiting Europe, Chinese premier demands Japan return “stolen” territories

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In an unprecedented move to challenge Japanese claims over the Diaoyu islands (known as Senkaku in Japan) in the East China Sea, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang brought the issue with him to Potsdam during his first visit to Germany.

In Potsdam, after the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, the Allied leaders held a conference in July–August 1945 to define the post-war settlement and discuss the final war effort against Imperial Japan.

In a speech at the site of the Potsdam Conference on Sunday, Li declared that 20 days after the Allies issued an ultimatum to the “Japanese fascists”, they surrendered and it “was a victory to Chinese people and the people of the world.”

He went on to stress Clause No. 8 of the Potsdam Declaration, implementing the 1943 Cairo Declaration issued by America, UK and China, which stated that territory Japan had seized by force after the World War I had to be taken back, the “stolen” territories of Manchuria, Taiwan and the Penghu Islands restored to China, and Tokyo’s territory limited to the Japanese archipelago.

“We must at all times safeguard the peace and post-war order, which are achieved at the price of tens of millions of lives,” Li said.

Despite the cynical invocation of “peace,” this amounts to an open challenge to Japanese claims not only to Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, but even to Okinawa. This will only further inflame Sino-Japanese tensions.

Li’s argument echoes the position that two Chinese academics recently put forward in the *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, questioning Japanese sovereignty over Okinawa. (See: “China challenges Japanese sovereignty over Okinawa”)

At the time, the Chinese government brushed aside

Tokyo’s protests, arguing that these were academic studies. Now, however, Li has openly stated that this is China’s official position.

China’s state-run Xinhua news agency immediately reported Li’s speech under the headline “Premier Li Keqiang demands Japan return stolen territories.” Newspapers in Germany and Austria, also interpreted the message in similar manner, i.e., that the Beijing now demands that Japan return these islands.

Li also criticised Japanese leaders, without naming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, for denying the Japanese war crimes. Li said: “Any attempt to deny or glorify wartime aggression during those years is nothing but a challenge to international justice, which will not be tolerated by the Chinese people and will be condemned by people all over the world.”

The Japanese government reacted angrily. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihida Suga declared that Li’s comment “completely ignored history.”

He insisted, “The Senkaku islands are our territory in terms of history and international law and we have administrative control over them.”

The dispute over the rocky Senkaku islets has been brewing over the past decade, at first due to the demarcation of the sea borders between China and Japan. These have direct implications over how to divide the large undersea oil and gas reserves in the highly strategic East China Sea.

The Obama administration decided to make it a new flashpoint in Asia, as part of its “pivot” strategy to exert diplomatic and strategic pressure on China. The row escalated in 2010 between the two countries after Japanese Coast Guards captured a Chinese fishing captain.

The Obama White House has repeatedly stressed that while it did not take sides on the ultimate sovereignty

over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, it would be obliged to follow the US-Japan Security Treaty and become militarily involved against China, if a war broke out over the three rocky islets.

The US encouraged Tokyo to produce a new “defence guideline” in 2010 to redefine its strategic focus away from Hokkaido in the north, to the “South Western islands chains”—including the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and Okinawa.

With such US backing, last September, Japanese Democrat Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda took a provocative step by “purchasing” the islands from its private owners last year—a campaign initially advanced by ultra-nationalist forces led by former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara.

China reacted by repeatedly sending maritime policing vessels and even warplanes to challenge the Japanese control of the islands, while incited anti-Japanese protests at home.

Just as Li made his demands in Potsdam, a physical confrontation occurred in the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Despite warning from Japanese Coast Guard ships, three Chinese maritime surveillance ships sailed within the 12 nautical miles of the territorial waters of Senkakus to “expel” a group of right-wing Japanese activists seeking to land on the islands. Tokyo issued a “strong protest” to the Chinese embassy in Japan.

In another front, China is in a fresh standoff with Philippines over the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea’s Spratly Islands, by blocking off Manila’s attempt to supply food to 12 Filipino marines stationed there.

The US has reportedly dispatched the nuclear-powered USS Nimitz aircraft carrier battle group to the region to carry out “reef defending” drills to demonstrate US backing for the Philippines. In response, China held a rare joint exercise involving its three fleets, including surface ships, submarines and warplanes—the first since the US deployed USS George Washington to the Yellow Sea in 2010.

Behind’s Li’s hard-line stance towards Japan and Philippines, is the fact that all sides in these territorial disputes are using them to incite chauvinism and divide the working class.

The Chinese regime announced a full-scale free market restructuring ahead of Li’s visit to Europe, aiming to open up state-dominated sectors of the

economy to private capital. Li is whipping up Chinese nationalism, with Japan denounced as the No.1 “foreign aggressor”, to divert attention from the implications of the lowering of living standards and the destruction of jobs.



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