

Japan scrambles fighters against Chinese plane in East China Sea

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Japan scrambled fighter jets on Wednesday after a Chinese Y-8 early warning aircraft flew through international air space between Okinawa and the smaller Miyako Island, south of Japan.

This is another sign that the US policy of “pivot to Asia” to militarily contain China has created an explosive situation that could rapidly lead to military conflict. The incident coincided with a patrol by four newly-established “Chinese Coast Guard” ships near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera told reporters it was the first time a Chinese military plane had flown through the Okinawa island chain, which is held by Japan, on its way to the Pacific. “We see it as a sign of China’s ever-growing maritime advance,” he said. Chinese naval vessels had repeatedly sailed through water passages in the same area in recent years for training in the West Pacific.

The region is highly strategic. Just last week, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the Miyako Island to inspect a radar base. The Japanese media speculated that the Chinese Y-8 plane was there to conduct electronic surveillance.

Though it was clear that the Y-8 overflight was a provocative action inflaming tensions in the region, the Chinese defence ministry defended its action, claiming that it has “freedom of flight” in international air space. The argument was clearly modelled on America’s, which has justified its routine surveillance of Chinese coastlines on the grounds of “freedom of navigation” outside territorial waters, which extend only 12 nautical miles from a country’s coastline.

Sino-Japanese tensions are fostered by the Obama administration’s decision to “pivot” to Asia by expanding America’s regional military presence and strengthening alliances, including with Japan, the

Philippines and Australia to encircle China. Washington is pressuring China over numerous flashpoints, such as the East and the South China seas, as well as North Korea.

Washington has repeatedly encouraged Japan to confront China over the Senkakus, insisting it would fully honour the US-Japan security treaty if war broke out over the uninhabited rocky islets. Last month, Japanese forces were sent to California to carry out amphibious assault exercises “Dawn Blitz” with the US troops. On a similar basis, the US and Australia are currently conducting their largest ever drill with 28,000 troops in Queensland, also practising amphibious operations potentially aimed at China.

Tension between China and Japan escalated last September when Prime Minister Abe’s predecessor, Yoshihiko Noda of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), provocatively bought three of the disputed islands from a private Japanese owner. Since then, patrol ships and aircraft from both countries have shadowed each other in the sea and skies around the islets, risking an unintended collision leading to an outright military clash.

As of March, according to the Japanese defence ministry, their fighters had scrambled 306 times in the previous 12 months in response to Chinese air force activity in East China Sea—up from 156 times the previous year.

China is carrying out its own escalation in the region. Okinawa, which is the home to the majority of US forces stationed in Japan, including its largest air base in Asia, has become a target of Chinese military planning. In May, Chinese submarines were spotted in waters near Okinawa, reportedly shadowing a US aircraft carrier.

Earlier this month, China and Russia held their

largest-ever naval exercises in the Sea of Japan, reportedly as a response to the US-Japanese “Dawn Blitz” exercise. In response, the US and Japan conducted a large-scale air counter-drill in the same region.

Just after the joint Russo-Chinese naval drills, President Vladimir Putin suddenly ordered Russia’s largest-ever military exercise in the Far East since the end of Soviet Union. He flew to the Sakhalin Islands, north of Japan, and presided over a drill involving 160,000 troops, 1,000 tanks, 130 warplanes and 70 warships. Russian analysts speculated the war game was based on a scenario of a US-Japanese attack on Russia.

The Obama administration has strongly endorsed the right-wing agenda of Abe’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which seeks to revise the pacifist clause in Japan’s constitution to allow Japan to use military force abroad. Abe is preparing new defence guidelines to be released by the end of this year, giving Japanese forces the capability to carry out pre-emptive strikes, as well as to establish marine forces similar to the US Marine Corps for “island warfare.”

Abe—who plans to implement a sweeping program of austerity against the working class, including the imposition of consumption taxes—is constantly whipping up Japanese nationalism to divert from growing social tensions.

Earlier this month, for instance, Abe declared on television that China had demanded he admit that there is a “dispute” over the sovereignty of the Senkakus as precondition for a Sino-Japanese summit. Abe claimed to have “dismissed” this demand, which Beijing has denied ever making. The remark, which took place just a day after the sensitive anniversary of Japan’s full-scale invasion of China in 1937 also included provocative comment that “every country takes pride in its history, so what is important is to have mutual respect.”

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime under President Xi Jinping, who is also facing a dire economic downturn at home that threatens to unleash mass protests, is recklessly promoting Chinese nationalism for the same purposes. His regime has openly challenged Japan’s sovereignty over Okinawa, claiming that the island was historically a vassal state of the Chinese emperor. (See: “China challenges

Japanese sovereignty over Okinawa”)

The question of Diaoyu/Senkakus and the surrounding areas combines two issues for Beijing: first, whether its newly built blue-water navy is able to penetrate the so-called “First Island Chains” stretching from northern Japan, Okinawa to Philippines, which was designed by the US to contain China. Second, China and Japan are in a long-standing dispute over the maritime boarder over almost the entire East China Sea, which is thought to contain significant reserves of oil and gas.

Earlier this month, China unilaterally began construction of a gas drilling rig in the East China Sea in waters both claimed by Japan and China in their overlapping “exclusive economic zones”, provoking a protest from Tokyo.



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