

Sino-Japanese tensions flare over disputed islands

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Tensions between Japan and China flared last Wednesday, on the anniversary of the Japanese government's purchase last year of the disputed Senkaku islands (known as Diaoyu in China) from their private Japanese owner.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was in Argentina to lobby for Tokyo's bid for the 2020 Olympic Games, used the occasion to declare that Japan must maintain "effective control" over the Senkakus. Hours later, two Chinese H-6 bombers for the first time flew over international airspace between the Okinawa island chains and Miyako islands, near the Senkakus. Japan responded by scrambling fighter jets.

Chinese media highlighted that these bombers were able to carry YJ-12 supersonic cruise missiles, which have a range of 500 kilometres and are designed to engage with Japanese and US naval fleets or ground targets in the western Pacific. At the same time, two Chinese 054A frigates were spotted sailing through the same area after a training exercise in the Pacific.

Both Japan and China engaged in risky manoeuvres in the lead up to the anniversary. Last Monday, Japan scrambled F-15 fighters to intercept a high-altitude Chinese surveillance drone that appeared near the Senkakus. The following day, eight Chinese Coast Guard ships were sent to patrol the waters around the disputed islands, provoking a formal protest by Japan.

China has justified its actions by insisting its right to "freedom of flight" over international waters near Japan, echoing the US pretext for its naval presence near China. The Chinese defence ministry declared: "The Chinese military will continue to plan similar actions in the future." It also claimed that Japanese surveillance planes fly some 500 sorties annually near the Chinese coast, including close to the 12-nautical mile territorial boundary.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea have

become a dangerous flashpoint after the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" encouraged the Japanese government, then led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), to take a more assertive stance. Tensions flared in 2010 after Japanese authorities arrested the captain of a Chinese trawler, and again last year, after Japan's "nationalisation" of the islands. Abe and his right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), after winning last December's national election, have taken an even tougher stance as part of its remilitarisation of Japan.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga declared last Tuesday that Japan "will never make a concession on the matter of sovereignty." Asked about the possibility that Tokyo could deploy government personnel on the uninhabited islets, he said it was "one of the options." Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei responded: "If the Japanese side recklessly makes provocative moves, it will have to accept the consequences."

At the recent G20 summit in St Petersburg, Chinese President Xi Jinping reportedly snubbed a request to arrange a formal meeting with Abe. When they met on the sidelines, Xi reportedly called on Abe to "squarely face up to history" and show sincerity in dealing with the issue of the Diaoyu islands.

Both Tokyo and Beijing are whipping up nationalism to divert from rising social tensions at home. Abe's government is preparing to increase the country's deeply unpopular consumption tax next April. The move could stall the Japanese economy, leading to higher levels of unemployment and poverty.

The Chinese government also faces slowing economic growth and mounting financial instability. It is seeking to impose a new round of pro-market restructuring that will widen the already deep gulf between rich and poor. The latest step is to list state-owned military industries on the share markets, with a Shanghai shipbuilder of China's aircraft carrier being hailed as giving a greater role to

“private capital” to develop China as a naval power.

Behind its hard-line posturing, however, the Chinese regime has hinted that the door is still open for dialogue.

A special commentary in the official Xinhua news agency, appearing on the anniversary of Japan’s nationalisation of the disputed islets, urged Tokyo to use its hosting of the 2020 Olympics “to adjust its attitude on its war-time history and break the stalemate by taking concrete action to win back its neighbours’ trust.” While blaming the Abe government for the bilateral tensions, Xinhua concluded: “Hard-earned after efforts by generations of leaders of the two countries, the bilateral relationship needs tender care. For the benefit of both countries and the region at large, China is willing to advance China-Japan strategic ties of mutual benefit ...”

The commentary reflects concerns in Beijing that the tensions have damaged economic relations. In the first seven months of 2013, bilateral trade declined 8.8 percent year-on-year, to \$US174 billion. Sections of the Chinese regime also fear that falling investment from Japan will exacerbate China’s economic slowdown and fuel rising unemployment.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported last Thursday that Japanese companies are turning to South East Asia as an alternative to China. Japanese investment in South East Asia jumped 55 percent in the first half of 2013 from the year before, to \$10.29 billion, whereas in China it tumbled 31 percent, to \$4.93 billion. The article pointed out that China was “missing an opportunity” as Japan’s net foreign direct investment surged 12 percent to \$122 billion in 2012.

Many Japanese business leaders have pointed to the violent anti-Japanese protests in China a year ago, including calls to boycott Japanese goods, as a major reason for shunning China. Significantly, no mass anti-Japanese protests took place in China last Wednesday against Japan’s “nationalisation” of the disputed islands.



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