

US-Japan ministerial meeting strengthens military stance against China

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The so-called “2 plus 2” meeting in Tokyo yesterday—Involving US Secretary of State John Kerry, Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, and their Japanese counterparts, Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera—has resulted in agreements that will escalate US-Japanese military tensions with China.

President Barack Obama shortened his intended trip to South East Asia next week by eliminating planned visits to Philippines and Malaysia, due to the US government shutdown. Amid growing concern among Asian allies over whether the US has the political will and financial resources to continue Obama’s aggressive “pivot to Asia” against China, Kerry and Hagel have used the meeting in Tokyo to send a strong message that Washington was serious about its commitments.

Hagel told reporters in Tokyo: “Our bilateral defence cooperation, including America’s commitment to the security of Japan, is a critical component of our overall relationship, and to the Obama administration’s rebalance to Asia-Pacific.”

The Pentagon put on a show of force to underscore the point. The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington and its battle group have been dispatched from Japan to Busan on Wednesday to carry out joint naval exercises with South Korean and Japanese warships off the southern coastline of the Korean Peninsula from October 9-10.

Hagel flew to Tokyo from Seoul where he commemorated the 60th anniversary of the US-Korean alliance. He also signed a strategic pact with South Korea that allows for a “pre-emptive” strike against North Korea, on the pretext of countering a nuclear attack by Pyongyang. The threat of pre-emptive strike could also be aimed at China.

China was clearly at the centre of discussions in

Tokyo. The joint statement encouraged Beijing “to play a responsible and constructive role in regional stability and prosperity, to adhere to international norms of behaviour, as well as to improve openness and transparency in its military modernisation.”

Obama’s “pivot” has fuelled tensions throughout the region as US allies have taken a more confrontational approach to China. Japan has significantly ratcheted up friction with China over the disputed Senkaku islands (known as Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea over the past three years.

Kerry, while reiterating the official US position of taking no position on the territorial dispute, pointedly declared “we do recognise Japan’s administration of those islands.” Among the military measures announced, the US plans to deploy long-range Global Hawk surveillance drones to Japan next year to monitor the West Pacific region, including the East China Sea, a move that will only fuel tensions with China.

US-Japan “2 plus 2” ministerial meetings have been held since 1990, but yesterday’s was the first full meeting held in Tokyo, rather than Washington. The key point of the talks was to emphasise that Japan would play a “more balanced” role in the alliance—that is, it would expand its own military and assume greater responsibilities as the US develops its regional military build-up against China.

The joint statement announced that the US would deploy the second X-band early warning radar in Japan, near Kyoto, as part of joint anti-ballistic missile systems. These are nominally aimed against North Korea, but in reality are part of the Pentagon’s nuclear war plans against China and Russia. The US also plans to deploy F-35B vertical take-off stealth fighters by 2017; P-8 anti-submarine planes (the first such deployment outside the US); and two squadrons of

MV-22 Osprey vertical take-off transport planes for joint training with Japanese forces.

For its part, Japan is creating a US-style National Security Council to enhance the prime minister's military authority, and to broaden the country's defence aid to South East Asian countries such as the Philippines. The government pledged in principle to increase military spending, despite the country's huge public debt. Tokyo also agreed to pay \$US3.1 billion to help finance the relocation of 9,000 US Marines out of Okinawa, to Guam and other locations in Asia-Pacific, as part of the US strategic realignment against China.

The ministerial meeting agreed to revise the current "Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation." Japan is currently inhibited from playing a more active role in US war preparations against China by the so-called "pacifist" clause of the country's post-war constitution, which formally prohibits aggressive military action. However, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is pressing to either reinterpret the clause or to change the constitution, allowing Japan to exercise "collective defence" with the US as well as pre-emptive "self-defence" against alleged threats.

When the US-Japan defence guidelines were first drawn up in 1978, during the Cold War, Japan was assigned a strictly limited role in the event that the USSR invaded the country. The last update to the guidelines, in 1997, broadened Japan's military activities to the immediate nearby region, such as assisting the US in a crisis over North Korea, but ruled out the use of Japanese forces in a joint attack against other countries.

In an interim report earlier this year on Japan's own defence guidelines, the Abe government strongly hinted that it would move towards acquiring "pre-emptive" strike capabilities. Amid the sharp standoff with China over the Senkaku islands, Japan's defence ministry is already planning a new protocol that would allow for the shooting down of Chinese drones.

Defence Minister Onodera told a press conference on October 1 that drones, unlike regular manned warplanes, might not respond to warnings, "so they represent a major risk." The current guidelines stipulate that Japanese warplanes use radio and visual signals to signal to a pilot to leave or land, and only use force if the pilot refuses to comply. China has warned that if Japan shot down a drone, it would be act of war.

Abe laid out his militarist agenda in his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 26. He declared that the Japanese military would make a "pro-active contribution to peace" under the UN's "collective security measures." Japan has previously been hampered by its constitution from joining US-led wars, such as those against Afghanistan and Libya.

In a thinly-veiled criticism of China, Abe told the General Assembly that Japan's national interests were connected to the "stability" of seas. "Changes to the maritime order through the use of force or coercion cannot be condoned under any circumstances," he declared.

Abe also spoke at a conservative US think tank, the Hudson Institute, where he defended his government's plans to increase military spending. Claiming that Japan's defence budget was modest compared to China's, he exclaimed: "So call me, if you want, a right-wing militarist."

By encouraging Japan's rearmament and militarism, the Obama administration is recklessly heightening the danger of war in Asia.



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