

Japanese PM foreshadows tougher action over disputed islets

Peter Symonds
29 October 2013

In a speech to the Japanese military last Sunday, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe foreshadowed a more aggressive stance toward China over the disputed Senkaku islands, known as Diaoyu in China, in the East China Sea.

Tensions with China flared in September last year after the previous Japanese government “nationalised” the rocky uninhabited islets by buying them from their private Japanese owner. Abe, who won office in December, has stepped up Japan’s military response to China’s dispatch of surveillance vessels and aircraft to areas near the islands.

Last Sunday, the Japanese military also scrambled fighter jets for the third successive day to challenge Chinese military aircraft flying over international waters near Japan’s Okinawa island chain. The two Chinese Y8 early-warning aircraft and two H6 bombers flew from the East China Sea to the Pacific Ocean but did not enter Japanese air space.

Abe has exploited these risky manoeuvres as the pretext for boosting the Japanese armed forces and pressing for constitutional changes to allow for “pre-emptive” military action. He told troops on Sunday that Japan would “not tolerate a change in the status quo by force,” adding: “We must conduct all sorts of activities such as surveillance and intelligence for that purpose.”

Under Japan’s post-war constitution, the military is barred, formally at least, from engaging in any action other than for self-defence. After declaring that the security environment around Japan was becoming “increasingly severe,” Abe exhorted the armed forces to “completely rid yourselves of the conventional notion that just the existence of a defence force could act as a deterrent.”

Abe was speaking at a military base just north of Tokyo to about 4,000 troops who staged a parade.

Reflecting the Abe government’s orientation to “island defence,” a unit specialising in amphibious assaults, the Western Army Infantry Regiment, took part in the parade for the first time, displaying military vehicles towing rubber boats. The parade included an amphibious assault vehicle used by the US Marines, who have held joint exercises with Japanese troops.

The tense standoff over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands was underscored last week when the Japanese media leaked Defence Ministry plans to shoot down foreign drones that intrude into Japan’s airspace. The plan was drafted after a Chinese military drone entered Japan’s air defence identification zone, but not the country’s airspace, near the disputed islands on September 9.

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng warned last Saturday: “If Japan does what it says and resorts to enforcement measures like shooting down aircraft, this is a serious provocation to us; it is an act of war. We will surely undertake decisive action to strike back.”

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* last Friday, Abe made clear that his government’s tough stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands was part of a wider strategy aimed at reasserting the interests of Japanese imperialism throughout the region. “I’ve realised that Japan is expected to exert leadership not just on the economic front, but also in the field of security in the Asia Pacific,” he told the newspaper.

Abe’s more assertive stance has been encouraged by the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” aimed at undermining China’s diplomatic, economic and strategic position throughout the region. Since taking office, Abe has conducted his own diplomatic offensive in South East Asia to boost economic and military ties.

Obama’s absence at two key regional summits this month, due to the government shutdown in

Washington, allowed Abe to adopt a higher profile. The Japanese prime minister intervened directly into maritime disputes between China and its South East Asian neighbours, saying Japan had “an interest in peace and stability in the South China Sea.” The remark provoked a sharp response from Chinese Premier Li Keqiang who declared that “countries that are not parties to the disputes should not get involved.”

Over the past three years, the Obama administration has exploited the disputes in the South China Sea to attempt to drive a wedge between China and neighbouring countries. Backed by the US, the Philippines in particular has taken a tougher approach to China, spearheading demands in Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings for multilateral negotiations over a code of conduct with China.

Abe has visited South East Asia four times since taking office less than a year ago. In July, he reached an agreement with the Philippines to supply 10 coast guard vessels. Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera indicated during a visit to Hanoi last month that Japan was discussing a similar deal with Vietnam. In December, Abe is planning to host a meeting with ASEAN leaders in Japan to mark 40 years of Japan’s ties with the bloc.

In his *Wall Street Journal* interview, Abe declared that Japan had become “inward-looking” over the past 15 years. After referring to his economic policies, Abe said: “By regaining a strong economy, Japan will regain confidence as well, and we’d like to contribute more to making the world a better place.”

Abe made clear, however, that Japan’s “contribution” would be to challenge China militarily. “There are concerns that China is attempting to change the status quo by force, rather than by rule of law. But if China opts to take that path, then it won’t be able to emerge peacefully. So it shouldn’t take that path, and many nations expect Japan to strongly express that view,” he said.

The Obama administration has encouraged Japan to play a far greater military role in Asia, directed against China in particular. Earlier this month, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel held a “2+2” meeting with their Japanese counterparts in Tokyo and released an extensive joint statement, outlining plans for stationing sophisticated US military

hardware in Japan and praising the Abe government’s own military expansion.

While Washington is seeking to use the US-Japan alliance to enhance its own dominant position in Asia, Abe is seeking to fulfil his election pledge to build Japan as “a strong nation”—that is, to reassert the interests of Japanese imperialism. The dangers of a slide toward war are evident in the worsening standoff with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact