

China and Japan hold rival military exercises

John Chan
6 November 2013

Japan and China are heightening the danger of confrontation in the East China Sea. Japan is currently holding one of its largest-ever military exercises, in southwestern Japanese waters around Okinawa, following China's biggest open sea naval drills, conducted in the same region. These exercises, staged not far from the bitterly disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, have become the focal point for a war of words between Tokyo and Beijing, with each branding the other as a "threat" to international peace.

The exercises were held in the context of US President Barack Obama's absence from key summits in Asia last month, due to the US government shutdown, which allowed Chinese leaders to bolster their diplomatic clout in the region. Washington then sought to restore the creditability of its diplomatic and military "pivot to Asia," directed at undermining China's growing role. The Obama administration sent an aircraft carrier battle group to the East and South China Seas to try to reassure allies such as Japan that they can count on the US military in the event of conflicts with China.

China responded by holding its largest ever naval drill with 100 naval vessels in the Yellow Sea, where the USS George Washington had held joint exercises with Japanese and South Korean warships. Following that drill, China's navy held a ground-breaking exercise, called "Manoeuvre 5," in which warships and submarines from China's South, East and North Sea Fleets sailed through the so-called First Island Chain (a line drawn by the US naval strategists from Japan to Taiwan and the Philippines to contain China militarily), to hold war games in the Pacific from October 24 to November 1.

"Manoeuvre 5" is the first time that units from all three major Chinese fleets have converged for simulated conflict, passing simultaneously through the Bashi Channel, the Osumi Strait and the Miyako Strait.

The Chinese defence ministry pointedly characterised the location of the exercise as "one of the most sensitive sea areas with the most potential conflicts," adding: "The PLAN [Peoples Liberation Army Navy] must be prepared for any unexpected combat operation in such an area."

Despite the danger of live fire drills, a Japanese destroyer provocatively entered the exercise zone on October 25 for three days, along with Japanese and US surveillance planes, to monitor the Chinese activity. Japan also scrambled jet fighters on three consecutive days in response to Chinese bombers and early-warning planes passing through the international airspace between the main Okinawan island and Miyako island, as part of the Chinese drills.

In an unusual move, the Chinese defence ministry, rather than the foreign ministry, lodged a protest to Japan last Thursday, over its "dangerous provocation" in disrupting the Chinese exercises.

The Chinese leadership under President Xi Jinping is seeking to present itself as a "strong" regime against a menacing Japan, in part to divert public attention from the devastating consequences of its pro-market economic policies to be announced at the Communist Party plenum this Friday. The regime's nationalistic tabloid, the *Global Times*, issued an editorial last Wednesday with the headline: "No more talk between China and Japan, prepare for the worst for military conflict."

The Chinese state media also headlined for two days last week the decommissioning of the first generation of the country's highly secretive, nuclear missile submarines. It was the first detailed reporting on nuclear submarines in four decades. China's newer Type-094 ballistic missile submarines have now entered service. These carry JL-2 nuclear missiles that can hit the US West Coast from the waters off China's coast. Unlike the older Type-092 subs, which never

conducted regular combat patrols, the new ones give Beijing a functional submarine-based nuclear arsenal for the first time.

The media coverage of the new nuclear submarine fleet—not marking any political or military anniversary—might well have been a warning to the Japanese government of Shinzo Abe about the consequences of war with China.

The Abe government, however, dialled up the tensions with Beijing. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato not only rejected the Chinese protest over the alleged Japanese disruption of its exercises, but lodged a counter-protest. “We are paying close attention to the movements of the Chinese armed forces, including those of Chinese military vessels in seas around Japan,” Kato said.

Immediately after the Chinese drills, Japan launched its own major land, sea and air exercise with 34,000 troops, accompanied by six naval vessels and 350 warplanes. These are taking place from November 1 to 18, in a large maritime region just north of where the Chinese war games were conducted.

The exercise, involving 14 percent of Japan’s land forces and one fifth of its air force, is based on a scenario that the US might not come to Japan’s assistance in time of war. This is in line with a recent joint US-Japanese statement calling on Japan to shoulder “greater” responsibility in the US-Japan alliance. Washington is encouraging Japan to build up offensive military capabilities, despite the restrictions in the Japanese constitution on such weapons.

In a drill that clearly relates to the disputed Senkakus, Japanese troops, including core units that will form Abe’s planned marine forces, will practice amphibious landings on the uninhabited atoll of Okidaitojima, 400 kilometres southeast of Okinawa. The Japanese will also deploy Type-88 land-based anti-ship missiles during the exercise, possibly on islands near the sea passages used by Chinese warships as gateways to the Pacific. With a range of 180 kilometres, these truck-launched missiles could potentially blockade the Chinese navy in the event of war.

Abe is deeply concerned by the prospect of opposition in the working class to his agenda of reviving Japanese militarism, and the accompanying danger of war. Well aware of the sensitivity of the latest Japanese exercise, his government banned

journalists from going to the region and instructed the Japanese media to report the event in the most minimal possible manner.

Last Tuesday, Japanese Defence Minister Onodera Itsunori accused China of having again “intruded” into the territorial waters of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Onodera said intrusions by Chinese Coast Guard ships “fall in the ‘grey zone’ [between] peacetime and an emergency situation.”

Rejecting Itsunori’s criticism, Chinese defence ministry spokesman Yang Yujun invoked the period leading up to World War II, declaring that Japan has “a precedent” for building up military power by telling lies and waging aggressive wars. Yang said Japan’s remarks “show its over-confidence, seeking to confront other countries and purposely challenge the post-World War II international order. How can such a country be accepted by neighbors and the international community, let alone play a leading role in Asia?”

Last week, Abe told the *Wall Street Journal* that Japan would “exert leadership not just on the economic front, but also in the field of security in the Asia-Pacific.” He warned China that if it sought to change the maritime status quo by force, “then it won’t be able to emerge peacefully” because Japan would “counter” China.

The belligerent exchanges between the two governments, backed by massive military exercises, are a warning sign that the US “pivot to Asia” has unleashed forces that are driving the world’s second and third largest economic powers towards conflict.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact