Japan steps up campaign against Chinese air defence zone

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The Japanese government is stepping up its campaign against China's declaration last month of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. The new zone, which overlaps with Japan's own ADIZ and includes the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, has resulted in escalating manoeuvres and counter-manoeuvres by Chinese and Japanese ships and aircraft in the disputed area.

In Tokyo last week, US Vice President Joe Biden reaffirmed that the US military would ignore the Chinese ADIZ and that Washington would back Japan in any conflict with China over the disputed islets. US and Japanese warplanes have flown through the zone without notifying Chinese authorities of their flight plans.

Secure in the knowledge that it has US backing, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government is intensifying the pressure on China to rescind the ADIZ by calling for an international meeting on the issue. Tokyo is also seeking the backing of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), urging it to adopt a critical stance toward China's action.

Visiting the Philippines last weekend, Japan's Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera met separately with both Philippine Defence Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and Australian Foreign Minister Julia Bishop. Japan, Australia and the Philippines all have formal military alliances with the United States.

After meeting with Bishop, Onodera declared that the international community "should meet to deal with this matter together" and that any unilateral action by coercive means should be opposed. "If any country would establish a similar air zone in the South China Sea, that would bring up tension and … that should be stopped," he said. Beijing has hinted that it may establish an ADIZ in the South China Sea, where it has territorial disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei.

Over the past four years, the Obama administration has deliberately stirred up these disputes in the South China and East China Seas as part of its "pivot to Asia," aimed at undercutting China diplomatically and encircling it militarily. Beijing has responded by asserting its own maritime "rights," leading to an increasingly dangerous series of moves and countermoves, involving Japan and the Philippines in particular.

After discussions with his Philippine counterpart, Onodera again blamed China's "unilateral action" for rising tensions, and announced that Japan and the Philippines would "expand and deepen" cooperation on defence. Japan previously agreed to provide the Philippines with coast guard vessels and training to boost its capacity to patrol. The Philippines is also in discussions with the US to establish basing arrangements for American forces in areas adjacent to the South China Sea.

Onodera's trip is part of a concerted effort by the Abe government to boost Japan's ties with ASEAN countries at the expense of China. Since coming to office last December, Abe has visited all 10 ASEAN members, and this weekend will host a Japan-ASEAN summit in Tokyo. A Japanese diplomatic source told the media that Tokyo would seek a joint statement implicitly critical of China, affirming that any "abuse" of power in international civil aviation could pose a security "threat."

The Abe government's aggressive effort to forge close ties within the region, directed against China, has been encouraged by, and is part of, the US "pivot." Abe came to power last December on the basis of a program of remilitarisation to create a "strong Japan"

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with a “strong military.” Once in office, he increased the military budget for the first time in a decade, reaffirmed Japan’s determination to cling to the Senkakus and foreshadowed the removal of constitutional restraints on the Japanese military. Abe then established a US-style National Security Council to centralise military and foreign policy under his control.

Relations with China, which were already frayed under the previous Democrat government, have sunk to a new low. Abe, a rightwing nationalist, is playing down the wartime crimes of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s, provoking angry responses in both China and South Korea. All three governments are seeking to stoke up nationalist sentiment in a bid to divert attention from rising social tensions at home.

Last Friday, Abe called for a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping to “reset” relations between the two countries, citing his trip to China in 2006 shortly after becoming prime minister for the first time. At that point, Abe, under pressure from big business, was seeking to mend ties with China that had been seriously undermined by his predecessor and mentor Junichiro Koizumi. Koizumi provocatively made the first visit by an incumbent prime minister to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead.

Abe reassumed power last year with an entirely different perspective than when he first came to office. Amid the deepening global economic crisis that erupted in 2008, he laid out economic policies—so-called Abenomics—boosting Japan at the expense of its rivals through what amounts to competitive devaluation, and imposing new burdens on the working class. Abe’s program of remilitarisation, aimed at asserting Japan’s strategic interests in Asia and internationally, complements his economic agenda.

Abe’s call for a summit with Xi amid the bitter standoff over China’s ADIZ is little more than diplomatic posturing. While Abe has toured every ASEAN country, he has only briefly met with Xi for a few minutes on the sidelines of a G20 meeting. A *Washington Post* article on December 7 detailed the collapse of diplomatic interchange between Japan and China, including so-called informal back channels. A senior Japanese foreign ministry official explained: “There used to be so many channels [of communication]. But this has all stopped.”

The article pointed out that within the Japanese foreign ministry, relations with China used to be managed by a group known as the “China School,” which included officials fluent in Chinese and knowledgeable about Chinese political history. Their main task was crisis management—for example, blocking rightwing activists seeking to land on disputed islands and preventing the revision of school history books to expunge Japan’s wartime atrocities. These officials, increasingly come under attack by rightwing nationalists, have been largely sidelined in the foreign ministry.

Far from “resetting” relations with China, the Abe government, with US backing, is engaged in its own aggressive campaign in Asia aimed at isolating Beijing. Tokyo’s hard-line stance over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has only encouraged China to stake its own claims more assertively. In the wake of the flare-up over the Chinese ADIZ, three Chinese coastguard ships entered the disputed waters around the islets yesterday to challenge Japanese administration.

Amid continuing high tensions between the two countries, the danger is that any incident involving aircraft or ships could spark a conflict that would draw in the US and evolve into a catastrophic war.

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