

Japan scrambles fighters amid escalating tensions with China

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In another sign of high tensions in North East Asia, Japan announced that it scrambled fighter jets yesterday to head off a Chinese civilian aircraft near disputed islands, in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. The Y-12 propeller plane entered Japan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ), but not the airspace around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets, before heading back to China.

The incident is the first reported since China announced its own ADIZ last November in the East China Sea, including the disputed islands, provoking an aggressive response from both the United States and Japan. The Obama administration immediately declared that US military aircraft would ignore the new Chinese protocols and flew nuclear-capable B-52 bombers through the zone without informing Chinese authorities. US allies Japan and South Korea followed suit, raising the danger that an error or miscalculation could lead to a clash with the potential for escalation into an open conflict.

In this heated geo-political environment, the Japanese government also announced yesterday that it would register 280 isolated islands as state property in order to "enhance their management." Tokyo's previous decision, in September 2012, to "nationalise" three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands provoked strong protests from China and dramatically escalated tensions between the two countries.

It is not yet known whether any of the 280 islands are in dispute, as their locations are yet to be released. The Headquarters for Ocean Policy in Japan told the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* that the islands were "all around Japan" and none were contested with other countries. According to the newspaper, however, some Chinese analysts regard the "move by Japan to further bolster its maritime power."

While the Japanese government portrayed the decision as innocuous, it is bound up with the reorientation of Japanese military strategy toward "island defence" and a military build-up in Japan's southern island chain adjacent to the Chinese mainland. Since coming to power in December 2012, the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government has boosted defence spending for the first time in a decade and sought to remove constitutional and legal constraints on the Japanese armed forces.

The five-year defence budget announced last month included a substantial expansion of the navy, with the addition of seven new destroyers and six more submarines. A new amphibious brigade will be created "to speedily land, recapture, and secure islands in case of invasions." Maritime surveillance is also to be enhanced, with the deployment of unmanned drones and a unit of E-2C early warning aircraft on Okinawa in the south.

The US is directly responsible for encouraging Japan's remilitarisation as part of Obama's "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at undermining China diplomatically and economically, and encircling it militarily. US bases in Japan, as well as Australia, are central to the Pentagon's war preparations. Japan's own military build-up is taking place in the closest collaboration with the US, as was made clear in a lengthy joint statement from a meeting of Japanese and US defence and foreign ministers in October. (See: "US-Japan ministerial meeting strengthens military stance against China")

Over the past four years, the Obama administration's "pivot" has encouraged key allies such as Japan to take a more aggressive stance toward China and greatly heightened the danger of war. The previous Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) government provoked diplomatic

rows with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2010 and again with their nationalisation in 2012, creating a climate of fear that the LDP exploited to win power.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe further stoked up tensions with China by visiting Japan's notorious Yasukuni Shrine to the war dead on December 26. The visit, the first by an incumbent prime minister since 2005, provoked strong protests from China and South Korea, and wider international criticism. The shrine not only symbolically inters the souls of convicted Japanese war criminals. Its associated museum glorifies Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s, and downplays its crimes.

The political fallout from Abe's visit is continuing with a bizarre exchange over the past week between the Chinese and Japanese ambassadors to Britain that is symptomatic of the worsening confrontation between Beijing and Tokyo. Each compared the other country to Lord Voldemort—the ultimate incarnation of evil in the Harry Potter novels—accusing it of militarism and aggression.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* last week, Chinese ambassador Liu Xiaoming declared that “militarism is like the haunting Voldemort of Japan,” with the Yasukuni Shrine “representing the darkest parts of the nation's soul.” The article is part of a far broader campaign by the Beijing regime to whip up anti-Japanese chauvinism as a means of justifying its own military build-up, diverting attention from the social crisis at home and manoeuvring diplomatically abroad. Liu concluded with a not-so-subtle appeal to Britain—a partner in all the criminal US-led wars of the past two decades—to renew the World War II alliance between the two countries in order “to safeguard regional stability and world peace.”

Japan's ambassador Keiichi Hayashi responded on Monday with his own article in the *Telegraph* that blamed Chinese military expansion for regional tensions and denied that Japan was remilitarising or that Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine had any sinister significance. He concluded by warning China against playing “the role of Voldemort in the region by letting loose the evil of an arms race and escalation of tensions.” Amid the worsening global economic crisis, the Abe government is whipping up anti-Chinese sentiment to justify remilitarisation and to project

sharpening social tensions outward.

The decidedly undiplomatic language of the articles is a measure of depth of the antagonisms between the two countries. In the midst of the worsening standoff, US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel telephoned his Japanese counterpart Itsunori Onodera on Saturday to “underscore the importance of Japan taking steps to improve relations with its neighbours.” The comments echo those of the US State Department, which expressed “disappointment” in Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine.

Given the US role in deliberately encouraging Japan's aggressive stand toward China, these remarks are the height of hypocrisy. Washington's chief concern over Abe's shrine visit was that it alienated other US allies in Asia, especially South Korea, and cut across US efforts to get Tokyo and Seoul to develop closer military ties. The chief responsibility for the rising danger of conflict and war lies with US imperialism, which is once again exploiting its military might to ensure its continued dominance in Asia and internationally.



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