

Obama affirms US backing for Japan in any conflict with China

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US President Barack Obama has set the stage for formal talks today with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by provocatively telling the *Yomiuri Shimbun* that the US is fully committed to supporting Japan in any military conflict with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Obama landed in Tokyo yesterday on the first leg of his Asian trip, which includes South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines.

In written answers to the Japanese newspaper, Obama declared: “The policy of the United States is clear—the Senkaku islands are administered by Japan and therefore fall within the scope of Article 5 of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. And we oppose any unilateral attempts to undermine Japan’s administration of these islands.”

While US officials have made similar statements previously, Obama’s unequivocal backing for Japan in any war with China will only further fuel the tense situation surrounding the islets, and harden Abe’s refusal to even concede that a territorial dispute exists. At the same time as he has deliberately stoked up a confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, Obama is giving the green light to the right-wing Abe government in Japan to take a more belligerent stance against China.

Obama’s comments to the *Yomiuri Shimbun* make clear that his “pivot to Asia” is broadly targeted against China. While paying lip service to “engagement with China,” he pointedly warned that “both our nations have to resist the danger of slipping into conflict.” He also reassured Tokyo that “our engagement with China does not and will not come at the expense of Japan or any other ally.”

Not surprisingly, the Chinese regime bluntly rejected Obama’s remarks. Foreign ministry spokesman Qin

Gang yesterday opposed the application of the US-Japan Security Treaty to the disputed islands, branding it as a Cold War alliance that “should not be used to damage China’s sovereignty and legitimate interest.” In conditions where Washington engineered a provocation against Moscow in the form of a fascist-led coup in Kiev, Beijing clearly fears that the tensions in the East China Sea could rapidly become the basis for threats of war against China.

Last November, the US recklessly challenged China’s declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea by flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the zone unannounced—risking a confrontation or clash with Chinese aircraft.

The Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”—aimed at containing China diplomatically, economically and militarily—has transformed the East China Sea into a dangerous flashpoint. The long dormant dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands was deliberately stoked up in the aftermath of Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama’s resignation in June 2010. The US put pressure on Hatoyama to step down after a sharp disagreement over US bases on Okinawa. His efforts to improve Japan’s ties with China had cut across Obama’s confrontational “pivot.”

In September 2010, the Democrat government of Naoto Kan provoked a major diplomatic row with China by arresting a Chinese trawler captain in waters around the disputed islands—a confrontation that former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton inflamed by affirming support for Japan under the security treaty. Tensions again flared in September 2012, after the Japanese government “nationalised” the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, leading to increasingly risky manoeuvres by Chinese and Japanese ships and aircraft in the area.

Obama's "pivot" helped create the climate of fear that Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) exploited to win the 2012 election and proceed with his plans to remilitarise Japan. In his *Yomiuri Shimbun* interview, Obama explicitly commended Abe "for his efforts to strengthen Japan's defence forces and to deepen the coordination between our militaries, including by reviewing existing limits on the exercise of collective self defence. We believe it is in the interest of both our countries for Japanese Self Defence Forces to do more within the framework of our alliance."

Under article 9 of the postwar constitution—drawn up by US occupying forces—Japan explicitly renounced "war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes." Post-war governments "reinterpreted" the clause to allow for the formation of so-called self defence forces. Under the banner of permitting "collective self-defence," Abe is now moving to end the restraints on the Japanese military engaging in wars of aggression alongside the US, not only in Asia, but other parts of the world. Japan's involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq was in a limited supportive role.

While not immediately on the agenda, the Abe government has also mooted a constitutional interpretation to allow for "pre-emptive self-defence"—in other words, Japanese acts of aggression in response to a threat, real or concocted. While currently aligned with the US in its "pivot" against China, Abe is seeking to rearm in order to prosecute the economic and strategic interests of Japanese imperialism, whether they coincide with those of the US or not.

Already there are frictions emerging in relations between the US and Japan. While not overtly critical, the Abe government was displeased that the US did not adopt a tougher stance towards China last year over its Air Defence Identification Zone. Unlike Japan, the US acknowledged that China had the right to declare such a zone. While US military aircraft would not abide by China's new rules, Washington directed American civilian aircraft to do so.

Japan and the US have also reached an impasse in negotiations over the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)—an all-encompassing agreement involving 12 nations, through which the Obama administration is

seeking to set the rules for trade and investment throughout the region. Agreement between the US and Japan is central to establishing such a deal, but the two countries remain locked in disagreement over tariffs on agriculture and vehicles.

Obama, who had hoped to announce an agreement during his visit, emphasised the TPP's importance for removing "tariffs, barriers and practices throughout the region that limit trade and investment and which prevent our economies from reaching their full potential." As the Abe government is only too well aware, Obama is seeking the removal of trade and investment barriers as a means of boosting the profits of American corporations at the expense of their rivals. An end to Japan's agricultural tariffs would have a devastating impact in rural areas that form a significant political base for the ruling LDP.

Obama's visit will undoubtedly be focused on the joint military build-up of the US and Japan against China. But the underlying differences underscore the divergent economic and strategic interests of the US and Japan, which during the second world war fought a bloody war in the Pacific for the domination of Asia. These differences could in the future fuel a new confrontation between the region's two major imperialist powers.



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