

Japan ramps up pressure on China at G7 summit

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, undoubtedly backed by Washington, used the two-day G7 summit in Germany, which ended on Monday, to elevate sharpening disputes with China in the East China and South China Seas to the international stage.

The discussion at the G7 gathering followed an escalating campaign by Washington against China's land reclamation in the South China Sea and demands by US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter last month at the regional Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore for an immediate and lasting halt to such activities.

Japan has no territorial claims in the South China Sea, but is engaged in a tense stand-off with China over disputed islets, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, in the East China Sea.

Like the US, the Abe government has been forging closer diplomatic and strategic ties with South East Asian countries. Last week, Philippine President Benigno Aquino III met with Abe in Tokyo and announced that talks could begin on an agreement providing Japanese armed forces access to the Philippines.

Last month the US deliberately inflamed tensions by flying a military reconnaissance aircraft, with a CNN news crew abroad, close to Chinese-administered atolls in the South China Sea. The Pentagon is drawing up plans for such "freedom of navigation" operations to provocatively breach the 12-mile territorial limit around China's islets and reefs.

The final G7 communiqué released yesterday, as well as taking a tough stance against Russia, "strongly oppose[d] the use of intimidation, coercion or force, as well as any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo, such as large-scale land reclamation." It called for "the free and unimpeded lawful use of the world's oceans."

This wording parallels the denunciations by the US and Japan of China, painting Beijing's actions in the South China Sea as a threat to "freedom of navigation" by seeking control of the key strategic waters. In reality, Washington and its allies have beefed up their military presence in the region in line with the Pentagon's war plans, which include the ability of US forces to impose an economic blockade on China.

While the communiqué left little doubt that it was targeted at Beijing, it did not explicitly refer to China or to the East China and South China Seas. Such omissions are never accidental and were almost certainly a concession to the European powers that are concerned about the potential impact of a stronger statement on their economic relations with China.

An official commentary published yesterday by China's state-owned Xinhua news agency hit back at Abe, predicting that his "anti-China attempt" at the G7 summit was "futile." It pointed out that "some G7 members, like Germany and France, have important bilateral relations with China, which makes it impossible for them to get embroiled in Abe's trick."

After noting that the European members of the G7 applied for membership of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the commentary pointedly warned: "It is advisable that the other members of the [G7] bloc should guard against Tokyo's selfish moves so as not to allow Japan to kidnap their own interests."

In March, Britain broke ranks with the US and publicly announced its intention to join the AIIB, prompting other European countries, including G7 members Germany, France and Italy, to follow suit. Washington reacted bitterly to a move that threatens to undermine post-war institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund over which it

wields considerable control.

Japan also sided with the US, announcing the establishment of its own \$110 billion investment fund for Asian infrastructure projects last month as the AIIB held a three-day meeting of founding members. At the G7 meeting, Abe touted Japan's "high quality" infrastructure investment initiative and raised questions about the AIIB's "transparency" and "governance."

Beijing certainly would have preferred that the G7 communiqué made no reference to the South China Sea, either directly or indirectly. The willingness of the European powers to agree its inclusion, underlines the interconnection between the maritime disputes in Asia and the other major issue that dominated the G7 summit—the mounting US-led confrontation with Russia over Ukraine.

In his bilateral talks with top European leaders, Abe pressed for their support over the South China Sea and in return indicated his backing for a tough stand against Russia. The common factor is the United States. In league with its allies in Europe and Asia, Washington is recklessly pursuing confrontations with both Russia and China, with the ultimate objective of securing its domination over the entire Eurasian landmass.

Increasingly, Russia and China are being driven together. Asked at a press conference yesterday about the G7 sanctions on Russia, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei indicated Beijing's opposition, declaring: "China has repeatedly reiterated its established position that it rejects constant threats and sanctions."

Even as the G7 summit was underway, tensions continued to mount in the South China Sea. Malaysia, which unlike claimants such as the Philippines and Vietnam has previously avoided any public rows with China, yesterday announced that it would protest against the alleged intrusion of a Chinese coast guard vessel within what it regards as its exclusive economic zone.

In comments to the *Wall Street Journal*, National Security Minister Shahidan Kassim said the area in question did not involve "overlapping claims." He declared: "In this case, we're taking diplomatic action," saying that Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak would raise the issue directly with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

This more assertive Malaysia stance is in line with

US efforts to press all claimants in the South China Sea to confront Beijing. In April last year, Obama became the first US president to visit Malaysia since 1966 and elevated the relationship between the two countries to a "comprehensive partnership," including in areas of military cooperation.



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