

# Japan heightens its profile in the South China Sea

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22 January 2016

In an interview last Sunday with the *Financial Times* and *Nikkei Weekly*, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe intervened directly into the territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and its neighbours.

Asked about China's land reclamation activities, Abe declared Japan had "very strong concerns over China's unilateral attempt to change the status quo in the South China Sea ... Such a unilateral challenge against the international order cannot be tolerated, and the international community should raise its voice against this."

Unlike the East China Sea, where Japan and China are in dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, Japan has no territorial claims in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, Japan, like the United States, is both fuelling and exploiting the tensions in the disputed waters to advance its own economic and strategic interests in South East Asia.

Abe's comments provoked a sharp response from Beijing. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei told reporters that China had every right to build on territory in the Spratly Islands. After referring to the Japanese takeover of the islands during World War II, Hong declared Japan should "make more efforts to increase mutual trust ... instead of sowing discord" and warned that China was on "high alert" against any Japanese interference.

Abe's remarks are part of the mounting campaign by the US and its allies against China's land reclamation in the South China Sea. Last October, the Pentagon directly challenged China's maritime claims by sailing the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit around a Chinese-administered islet.

The Japanese government has ruled out, for the time being, conducting a similar "freedom of navigation"

operation—a move that would antagonise China and could raise concerns among South East Asian nations that were occupied by Japan during World War II.

On January 10, however, the Japanese Defence Ministry announced that it would re-route military aircraft returning from anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa. Instead of refuelling in their traditional stops like Singapore and Thailand, the two P-3 Orion maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircraft would land in places such as Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. The aircraft carry highly sophisticated equipment designed to monitor and track vessels, including submarines.

The first planned stopover will be at Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay, which is directly adjacent to the South China Sea. Vietnam, together with the Philippines and Malaysia, is in dispute with China over islets and reefs in the South China Sea. Japan has concluded a series of deals with Vietnam to enhance its maritime security, including the provision of coast guard vessels, and the two governments have agreed to hold their first-ever joint naval exercise in the near future.

Tokyo is likewise establishing close relations with Manila. Abe and Philippine President Benigno Aquino signed a strategic partnership last June and agreed to hold talks on the sale of Japanese military hardware to the Philippines, including radar technology and Orion P-3 aircraft. Japan has already agreed to supply 10 patrol vessels to boost the Philippine Coast Guard.

While the refuelling stopovers are low key, they are clearly part of a broader plan to establish a more permanent Japanese presence in South East Asia. The US think tank Stratfor commented: "Japan wants to play a more active military role in the Pacific—indeed, it may have no other choice—but to do this Tokyo needs countries willing to host its forces. It is safe to say that

Japan is not going to the trouble of altering its flight plans just so its aircraft will have a small number of additional refuelling options over the next decade. Starting with these modest visits, Tokyo hopes to lay the foundation for a greater, more sustainable presence.”

Since coming to power in 2012, Abe has sought to reorganise and expand the Japanese military and free it from legal and constitutional constraints. Last month the cabinet foreshadowed another increase in military spending—the fourth in a row—for the year beginning April 2016, to 5.05 trillion yen or \$US41.8 billion. Major purchases include an Aegis-equipped anti-ballistic missile ship, six F-35A fighter aircraft and 17 SH-60K patrol helicopters.

The budget will also fund the reorientation of the Japanese military to “island defence” in the south of the country, directly adjacent to China. Japan is boosting its military presence on some of its southern islands and is establishing an amphibious force, along the lines of the US Marines.

Last week, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga intensified the pressure on China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. He announced that the Japanese navy or Maritime Self-Defence Forces would engage in a “maritime policing operation” when a foreign warship entered Japan’s territorial waters and was not practicing “innocent passage.” The declaration is particularly targeted against China, which is not going to claim “innocent passage” through waters it regards as its own.

While a “policing operation” is not the same as a “defence operation” and limits the use of weapons, the Japanese navy’s involvement in activities directed against Chinese naval vessels heightens the danger of a confrontation. Any attempt by Japanese warships to ward off their Chinese counterparts with “warning shots” would risk escalation.

At present, the Japanese government is adopting a more aggressive stance toward China, both in the East China and South China Seas, within the framework of the US “pivot to Asia.” In remilitarising, however, Abe is preparing to prosecute Japan’s economic and strategic interests. In his interview last week with the *Nikkei Weekly*, he pointedly dismissed the notion of a G-2—that is, the US and China—managing Asia as “an outdated way of thinking”. In other words, Japanese

imperialism has no intention of being eclipsed by other powers, whoever they be.



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