

Japan to conduct South China Sea patrols with US

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Japanese Defence Minister Tomomi Inada declared last week that the country's military would step up its activity in the South China Sea—comments that have already provoked criticism from the state-owned media in China amid rising tensions over the disputed waters.

Speaking in Washington at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Inada said: "Japan on its part will increase its engagement in the South China Sea through, for example, Maritime Self-Defence Force [Japan's navy] joint training exercises with the US navy, bilateral and multi-lateral exercises with regional navies, as well as providing capacity building assistance for coast nations."

Inada specifically targeted China, stating: "Coercive attempts to change the facts on the ground and upend the prevailing norms do not serve anybody's interest. Unfortunately, what China has been doing recently in the East China Sea and South China Sea is just that, and it is raising serious concern in the Asia-Pacific and beyond."

Inada's remarks came before a meeting with US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter at which they agreed the two countries would work together to counter "grave threats to the national security of both Japan and the United States." The two specifically upheld the ruling in July of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favour of a US-backed Philippine challenge to China's maritime claims in the South China Sea.

While joint naval patrols and exercises are set to go ahead, Japan has ruled out, to date, participating in the Pentagon's so-called freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)—that is, provocative naval intrusions within the 12-nautical mile territorial limits surrounding Chinese-controlled islets. The US has conducted three such operations over the past year, most recently in

May.

Inada, who became defence minister in early August, is well known for her right-wing militarist views and is closely aligned with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. She has been a frequent visitor to the Yasukuni Shrine that is notorious as a symbol of Japanese militarism and she has a long history of defending the crimes of the Japanese army during the 1930s and 1940s.

In his meeting with Inada, Carter reaffirmed that the US "nuclear umbrella" would continue to cover Japan. He also restated that the US would come to Japan's aid in the event of war with China over the disputed islets in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. Since taking office in 2012, the Abe government has emphatically ruled out negotiations with China over the issue, leading to a further escalation of tensions between the two countries.

An editorial on Saturday in China's state-owned *Global Times* declared that "China should resolutely begin military deployment on its expanded Nansha [Spratly] Islands to balance the situation." The hawkish newspaper condemned the joint US-Japanese patrols as "the 'gunboat policy' of the 21st century against China" and suggested that, if such operations intensified, China could declare an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the area.

The *Japan Times* revealed last month that the Chinese ambassador warned a high-level Japanese official in June that Japan would "cross a red line" if it joined a "freedom of navigation" operation with the US in Chinese-claimed waters. He reportedly said China "will not concede on sovereignty issues and is not afraid of military provocations."

While Washington and Tokyo both blame "Chinese expansionism" for the tense situation in the South China Sea, the US bears primary responsibility for

transforming low-key regional disputes into a dangerous international flashpoint. After US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in 2010 that the US had a “national interest” in the sea, Washington has encouraged South East Asian countries to aggressively pursue their own claims against China, greatly heightening tensions.

Japan has no territorial claims in the South China Sea but, like the US, is exploiting the disputes to further its own interests in South East Asia. Since becoming prime minister, Abe has travelled extensively in South East Asia, visiting all members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Earlier this month, Abe met with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and struck a deal to provide the Philippines with two large patrol vessels and loan the use of five TC-90 surveillance planes. The two 90 metre-class ships are similar to the largest vessels in Japan’s own coast guard. The Abe government previously agreed to provide the Philippines with 10 smaller vessels, the first of which was delivered in August.

India, which has a strategic partnership with the US, is also strengthening its presence in South East Asia. It recently reached a \$100 million agreement to supply fast patrol vessels to Vietnam. Both Vietnam and the Philippines are engaged in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

China is currently holding joint naval exercises in the South China Sea with Russia. Announcing their start last week, the Chinese defence ministry said that “Joint Sea-2016” war games would involve warships, submarines, ship-borne helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, along with marines and amphibious armoured vehicles. The drills would include rescue and anti-submarine exercises, as well as the simulated seizure of an island.

During a visit to Beijing last month, the commander of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Scott Swift, criticised the joint Chinese-Russian drills, saying: “There are other places those exercises could have been conducted.” He warned that such actions “are not increasing stability within the region.”

While condemning “aggressive” Chinese moves, the Pentagon has been steadily ramping up the US military presence in the Pacific as part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” directed against

China. By 2020, 60 percent of US naval and air assets are due to be stationed in the Asia Pacific. The buildup has included increased patrols and exercises by the American navy either in or near the South China Sea, which the US regards as strategically crucial to its plans for war against China.



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