Japan raising tensions with Beijing in the East China Sea

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As the United States accelerates its war drive against China, the government of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is similarly ramping up its own confrontation against Beijing. On July 22, Tokyo denounced Beijing for sending vessels near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea for 100 straight days, longer than any time in the past. The islands claimed by China, but administered and controlled by Japan are located in strategic sea lanes. Chinese ships actually entered waters claimed by Japan for a total of eleven days.

Tokyo also announced on July 18 that it would immediately scramble fighter jets to respond to any launch of Chinese planes from the latter's airbase in Fujian Province. Previously, Japan only scrambled fighters when Chinese planes approached airspace claimed by Tokyo. However, Chinese war planes operating in the region had previously flown out of Zhejiang Province, a greater distance from the disputed islands. From Fujian to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, it is a 20 minute flight, while it takes approximately 25 minutes for Japan's Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) planes to reach the islands from their base in Naha, Okinawa.

Japan will also now send four fighter jets for every Chinese fighter rather than two. In addition, ASDF planes are flying daily patrols over the East China Sea. All of this raises the risk of a military encounter occurring that could escalate into a larger conflict.

Tokyo is attempting to portray its measures as defensive. "The repeated activities are extremely serious. Japan Coast Guard patrol ships have issued warnings and we have protested to the Chinese side through diplomatic channels over and over again," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga stated at a news conference last week. Tokyo also claimed that in the 2018 fiscal year, Japan scrambled jets against Chinese military planes 638 times and 675 times over the same period ending this past March.

In another sign of rising tensions, Defense Minister Taro Kono on June 23 took the rare step of announcing the nationality of a Chinese submarine supposedly detected near waters off Japan's Amami-Oshima Island, which is home to missile batteries. The submarine did not enter Japanese waters and Kono described it as moving "in the direction of China."

In deciding to announce the submarine's nationality, Kono stated, "In addition to conditions in the East and South China seas, we've seen various events (regarding China), including its rapid military budget increase, rising tensions with India and pressure on Hong Kong's 'one country, two systems,' so we need to infer clearly the intention of the Chinese Communist Party amid these situations."

Japan's annual defense white paper released on July 14 accused China of "continuing to attempt to alter the status quo in the East China Sea and the South China Sea" and for the first time describing China's actions as "relentless."

An anonymous expert on China in the Japanese government told the *South China Morning Post*, "It is easy to see a strong determination on the part of the Chinese to change the status quo surrounding the Senkaku islands. This is a long-term strategy, but the present situation is an opportunity for Beijing because the United States, Japan and other countries in the region are focused on dealing with the coronavirus pandemic."

The US and Japan, however, bear primary responsibility for upending the status quo in the East China Sea. Under US President Obama, longstanding, but minor territorial disputes between China and

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various other countries in the region were inflamed and turned into pressure points on Beijing.

In 2012, while the Democratic Party of Japan was in office, Tokyo "nationalized" the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by purchasing them from their private owner, which sharply raised tensions with Beijing.

Furthermore, Tokyo has militarized the region in the past five years, dispatching a radar station to Yonaguni Island and constructing bases with missile batteries on Ishigaki, Miyako, and Amami-Oshima, all of which surround the Senkakus/Diaoyus.

The statements from Tokyo and Washington are dripping with hypocrisy. China is regularly denounced for supposedly attempting to prevent "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, with the US conducting operations in waters claimed by China since 2015 under the Obama administration. When Chinese vessels or aircraft sail near Japanese waters, however, it is deemed a threat.

Last week, warships from the US, Japan, Australia, and India (the Quad—Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) held co-ordinated naval war games in the region. The US conducted exercises in the Philippine Sea with Japan and Australia, which neighbors the South China Sea, while also holding joint exercises with India near the Malacca Strait, a key sea lane and "choke point" for shipping.

Patrick Cronin, the Asia-Pacific security chair at the Hudson Institute, stated: "The international naval exercises underway in the Indo-Pacific are just the latest demonstration of India, Australia, and Japan shedding prior inhibitions about multilateral military maneuvers." In other words, the three countries are more and more falling into line with the US war drive in the region against China.

Washington has also perpetuated the lie that Beijing is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic by releasing the virus from a Wuhan laboratory; provocatively ordered the closure of China's Houston consulate with unproven claims of Chinese spying; backed India in its recent border dispute with China; and drawn closer to Taiwan, threatening to overturn the "One China" policy that formally recognizes the island as a part of China.

The danger of conflict breaking out is growing. Last week, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made the case for war with China, stating "we can never go back to the status quo." The "old paradigm of blind engagement with China" had to be replaced with a new strategy in which the "free world" ends China's "new tyranny," he declared.

Washington and Tokyo mix their condemnations of Beijing with professions of concern for regions like Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Their aim has nothing to do with human rights, but is to isolate Beijing and prepare for war as a means of subordinating and undermining a potential rival and deflecting from the immense social and economic crises they face at home.

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