Tokyo gives coast guard authorization to fire on foreign vessels

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In a decision that will only further escalate tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, members of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) announced Thursday that the government had confirmed a "reinterpretation" of a law to allow Japan's coast guard to fire upon foreign vessels attempting to land on disputed islands, namely the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The move is aimed at China as Tokyo, Washington, and their allies in the region increase their efforts to militarily and economically subordinate Beijing to their interests.

The meeting between government officials and the LDP members was held by the party's National Defense Division. Previously, Japan's coast guard was authorized to fire on foreign vessels only in self-defense, as attacking another country's ships is in violation of Article 9 of the constitution, which explicitly bars Japan from waging war or using other forms of military aggression. This change significantly increases the chances of an armed clash with China over the disputed territories in the East China Sea.

Tokyo's immediate justification for the change is China's own new law allowing its coast guard to use their weaponry against vessels in territories it claims. Beijing's legislation took effect on February 1, but was drawn up towards the end of 2020, after four years of increasingly belligerent provocations by the Trump administration in Washington.

Trump, backed by the Democrats and Republicans, repeatedly antagonized China by calling into question the status of Taiwan, which Beijing considers a renegade province. The US supplied Taipei with large amounts of weaponry and increased official state visits to the island. Beijing has stated that any recognition of or attempt by Taipei to declare independence would trigger a Chinese military response.

Japan claims that last year Chinese ships sailed into the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands approximately twice per month and with the passage of the Beijing's law, twice per week. Tokyo also claimed that Beijing sent more than 1,100 ships over the course of 333 days, both record highs, in 2020 into the so-called contiguous zone near the islands.

Parroting Washington's line, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said on Thursday, "I firmly believe that it is a free and open order based on the rule of law, not force or coercion, that will bring peace and prosperity to the region and the world."

Tokyo and Washington have both deliberately inflamed what were once minor regional territorial disputes in order to put pressure on China. This included Japan's "nationalization" of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012.

The Biden administration in the US is deepening its confrontational approach to China. During a press conference last Tuesday, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby stated, "We hold with the international community about the Senkakus and the sovereignty of the Senkakus, and we support Japan obviously in that sovereignty." This is a shift from Washington's previous public position to not take a side in the territorial dispute.

When Biden took office in January, his administration quickly assured Tokyo that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands fell under the US-Japan security treaty, meaning Washington would support Japan in a military clash with China over the uninhabited islands. This position was first put forward in 2014 under the Obama administration, in which Biden served as vice president.

There is also deepening military cooperation between Tokyo and Washington. Last year Japan increased the number of Self-Defense Forces' (SDF) missions

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providing protection to US ships on military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region to 25—up from 14 in 2019. This included spy missions during which US naval vessels collected intelligence on ballistic missiles and other military activities of countries that almost certainly included China. Tokyo did not disclose where the operations took place just that they "contributed to the defense of Japan."

Japan's 2014 constitutional "reinterpretation" under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and related military legislation passed the following year have allowed Japan to engage in so-called "collective self-defense," or to conduct military operations overseas in the aid of an ally, primarily the US. Were the US to stage a provocation against China, for example, during one of these joint missions, Japan's SDF would be given the green light to join the attack.

Such US provocations against China include so-called "freedom of navigation" operations in and around Chinese controlled islands, where the US sends naval ships into these waters claimed by Beijing. At the same time, however, Washington and Tokyo both denounce China for sailing in or flying over international waters near Japanese controlled islands, or those with ties like Taiwan.

Tokyo hopes to use claims of "Chinese aggression" against Taiwan to also further its own imperialist interests. Masahisa Sato, who leads the LDP's Foreign Affairs Division, announced in early February the creation of a "Taiwan project team" to explore how to deepen relations with Taipei. Following in Washington's footsteps, LDP lawmakers called for a law similar to Washington's Taiwan Relations Act. Under the 1979 act, Washington does not officially recognize Taiwan, but continues to provide the island with military support.

Since 1979, the US has given de facto support to the "one China" policy, which states that Beijing is the legitimate government and that Taiwan is a part of China. However, Washington stated in August that it was making significant changes to its Taiwan policy and the meaning of "one China." A similar law in Tokyo would almost certainly further challenge Beijing's claims to Taiwan—a former Japanese colony.

Sato stated that Tokyo would consider increased diplomatic contact between lawmakers from Japan and Taiwan. LDP members have suggested "2+2" dialogues between the Japanese foreign and defense ministers with their counterparts in Taipei, undoubtedly encouraged to do so by Washington's own push to increase official diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Sato also stated, "We want to bolster our diplomatic prowess through a two-pronged approach, using our human rights and Taiwan project teams." Like Washington and imperialist countries, Tokyo is seeking to exploit unproven claims of "genocide" in China's Xinjiang region as well as Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong, to justify ramping up military tensions against China.

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