

Confrontation between China and Japan. Naval Deployments in East China Sea

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Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, October 24, 2012

Relations between Japan and China have continued to fester after the Japanese government announced last month that it had “nationalised” the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands by buying them from their private Japanese owner.

In a show of force, China staged a naval exercise in the East China Sea last Friday involving 11 vessels from its naval fleet and civilian maritime agencies. According to the Chinese state media, the exercise was to “simulate a situation where foreign law enforcement vessels obstruct and interfere with our maritime surveillance and fisheries administration agencies.”

Between October 1 and October 10, China sent maritime surveillance vessels into waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, raising the danger of clashes with the Japanese coast guard which patrols the area. China insists that the islands were “stolen” by Japan at the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese war in 1895.

While the US and Western media highlighted the Chinese maritime drills, Japan held a major naval exercise on Sunday to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the country’s post-war navy. The operation involved some 40 vessels, including hi-tech destroyers, new conventional submarines and hovercraft designed for amphibious landings. Warships from the US, Australia and Singapore also took part.

Japan and the US have called off a provocative joint exercise scheduled for next month that was to practice the “recapture” of a remote island in Japan’s southern island chain where the Senkaku/Diaoyu are located. While concerns about China’s reaction were a possible factor, the ongoing widespread opposition to the US military presence on Okinawa is likely to have provoked the decision. Public outrage flared again last week on the southern Japanese island after reports of an alleged rape of a Japanese woman by two American sailors.

US and Japanese military forces have already held joint exercises on Guam and other US-controlled islands last month to train for amphibious landings and island defence—drills that were obviously related to the dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

A group of former top US national security officials from both Republican and Democratic administrations are visiting Japan and China this week in a bid to ease tensions between the two countries. In comments to the *New York Times*, James Steinberg, an ex-Obama administration official, warned of the danger of “an inadvertent escalation of tensions and even confrontation” and raised the need “to get back to relative stability.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton backed the trip, giving it a semi-official status. However, the Obama administration is directly responsible for stoking tensions between Japan and China as part of its broader strategy of confronting China throughout Asia. While proclaiming its neutrality in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, the White House has repeatedly declared that the US would side with Japan if conflict broke out with China over the islands.

Tensions first flared up in September 2010 after the Japanese authorities arrested a Chinese trawler captain for allegedly colliding with a Japanese coastguard vessel. Now amid the worsening global economic crisis, both governments have seized on the issue to whip up nationalist sentiment at home to divert rising social tensions.

The dispute has a dangerous logic of its own, leading to jingoist protests and reactionary nationalist posturing by politicians in the two countries. Last week Japan's opposition leader Shinzo Abe made a provocative visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, which is widely regarded as a symbol of Japanese militarism. Two cabinet ministers—Yuichiro Hata and Mikio Shimoji—followed suit last Thursday, triggering a protest by China's foreign ministry.

Speaking at Nagoya University on Saturday, Japan's ambassador to China, Uichiro Niwa, described the current standoff between the two countries as the worst since relations were normalised in 1972. He warned that if the dispute were not settled, "the efforts by many Japanese prime ministers [to improve relations with China] over the past four decades could come to naught." Niwa was removed from his post for being too sympathetic to China, but has yet to be replaced.

Niwa's views reflect fears in the Japanese corporate elite over the economic damage being done as a result of the dispute. The latest Japanese trade figures published on Monday revealed a sharp downturn in exports to China, in part as a result of a boycott of Japanese products by Chinese consumers.

Shipments to China fell by 14.1 percent in September compared to a year earlier, according to preliminary finance ministry data, following a 9.9 percent drop in August. Exports of Japanese cars and motorcycles to China plunged by 45 percent and 31 percent respectively. Exports of electrical goods and photographic supplies also experienced double-digit falls.

Significantly, however, the largest factor in the overall decline was a drop in exports of industrial machinery by 29.1 percent. Falling purchases of capital goods are related to the continuing slowdown of the Chinese economy, as well as a turn by Japanese companies to manufacture goods elsewhere. A recent Reuters Corporate Survey found that almost a quarter of Japanese firms were rethinking their investment in China, with some considering moving production to other Asian countries.

The rift between the world's second and third largest economies has provoked concerns in global financial circles about the impact on the world economy of further slowing in China and a possible recession in Japan. IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde recently urged the two countries to "harmoniously and expeditiously" resolve their differences.

While publically calling for an easing of tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, the Obama administration continues its aggressive moves in the Asia-Pacific region to undercut the diplomatic and strategic position of China. This week, in a show of support for the Philippines and Vietnam, the US navy dispatched the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, and its associated battle fleet to the South China Sea. The visit will

only further inflame maritime disputes between China and the two South East Asian nations over these strategic waters.

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