

US-China Standoff: The South China Sea's Simmering Crisis

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The standoff between China and the US in the South China Sea has intensified in recent months largely due to tit-for-tat maneuvering by both countries.

Washington has vehemently criticized China's land reclamation in this strategic body of water.

It is also concerned about the implications of US primacy challenged in the maritime domain and the perceived undermining of America's credibility among its regional allies.

For its part, Beijing accused the US of "militarizing" the South China Sea by deploying more military assets and conducting joint drills with regional allies in a rampant manner.

Indeed, a form of strategic competition between China and the US has increasingly come to define the core of the South China Sea disputes.

Enter a new player on the scene.

In late July, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signaled that Japan could conduct minesweeping operations in the South China Sea. It indicated a desire of the Abe administration to push forward with its ambitious national security strategy in virtue of the South China Sea issue.



“For a long time, the U.S. military has been conducting close-in surveillance of China and the Chinese military has been making such necessary, legal and professional response — why did this story suddenly pop up in the past weeks? Has the South China Sea shrunk?” Senior Col. Yang Yujun of China’s PLA said on 26 May 2015 [Xinhua]

Tokyo possesses advanced naval and air military power as well as amphibious warfare capabilities. With the recent passage of Abe’s security legislation in the Diet and the ongoing transformation of the US-Japan alliance, Japan’s military revival would be nothing less than a nightmare for China.

Japan has consequently become more active on the South China Sea issue. Jeff Smith, director of Asian Security Programs at the American Foreign Policy Council, says Tokyo’s moves constitute “very bold and very significant changes to a Japanese foreign policy that appears to be going all-in on a hedging strategy toward China”.

Tokyo engages ‘allies’

In addition to possible minesweeping operations in the disputed waters, Tokyo is mulling the transfer of defense equipment and sophisticated weaponry to the Philippines. A consensus on bolstering more substantive military cooperation was hammered out by Filipino President Benigno Aquino III and Abe in June 2015.

In the meantime, the first joint maritime drills were held by Japanese and Filipino troops near a disputed shoal in the South China Sea, with P-3C surveillance aircrafts dispatched by Japan’s Maritime Self-Defense Force.

Such drills, which aim to support Manila and flex Japan’s maritime muscles, are very likely to be institutionalized. Furthermore, both sides are negotiating an agreement that could enable Japan to have access to Filipino military bases.

However, it is even more disconcerting that Japanese and American military forces could

carry out joint patrols regularly in disputed South China Sea waters.

Despite the political, legal and fiscal hurdles for Tokyo, the Abe administration would like to expand collective self-defense to this area for several reasons.

First, it helps with steady implementation of the renewed US-Japan defense cooperation guidelines issued in April 2015, which allow for greater Japanese autonomy in security affairs and present China as the main adversary.

Second, closer Japan-US cooperation on the South China Sea issue may serve to strengthen Tokyo's ties with ASEAN member states. During the Shangri-la Dialogue held in Singapore this May, US Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced the "Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative", which would spend \$425 million in funding maritime security capacity-building of regional countries.

Tokyo is expected to be Washington's prime partner in this [endeavor](#).

Third, by engaging the South China Sea issue, Japan can enhance its counterbalancing against China in the East China Sea. Due to the absence of an effective crisis management mechanism between Beijing and Tokyo, the possibility of an armed clash over the [Diaoyu](#) Islands (known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan) cannot be ruled out.

By being part of US deterrence acts vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea, Japan expects Washington's firm commitment in the defense of offshore islands in the East China Sea.

Every sea has its thorn?

Therefore, the South China Sea issue is gradually becoming a thorny problem that threatens the relationship among Beijing, Washington and Tokyo.

Indeed, the US is a vital player that may [define the trajectory](#) of this dangerous game among big powers. As for the US, what role it can play over the South China Sea issue is closely related to its primacy in the Asia-Pacific region.

The alliance system is the foundation of US primacy, and the space for maneuver and dominance over global commons is what Washington really cares about.

The South China Sea issue is nothing but leverage to safeguard US regional primacy. Washington has been increasingly linking its credibility to the confrontation against China in the area, which is definitely not a wise move, given the complexity of the South China Sea issue and Washington's lack of control over the claimant states.

Perhaps more worryingly, maritime Asia has long been a place where the US could dominate, but now the space has to accommodate more aspiring players. The emerging military powers in the region, including Japan, have the potential to enormously change the strategic landscape of maritime Asia.

However, the South China Sea is [not a good playfield](#) for practicing power politics. The US-China wrestling along with security balancing moves taken by the middle and small powers in the region cast their shadow over this major shipping route for international trade.

China has never claimed sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, and the freedom of

navigation of commercial vessels has never been sabotaged.

Beijing is working hard to promote a “dual-track approach”. As it continues to attach importance to bilateral negotiations, it has also expressed its desire to [jointly maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea](#).

A more binding Code of Conduct that is under difficult negotiation will keep the behaviors of China and other claimants in check.



File photo of US President Barack Obama with Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe at the White House
[Image: White House]

Ultimately, Japan’s high-profile involvement in the South China Sea issue would inevitably draw fierce resistance from Beijing. In fact, Seoul is also deeply concerned with Japan’s security presence and activities in the region.

Sins of the past

On the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII in August 1995, then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama issued a statement, frankly acknowledging that “colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations” and expressed his feelings of “deep remorse” and “heartfelt apology.”

Japan’s Yasukuni Shrine enshrines notorious class-A war criminals convicted by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East.

They are worshiped by Abe’s cabinet and members of Japan’s National Diet while German Nazi war criminals convicted in the Nuremberg trials are disdained by people in every corner

of the world.

Such immoral “historical revisionism” of the Abe administration considerably reinforces Beijing’s apprehension toward Japan’s national security strategy.

China-Japan relations would be further strained by Japan’s assertive role over the South China Sea issue.

Japan has its legitimate security concerns on maritime disputes but it should come up with more pragmatic and cautious thinking to deal with it.

“Anything but China” is not a wise approach for Japan.

By the same token, China should continue with strategic restraint and without giving up its hope of reconciling with Japan.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the publisher’s editorial policy.

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