

US Flyover in China-Japan Island Row - Will the Real Provocateur Please Stand Up?

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Washington's move to fly nuclear-capable bombers over China's eastern air defense zone as a forceful endorsement of Japan's claims over disputed islands is both needlessly confrontational and totally counterproductive.

The territorial dispute over an uninhabited chain of islands in the East China Sea – referred to as the Senkaku Islands by Japan and the Diaoyu Islands by China – has been a highly contentious issue in Sino-Japanese relations for decades, and the issue has resurfaced in recent times as both sides assert their sovereignty over the area.

Mass protests were seen in China targeting Japan's embassy and Japanese products, shops and restaurants when Tokyo's far-right former Governor Shintaro Ishihara called on Japan to use public money to buy the islands from private Japanese owners in 2012.

The issue stirs passions in Chinese society because Tokyo's claims are seen as an extension of the brutal legacy of the Japanese occupation and a direct challenge to strong historical evidence that has legitimized Chinese sovereignty over the area since ancient times.

Moreover, the official stance of the government in Beijing is that Japan's invalid claims over the islands were facilitated and legitimized by a backdoor-deal between Tokyo and Washington that directly challenges international law and post-World War II international treaties.

The right-wing government of Shinzo Abe in Japan has abandoned the passive approach to the issue taken by previous governments and has played on nationalist sentiments by asserting Tokyo's firm position over the islands, which are internationally administered by Japan.

Chinese and Korean societies see Abe's administration as whitewashing Japan's history as a ruthless occupier and imperial power, and have lodged angry protests over his calls to revise Japan's 1995 war apology and amend Article 9 of its pacifist constitution, which forbids Japan from having a standing army. China's recent moves to introduce an air defense zone over the disputed islands have come as a response to months of aggressive Japanese military exercises in the area.

Beijing has denounced the presence of the Japanese navy in the region and Japan's numerous threats to fire warning shots against Chinese planes that violate Japan's air defense zone, which defiantly stretches only 130km from China's mainland and includes the disputed islands. In addition to claims by Taiwan, both China and Japan have strengthened their rights over the islands due to significant oil and mineral resources that have yet to be

exploited there.

Let history be the judge

Given legacies of both China and Japan as neighboring civilizations that morphed in modern nation-states, ancient history is sewn into conflicts like the Senkaku-Diaoyu dispute. The earliest historical records of the island being under China's maritime jurisdiction date back to 1403 in texts prepared by imperial envoys of the Ming Dynasty; during the Qing Dynasty, the islands were placed under the jurisdiction of the local government of Taiwan province. Maps published throughout the 1800s in France, Britain, and the United States all recognize the Diaoyu Islands as a territory of China.

Japan eventually defeated the Qing Dynasty in the late 1800s during its expansionary campaigns in the region and strong-armed China into signing the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki that officially ceded Taiwan and surrounding islands, including the Diaoyu, which the Japanese renamed to 'Senkaku Islands' in 1900. Following the defeat and surrender of Japan in World War II, international treaties such as the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation legally returned all territories stolen by Japan to pre-revolutionary China.

Beijing accuses US forces in post-war Japan of unilaterally and arbitrarily expanding its jurisdiction to include the Diaoyu Islands shortly after the Chinese revolution in the early 1950s, which were 'returned' to Japan in the 1970s in the Okinawa Reversion Agreement, a move condemned by China and the US-allied Taiwan authorities.

Japan has argued since the 1970s that the Diaoyu was not part of the affiliated islands that were ceded to Japan by the Qing Dynasty (despite strong evidence to the contrary), and that the islands were placed under the administration of the United States following World War II and 'returned' to Japan. The view from Beijing, and especially from within the Xi Jinping administration, is that this case constitutes an illegal occupation of Chinese territory that seriously violates the obligations Japan should undertake according to international law.

Tokyo's position on the issue really doesn't hold water considering that 19th-century Japanese government documents available for viewing in Japan's National Archives suggest that Japan clearly knew and recognized the Diaoyu Islands as Chinese territory.

Washington's B-52 diplomacy

Beijing's announcement of an air defense zone over the Diaoyu Islands would naturally be seen as controversial due to the dispute with Japan, and because Washington implicitly backs Tokyo's claims, the US administration has taken to framing the issue so as to portray China as the hostile actor and principal belligerent.

China has defended its air defense declaration as an extension of its entitlement to uphold its national sovereignty and territorial integrity; Beijing has also pointed out how the US and Japan have established their own zones decades ago, which extend to the frontline borders of other countries in some cases. Beijing's air defense declaration essentially asserts the right to identify, monitor and possibly take military action against any aircraft that enters the area, and despite the US backing Japan's right to uphold a similar zone, the White House declared China's moves "unnecessarily inflammatory."

Just days after the Chinese government issued its defense declaration, the US military deployed two unarmed (nuclear-capable) B-52 bombers from its airbase in Guam that embarked on a 1500-mile flight into the Chinese air defense umbrella before turning back. The symbolic but forceful display by Washington is essentially the equivalent of the Pentagon giving the middle finger to the Chinese government.

The maneuver was apparently part of a 'long-planned' exercise, but the timing and the message sent a clearly hostile and deeply arrogant message to Beijing. China claims that it monitored the US bombers in the zone and took no action, and as Beijing exercises restraint, Tokyo and Washington openly stoke tensions and practice hypocritical double standards.

The United States and Japan both operate vast unilateral air defense zones, and yet Washington has the cheek to childishly reject the legitimate defensive claims of others.

To quote Xinhua columnist Wu Liming's characterization of US-Japan policy, "Their logic is simple: they can do it while China cannot, which could be described with a Chinese saying, 'the magistrates are free to burn down houses while the common people are forbidden even to light lamps.'"

The message derived from Washington's actions perfectly illustrates the nature of the so-called 'Pivot to Asia', that even though America's political representatives cannot be relied on to fulfill their long-planned appointments to visit the region, the Pentagon can always be relied on to deliver reminders that the US seeks hegemony in Asia.

The truth is that China and Japan have too much to lose as the second- and third-largest economies in the world to allow this issue to slide into a military confrontation, and cooler heads will likely prevent the latter scenario.

Given the contention around this dispute and the destabilizing effects it could have on the global economy if the situation were to deteriorate into a military conflict, it would be fundamental for the US to instead remain neutral and promote a peaceful compromise and settlement to this issue.

Beijing and Tokyo should both take their claims to the UN to settle this issue indefinitely if a mutual compromise to jointly develop the disputed region cannot be agreed upon.

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