

Washington-Tokyo Axis: U.S. Supports Japan, Confronts China And Russia Over Island Disputes

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In a six-day span the U.S. State Department has bluntly affirmed unequivocal backing for Japanese territorial claims against both Russia and China, even invoking a defense treaty provision that could lead to direct military intervention and war with the world's most populous nation.

Beginning a 13-day, seven-nation tour of the Asia-Pacific region on October 27 in Hawaii, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam and met with Admiral Robert Willard, head of U.S. Pacific Command – the largest overseas regional military command in the world – and held a joint press conference with new Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara in Honolulu.

Clinton's comments on the occasion underlined Washington's increasingly assertive – and intrusive – role in East Asia and the Western Pacific Ocean. They included:

"This year, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our alliance, which was forged at the height of the Cold War. At the time, President Eisenhower described the indestructible partnership between our two countries, and time has proven him right. The world's geopolitical landscape has shifted many times since then, but the partnership between the United States and Japan has endured....This alliance is the cornerstone of American strategic engagement in the Asia Pacific..... I'm grateful that we are the two largest contributors to reconstruction in Afghanistan." [1]

Responding to a question from the press corps on an East China Sea island chain contested by Japan and China – the Senkaku Islands in the Japanese designation and the Diaoyu Islands in the Chinese – near which a Chinese trawler collided with two Japanese coast guard ships on September 7, almost leading to an international incident, Clinton added that for the government she represents "the Senkakus fall within the scope of Article 5 of the 1960 U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. This is part of the larger commitment that the United States has made to Japan's security. We consider the Japanese-U.S. alliance one of the most important alliance partnerships we have anywhere in the world and we are committed to our obligations to protect the Japanese." [2]



Clinton's raising Article 5 of the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan, which states that "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger," paralleled and followed by three months a similar attempt to intervene against China in the South China Sea.

On July 23 Clinton spoke at the 17th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in Hanoi, Vietnam, and alluding to disputes in the South China Sea between China and ASEAN member states Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei over the Spratly Islands and between China and Vietnam over the Paracel Islands, she maintained that "The United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea....We oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant." [3] Clinton had the temerity to evoke the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the U.S. has not ratified.



Her allusion to the prospect of force being used is - could only be - a reference to China in the current context. In an indisputable attempt to take up cudgels in alleged defense of the ten members of ASEAN - Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma) the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam - against what is being promoted by Washington as a common threat, China, Clinton delivered the opening salvo in what has since been an intensifying campaign to introduce the U.S. as not so much a mediator as a power broker and military guarantor in the Asia-Pacific region.

An outside player whose main “negotiation” tools are U.S. Pacific Command and the world’s largest expeditionary naval force, the U.S. Seventh Fleet, with 50–60 warships, 350 aircraft and as many as 60,000 sailors and marines attached to it at any given time.

In her comments in the Vietnamese capital on July 23 Clinton foreshadowed the renewed American emphasis on East Asia, in particular on isolating and confronting “outposts of tyranny” (her predecessor Condoleezza Rice’s term) Myanmar and North Korea and revivifying and expanding military alliances in the area. [4]

“The day before, I was in Seoul, my third visit to Korea as Secretary. Together, Secretary Gates and I have sent the strong message that 60 years after the outbreak of the Korean War the U.S.-Korea alliance is strong....I’ve just completed two days of intensive consultations with my ASEAN colleagues and with the other partners who have come here to pursue a common endeavor: strengthening security, prosperity, and opportunity across Asia....[T]he Obama Administration is committed to broad, deep, and sustained engagement in Asia.” [5]

The Pentagon demonstrated what America’s sustained engagement in Asia means starting two days after Clinton’s statements in Vietnam and every month since: With the Invincible Spirit military exercise in the Sea of Japan/East Sea starting on July 25. The first joint U.S.-Vietnamese military exercise – naval drills in the South China Sea – and the Ulchi Freedom Guardian military exercises in South Korea in August. Anti-submarine warfare maneuvers in the Yellow Sea near where China claims an exclusive economic zone in September. Confirmation late last month that naval exercises will be held in the near future in the Yellow Sea with the participation of the almost 100,000-ton nuclear-powered supercarrier USS George Washington, based in Yokosuka, Japan, which was deployed for the earlier Sea of Japan/East Sea and South China Sea exercises.

During the same period, from late July until the present, U.S. Pacific Command and Central Command led multinational military exercises in the two countries aside from North Korea that border both Russia and China – Kazakhstan (Steppe Eagle) and Mongolia (Khaan Quest 2010) [6] – and in Cambodia (Angkor Sentinel) and the Philippines (Amphibious Landing Exercise 2011). [7] The U.S. also conducted this year’s Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC 2010) naval warfare exercises, the world’s largest, off Hawaii from June 23 to July 30.

For all of Hillary Clinton’s talk of the use “soft power” to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives, Washington overwhelmingly depends on its (decidedly) hard power: Nuclear aircraft supercarrier strike groups, six regional navy fleets, advanced bombers and jet fighters, nuclear attack submarines and cruise missiles. When Clinton and other American officials pledge to support Japan in future conflicts with China – or Russia – they do not intend to limit themselves to the use of diplomatic niceties.

The U.S.’s top diplomat will end her current Asia-Pacific trip, which includes stopovers in Hawaii, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia, on November 8 and in the interim will have strengthened her country’s position in the Asia-Pacific region on the civilian side, with her foreign policy partner Defense Secretary Robert Gates supplementing her efforts on the military one. Though on October 27 it was Clinton and not Gates who assured Japan that in the event of a repetition of last month’s Chinese-Japanese clash over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands Washington would honor its military commitment to intervene.

That is how Japanese Foreign Minister Maehara understood her statement at the time when he responded by saying:

“There was a question about the Senkaku Islands and rare earth minerals [the shipment of which were stopped by China]. As I have been saying, Senkaku Islands, in terms of history and international law, are inherent territory of Japan and have – we have had (inaudible) control over the islands and will continue to do so. Today, Secretary Clinton repeated that the Senkaku Islands would fall within the scope of the application of Article 5 of the bilateral security treaty. That was very encouraging.” [8]

Clinton had made the same pledge, to abide by Article 5 of the two nations’ military assistance treaty, to Maehara on September 23, and on October 11 U.S. Defense Secretary Gates and Japanese Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa agree “that their countries will jointly respond in line with a bilateral security pact toward stability in areas in the East China Sea covering the Senkaku Islands that came into the spotlight in disputes between Japan and China....” [9]

At their recent Hawaiian press conference Clinton and Maehara also confirmed a common position against Iran and North Korea.

As with the disputes over the Spratly and Paracel island chains in late July, Clinton also attempted to intrude the U.S. as a third party in the China-Japan conflict over the eight Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Hanoi on October 30, insisting the U.S. was “more than willing to host a trilateral [meeting] where we would bring Japan and China and their foreign ministers together to discuss a range of issues.” [10]

Three days later Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ma Zhaoxu responded by stating: “I’d like to stress that this is only the thinking of the U.S. side....The Diaoyu Islands and their adjacent islets are an inalienable part of China’s territory and the territorial dispute over the islands is an issue between China and Japan.

“It is absolutely wrong for the United States to repeatedly claim the Diaoyu Islands fall within the scope of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. What the United States should do is to immediately correct its wrong position.” [11]

Next month Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) are to conduct “island-reclaiming drills” in the East China Sea in which “the U.S. military and the U.S. Navy’s 7th Fleet will provide support” as part of a “newly compiled defense program for the Nansei Islands.” The latter, also known as the Ryukyu Islands, form a 700-mile-long archipelago which includes Okinawa and at its southwest extreme gives way to the Senkaku Islands. In the words of a senior Japanese Ministry of Defense official, “It must be demonstrated to China...that the SDF and the U.S. military form a watertight defense array.” [12]

Antagonizing China with the threat of military intervention on behalf of Japan – or rather using Japan as the bait to provoke a military showdown with China – does not exhaust American plans in the Far East.

On November 1 President Dmitri Medvedev became the first Russian head of state to visit the Kuril Islands. The four islands were transferred from Japan to Russia after World War Two under terms of the 1945 Yalta agreement to which President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was

a party. Sixty-five years later there is still no peace treaty between Russia, as successor state to the Soviet Union, and Japan because of the dispute over the Kurils.

Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara immediately summoned the Russian ambassador to Japan to lodge a protest over Medvedev's trip, and after Russia returned the favor Japan recalled its own ambassador from Moscow.



Washington lost no time in entering the fray. Hillary Clinton's spokesman, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Philip Crowley, stated on November 1 that "We do back Japan regarding the Northern Territories," [13] employing the Japanese government's name for the islands.

In the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty the U.S., while not recognizing Soviet rights to the Kurils, did accede to Japan losing any rights to them as well as to Russia's Sakhalin island to their northwest. In fact the treaty, to which Washington was a signatory, explicitly states that "Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Kuril islands, and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it over which Japan acquired sovereignty as a consequence of the Treaty of Portsmouth of 5 September 1905," signed after the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. [14] Sakhalin is rich in oil, natural gas and coal. Japanese designs on the Kurils may not be limited to those islands but include the entire Sakhalin Oblast to which they belong.

The State Department now openly expresses its support for Japan's claims on Russian territory while it repeatedly confirms its willingness to honor a bilateral military agreement to back Japan in an armed conflict with China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

According to China's Global Times, "The Russia-Japan row over the islands coincides with a dispute between Japan and China over the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea following Japan's detention of a Chinese boat captain in September....[T]he strong message by Medvedev's visit to the island, to some extent, echoes China's firm stance on its dispute with Japan." [15]

U.S. backing for Japanese claims on the Kurils has now progressed from tacit to explicit commitment, part of a policy of World War Two revisionism also evident in Washington's actions in Eastern Europe from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans which aim at undoing the results of the Yalta and Potsdam conferences and the entire post-war system of international relations.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union and during Russia's debilitated state under the Boris Yeltsin presidency in the 1990s, the first moves were made to do to Russia what had been done to the Soviet Union: Fragment it. From the Kuril Islands to the North Caucasus, from

the Arctic to Kaliningrad and the Republic of Karelia, parts of post-Soviet Russia were coveted by neighboring states or otherwise targeted to be wrested from the country.

Japanese claims, though, have been even more brazen in recent years. In July of 2008 the Japanese government published new textbook guidelines directing teachers to instruct students that Japan has sovereignty over the Kuril Islands. A Russian commentary at the time remarked that in “maps published in...regions of the country even the whole territory of the Kuril Islands is marked as Japanese.

“Such kinds of territorial disputes had long been dubbed as ‘cartographic aggression.’

“For example, if Japan does not want to settle an old dispute with China over the Diaoytai Islands, also known as the Senkaku Islands in Japanese, it may mark the territory as Japanese.” [16]

In November of 2009 the Japanese government reiterated the accusation that “the Russian Federation is illegally occupying four northern islands.” [17]

The Russian Foreign Ministry responded by labelling as “unacceptable” a document issued by Tokyo identifying the alleged “illegal occupation by Russia” of the Kuril Islands, stating:

“We consider it necessary to stress that the Southern Kuril Islands are an inseparable part of the Russian Federation territory on legal grounds based on the WW2 results in accordance with the legally binding agreements and treaties between the ally states, as well as the UN Charter that was ratified by Japan.” [18]

Last month then-Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada spoke of the Kurils being “illegally occupied by Russia.”

When similar statements were made by Okada’s successor, Seiji Maehara, chairman of the international affairs committee in the Russian State Duma Konstantin Kosachev remarked:

“Such an inappropriate and tough statement by the Japanese foreign minister is regrettable.

“Like the parliament of that country did earlier, Tokyo is consistently toughening its stance, pointing out the debatable status of the Kuril islands. That may only drive the situation into a deadlock.” [19]

It is this intensified policy of Japanese recalcitrance and revisionism that Washington has now squarely endorsed. Although State Department spokesman Philip Crowley qualified his comments of November 1 by saying the Article 5 military component of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan would not be invoked as long as Japan did not administer the Kurils, the door was left open for the activation of the article should Japan succeed, peacefully or otherwise, in gaining possession of the islands and the transition be recognized by Washington.

But the Kuril, as well as the Senkaku/Diaoyu, Spratly and Paracel, islands are minor chess pieces in a far broader stratagem. The U.S. intends to accelerate its return to and domination over the Asia-Pacific region and China and Russia are the main obstacles to its doing so.

The day after Hillary Clinton met with Japan’s foreign minister in Hawaii, weeks after the

Chinese-Japanese confrontation in the East China Sea and days before the Japanese-Russian contretemps began, the Japanese destroyer JS Kirishima launched a Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) Block IA interceptor missile 100 miles into the sky above the Pacific Missile Range Facility at Barking Sands on the Hawaiian island of Kauai and destroyed a multi-stage target missile. The missile intercept was the fourth jointly conducted by Japan and the U.S. Although North Korea will be evoked as the probable target of the bilateral tests, that country's neighbors to the north – China and Russia – have also been put on notice.



The USS Lake Erie guided missile cruiser and USS Russell Arleigh Burke class destroyer, both part of the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency, simultaneously carried out a mock interception of the target missile. USS Lake Erie shot down a space satellite with a Standard Missile-3 133 miles over the Pacific Ocean on February 20, 2008, with USS Russell part of the task force assigned to the mission.

In September the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) awarded Raytheon Company, the world's largest missile manufacturer, a \$175 million contract to "work with partners in Japan on the cooperative engineering and development efforts for the SM-3 Block IIA missile through the preliminary design process."

"Raytheon and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, under contract to the MDA and Japan's Ministry of Defense, are developing the next-generation SM-3 Block IIA missile, scheduled to begin flight testing in 2014. The company says the new missile will include larger second- and third-stage rocket motors and a larger kinetic warhead to provide a greater area of defense against sophisticated threats." [20]

Last month it was disclosed that "Japan is likely to decide by year-end whether to order Northrop Grumman RQ-4B Global Hawk surveillance aircraft that could later be upgraded to reinforce the country's ballistic missile defenses." [21] The transaction is expected to be authorized in the National Defense Program Guideline to be published later this year.

A Kyodo News report revealed that Japan would pay \$150 million for three Global Hawk unmanned high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft to "deal with China's military rise" and to "defend remote Japanese islands."

The same news agency divulged in a separate report that "Japan and the US are planning to

hold a joint military exercise in December focused on defending the disputed [Senkaku/Diaoyu] islands....said to have vast oil and gas reserves.” [22]

An analysis in the Japan Times last month indicated the broader parameters of enhanced U.S.-Japanese military collaboration. It stated that “the scope of the Japan-U.S. military treaty has been extended far beyond ‘the Far East,’ roughly defined as areas north of the Philippines. The U.S. bases here support global engagements, including in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean.

USS George Washington and USS Blue Ridge are based in Yokosuka. The second is the flagship of the Seventh Fleet whose “area of responsibility ranges from the Kuril Islands in the north to the Antarctic, and from the international date line to the 68th meridian east at the India-Pakistan border.

“The area includes 35 maritime countries and the world’s five largest armed forces outside the U.S. — China, Russia, India, and North and South Korea. Five of the seven U.S. Mutual Defense Treaties are with countries in the area — the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand, South Korea, Japan and Thailand, according to the 7th Fleet’s official website.

“The U.S. currently deploys 11 ships and units to Yokosuka, including the USS George Washington, the world’s only forward-deployed aircraft carrier.

“The III Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa is tasked with covering the Asia-Pacific to the Middle East.” [23]

The U.S. is acting in the 21st century much as it did during the most dangerous days of the Cold War half a century ago, for all the world appearing to prepare for a replication of the Taiwan Strait Crises of the 1950s, though now in an Asia with several nuclear powers.

Notes

1) U.S. Department of State, October 27, 2010

2) Ibid

3) U.S. Department of State, July 23, 2010

4) Asia: Pentagon Revives And Expands Cold War Military Blocs

Stop NATO, September 14, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/asia-pentagon-revives-and-expands-cold-war-military-blocs>

5) U.S. Department of State, October 27, 2010

6) Kazakhstan: U.S., NATO Seek Military Outpost Between Russia And China

Stop NATO, April 14, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/04/15/kazakhstan-u-s-nato-seek-military-outpost-between-russia-and-china/>

Mongolia: Pentagon Trojan Horse Wedged Between China And Russia

Stop NATO, March 31, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/mongolia-pentagon-trojan-horse-wedged-between-china-and-russia>

7) Asia: Pentagon Revives And Expands Cold War Military Blocs

Stop NATO, September 14, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/asia-pentagon-revives-and-expands-cold-war-military-blocs>

U.S. Marshals Military Might To Challenge Asian Century

Stop NATO, August 21, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/08/21/u-s-marshals-military-might-to-challenge-asian-century>

8) U.S. Department of State, October 27, 2010

9) Kyodo News, October 11, 2010

10) Radio Netherlands, November 2, 2010

11) Xinhua News Agency, November 2, 2010

12) Yomiuri Shimbun, August 20, 2010

13) Russian Information Agency Novosti, November 2, 2010

14) Treaty of Peace with Japan

<http://www.international.ucla.edu/eas/documents/peace1951.htm>

15) Global Times, November 2, 2010

16) Voice of Russia, July 1, 2008

17) Russian Information Agency Novosti, November 24, 2009

18) Itar-Tass, November 25, 2009

19) Interfax, September 29, 2010

20) Associated Press, September 27, 2010

21) Aviation Week, October 11, 2010

22) Kyodo News, October 3, 2010

23) Japan Times, October 14, 2010

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