

High stakes tension on the China Seas

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It is clear that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea have become the most dangerous, high-stakes maritime dispute in East Asia as a lightning rod for long-standing historical animosities and rising Sino-Japanese tensions over their respective places in the region's new order.

It is not simply a territorial dispute amenable to resolution by legal adjudication or reasonable political accommodation. This much is clear from the recent Falklands Islands analogy by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has put Beijing on notice that he is determined to defend the Senkakus against perceived Chinese encroachments, whatever the cost.

Many observers are sceptical that Abe will match his words with deeds, given the disappointments of his first term, his reputation for pragmatism and deeply entrenched pacifist sentiment in Japan. But public attitudes towards China are hardening, providing more political space for Abe to play the role of defender of the national interest. Moreover, a consensus is emerging among Japan's previously quiescent foreign policy and strategic community, that the Senkakus are critical strategic links in the island chain running from Japan to Indonesia that geographically constrains China's maritime ambitions, and they must not be allowed to fall into Chinese hands.

Should China take control of the Senkakus, they could quickly garrison the islands as they have in the South China Sea, building heliports and radar installations which would allow them to gather unique intelligence on the activities of Japanese and American forces on nearby Okinawa and the Sakashima Islands. This would significantly weaken US and Japanese control of the western Pacific, complicate the defence of Taiwan and breach what China has long regarded as an enclosing maritime "great wall".

These strategic anxieties are increasingly driving Japanese and US policy on the Senkakus, and the jockeying for naval pre-eminence in the East and South China Seas explains much about China's preparedness to assert its territorial claims extending as far south as Indonesia's Natuna Islands, thousands of kilometres from the Chinese mainland.

Japan's options are few. They include appeasement and confrontation. But each, for diametrically opposed reasons, would be high-risk choices. Appeasement would only encourage China to ratchet up its pressure on Japan to make further territorial concessions. Confrontation risks serious military conflict, which is in no one's interests, least of all Japan's.

Abe knows this and is likely to pursue a more calibrated, carrot and stick approach, combining elements of co-operation and deterrence. Militarily, the key elements of his strategy are already apparent, notably a willingness to boost defence spending, redeploy significant numbers of troops to the southern region of Japan, increase intelligence collection against China, and the Peoples Liberation Army in particular, and loosen the self-imposed restraints on the export of sensitive defence technologies.

Politically, Abe has toughened his language on China, sought and received reassurances from the Obama administration that the Senkakus fall within the terms of the US-Japan Security Agreement and, unusually in post-war Japan, appealed to Japanese patriotism. He has also reminded China of the enormous investment both countries have in the relationship and that his door remains open to dialogue.

This constitutes a more coherent and workable strategy which ought to give the equally new Chinese leadership pause for reflection, provided Abe sticks to his guns. The worry is that already inflamed Chinese nationalism, never far from the surface on matters Japan, could be deliberately fanned by a PLA intent on dominating China's eponymously named contiguous seas, making it difficult for China's leader, Xi Jinping, to take a more conciliatory approach.

The unwillingness of the Chinese government to curb provocative public interventions by Chinese military representatives is not reassuring. Along with credible reports that the PLA is engaged in aggressive, widespread cyber hacking, this indicates that hawks in the Chinese military have aspirations to play a far more influential role in Chinese domestic and foreign policy than has been the case since the early years of the Chinese Peoples Republic. This is not good news for Sino-Japanese relations.

Abe has to be careful that in taking a firmer stance on the islands, he does not provide China's hawks with gratuitous opportunities for exploiting existing tensions. But he should also resist any demands by Japan's own hawks for the military to pre-emptively occupy the Senkakus and establish a garrison force there. This would almost certainly trigger a countervailing Chinese response and further complicate attempts to take the heat out of what threatens to rival North Korea's nuclear weapons program as East Asia's number one security concern.

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