

Xi and Abe on the Brink: Can the US Help Avert Armed Conflict? By Kerry Gershaneck

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe chose a particularly bad time to revive the specter of historical revisionism at home. Abe's statements and the Yasakuni Shrine visit by 168 Japanese politicians risk harming relations with Washington – and Seoul – precisely when Tokyo needs strong backing from the United States to avoid an incident that China is doing much to provoke.

Make no mistake: the PRC is primarily to blame for setting near perfect conditions for confrontation. Beijing's designation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as a "core interest" – in effect, a reason to go to war – makes the trend toward armed conflict harder to reverse. While Abe and Xi may wish to avoid a military confrontation as they pursue competing sovereignty claims, both men have abetted domestic expectations that make conflict increasingly hard to avoid.

Fortunately, the US still deals from a position of strength in this deteriorating situation. While it is not able to resolve the competing claims, Washington can work to reduce the chance of a military clash.

In the last six months, these chances of a conflict have increased, along with the frequency and composition of PRC civilian maritime patrols, nationalistic Chinese propaganda, the frequency and composition of Chinese air patrols, and Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) actions against Japanese vessels and aircraft. For its part, Tokyo's failed diplomacy over the islands' nationalization and public historical revisionism have fanned the flames.

A few years ago, the PRC was not sending government vessels into the territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Now the number of entries can exceed 20 a month, with vessels going directly into the waters and staying "on station" for increasing periods of time.

Thus far, no PLAN or armed Chinese civilian vessels appear to have entered the waters. But PLAN vessels did focus weapons-targeting radars on a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel and a Japanese helicopter earlier this year, in incidents related to the islands dispute. Recently, Abe threatened to "expel by force" Chinese vessels making landings on the disputed islands.

Last year, China initiated air patrols near the disputed islands. This has increased the potential for an aerial confrontation, similar to the accidental collision that resulted in the US Navy P-3 downing by a PLAAF fighter in April 2001. In January, Chinese PLAAF J-10 fighters scrambled to meet two Japanese F-15s that were following a Chinese

aircraft "on routine patrol" in the East China Sea. Japan is considering authorizing its pilots to fire "warning shots" if they are approached in this manner again.

In one promising sign, neither country has built new structures, nor permanently placed personnel on these islands, despite Abe's campaign promise to do so. Yet that restraint is lost amid the anti-Japanese films, TV dramas, comic books, prime-time news programs, and newspaper columns that have become the norm, especially in the past six months. This propaganda campaign produces hyper-nationalism that inflames public opinion, and some PRC officials admit that public opinion may push the government into taking actions it would otherwise handle with more restraint and prudence.

The propaganda campaign is part of a larger Chinese "coercive diplomacy" strategy, evident in the PRC's actions in the South China Sea. This strategy is to first accord a disputed area an administrative status, such as a "county" or "town." Simultaneously the domestic propaganda campaign is initiated. The third, and final, action is to occupy the disputed area and protect it with armed vessels. With China's identification of "Diaoyu" as a "core interest," and the current propaganda campaign, this third step (occupation) may be imminent.

Unfortunately, at this sensitive time, Abe has distanced himself from Japan's friends, and he has offered an excuse for the PRC's "coercive diplomacy" to achieve its territorial objectives in the East China Sea.

Abe undercut the goodwill he'd built up in Washington in recent months. Despite initial concerns in the US, Abe had cultivated the appearance of a pragmatist determined to stabilize Japan, and who was wisely side-stepping rightwing topics that would enflame Chinese and Koreans. Unfortunately, Abe failed to stay silent and said he "has not necessarily inherited" Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama's statement apologizing for Japan's wartime militarism. With that statement and others, Abe unnecessarily provoked Seoul, Beijing, and – most importantly – Washington.

There is now fear in some US policy circles that Abe is a loose cannon who might drag the US into an unnecessary confrontation. Consequently, Washington could choose to quietly distance itself from Abe. This approach could tempt Beijing to think that the US is less committed to Japan, and prompt Japan to worry that it can't count on the US.

Moreover, Abe's actions risk tainting Japan's legitimate self-defense aspirations, such as enhancing its almost non-existent ability to conduct amphibious operations for home island security and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. Those who might otherwise support Japan may now see this needed force modernization as merely "the awakening of Japan's latent militaristic tendencies."

Bilateral talks, including the recent meeting of China and Japan's senior defense officials in Beijing, have been ineffective in defusing the situation. Nevertheless, both countries have to conduct such discussions if there is to be a peaceable resolution. More creativity and less posturing is needed.

In the absence of such talks, the road to an armed confrontation in the East China Sea is well paved. What can the US do about it?

First, Washington should clearly state that the US, too, has *core interests*. One of them is the principal that one nation cannot simply decide it wants a piece of territory and take it from another – especially not forcefully. The Senkakus are under Japanese control – and it is America's *core interest* that they remain under Japanese control until and unless both sides peacefully agree on a solution.

Second, stop stressing that the US has “no position on ultimate sovereignty of the islands”: this position confuses the issue and suggests the US is not committed to Japanese control. However, allow for some face-saving de-escalation if the PRC demonstrates restraint. The US should simply state that the US backs Japanese administrative control of the islands under the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (with military force if necessary), and insist that the question of “ultimate sovereignty” be peacefully resolved.

Third, quietly – but forcefully – tell Abe to practice “virtuous silence” about his view of Japanese history in the first half of the 20th century. His revisionist history inflames Chinese, Koreans, and Americans who understand WWII and Japanese brutality towards prisoners of war and helpless civilians.

Fourth get its financial house in order – quickly – to help win back credibility in the Asia-Pacific region and to rebuild military capability required “to deter, or to fight and win” when needed. A hollow force neither deters nor wins wars.

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